

Forced Labor Among Informal Apparel Workers in Apparel Hubs of Bangladesh: A Prevalence Estimation Report

Background

Bangladesh is the second largest textile and garment products exporter in the world and its ready-made garment industry employs millions of workers, accounting for 85 percent of export earnings.¹ The COVID pandemic hit the industry hard, with over \$3 billion in canceled orders.² Bangladesh's Ready-made Garments (RMG) sector is supplied by subcontracting orders from informal RMG factories. These factories operate without formal oversight from government or brands and were hit particularly hard by the pandemic. This left Bangladeshi workers in dire circumstances. Informal garment workers are vulnerable to forced labor and child labor due to high poverty rates, the fragmented nature of apparel supply chains, and the lack of enforcement of legal protections for workers. GFEMS has invested in several studies to shed light on exploitative labor practices in the informal apparel sector of Bangladesh,

including [policy analysis](#) and a [rapid assessment](#) of the policy impacts of COVID-19 on workers. The Fund has created [handouts](#) to support stakeholders in advocating for programming and policy changes. Few organizations have previously estimated the prevalence of forced labor in the informal ready-made garment sector.

With funding from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), GFEMS engaged NORC at the University of Chicago to measure the prevalence of forced labor among informal apparel factory workers in the Narayanganj and Keraniganj garment production hubs in Bangladesh. The study also examines levels of forced labor for workers who migrate from vulnerable source districts of Bangladesh.³

¹ Bangladesh Bank Research Department RMG Quarterly reports: <https://www.bb.org.bd>

² Majumder, F.H. (January - February 2021) 'Covid-19 and the RMG Industry: The Pandemic Effect', The Apparel Story, <https://www.bgmea.com.bd>

³ Vulnerable districts were identified by local partners and include Barisal, Comilla, Dhaka, Faridpur, Madaripur, Munshiganj, Kurigram, Mymensingh, Rangpur, Shariatpur, Kishoreganj, and Patuakhali.

Key Findings



86%

Forced labor among informal apparel workers in the garment production hubs of Narayanganj and Keraniganj is high, **WITH OVER 86% OF WORKERS MEETING THE ILO'S CRITERIA FOR FORCED LABOR**

International Labour Organization (ILO). (2012). Hard to see, harder to count: survey guidelines to estimate forced labour of adults and children. Geneva: ILO.



Female workers were

7 PERCENTAGE POINTS

more likely than males to be in forced labor per ILO definitions, and were across the board more likely to experience scale of harm violations.

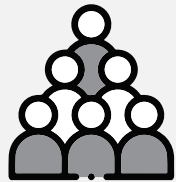


Females were

27 PERCENTAGE POINTS

more likely to face restrictions on movement or communication.

96%



THE LEVEL OF FORCED LABOR AMONG WORKERS WHO ORIGINATE FROM VULNERABLE SOURCE DISTRICTS IS

↑ 13% POINTS HIGHER

66%

Experienced actual or threat of physical/sexual violence

44%

Have faced restriction of movement or communication

67%

Have endured abusive or coercive employment practices

91%

Have reported deceptive, unfair, or unsafe working environments

Just under one-third have experienced violations across all four of these "scale of harm" domains.



17%

NEARLY 17 PERCENT OF INFORMAL APPAREL WORKERS HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO PHYSICAL OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE.

The government of Bangladesh has [demonstrated commitment](#) to informal apparel workers by declaring that Keraniganj will become a model garment-producing region by 2023, starting with the elimination of child labor. Evidence generated by this study and others noted above can support government and civil society organizations in achieving this vision.

Recommendations

The Government of Bangladesh must implement stricter and more comprehensive monitoring and enforcement of the Bangladesh Labor Act within informal apparel factories. Specifically, Bangladesh's Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments should be granted authority to withdraw licenses and impose fines for employer violations.

Government and civil society can collaborate to support access to social protection programs and sensitization campaigns in vulnerable source districts. Interventions should ensure workers can access available welfare

benefits, know that employer deception is common, and understand their rights under Bangladeshi law.

Government and civil society should educate informal workers and their families at both source and destination locations on the types of employer violations, with special emphasis on physical and sexual violence faced by girls and women. These activities can familiarize workers with procedures for reporting violations to relevant authorities and advocacy groups. Victim services should be enhanced with pro bono legal counsel, psychosocial support, and repatriation.

Sampling and Measurement Approach

NORC applied rigorous methodologies to gain precise estimates of forced labor for the target population, as well as tested innovative methodologies for measuring hidden and hard-to-reach populations in the context of Bangladesh's informal apparel sector.

A respondent-driven sampling (RDS) design was used to find and recruit informal apparel workers in the study areas. RDS is well-suited for studying irregularly distributed, hard-to-find, or hard-to-survey populations, including victims of human trafficking and forced labor. RDS starts with selecting a small set of "seeds" or, in this case, informal apparel workers in target areas. Sixty-one seeds were identified and enlisted through a conventional general population survey of 1,100 households. The method then relies on peer-recruitment via referral coupons to create a networked sample that forms a tree-like structure. A design-based procedure was used to weight network sample observations which entailed selecting subsamples of the observed network sample

based on a relatively small amount of reseeding and tracing links/branches to reach a predetermined subsample size of observed individuals. Sampling weights are inversely proportional to the number of times individuals are resampled through the algorithm.

This resampling procedure has been shown to address and mitigate the bias in point estimators commonly encountered with RDS and other network sampling designs.

Two separate frameworks were used to define forced labor for the study, including International Labour Organization (ILO) indicators of involuntariness and menace of penalty and a "scale of harm" approach, which examines indicators of forced labor across several domains, ordered by severity. These domains include violations of physical integrity, restriction of movement and communication, abusive and coercive employment practices, and deceptive/unfair/unsafe work environments.