

**Impact of COVID-19 on women HBWs in Dhaka, Bangladesh**  
***Findings from the HNSA-IDRC study, February 2020 to August 2021***

<b>Location</b>	Dhaka	
<b>HBW respondents</b>	Total 60. 30 each from CUP and LIE. All surveyed in both rounds of the study. 2 shifted out of home-based work in late 2020.	
<b>Product line</b>	Mainly garment related – 81% in Aug. 2021, 95% in Aug. 2020 Food and related work- 19% in Aug. 2021, 5% in Aug. 2020	
<b>Employment status</b>	Aug. 2021	Aug. 2020
Piece-rate workers	21%	82%
Own-account workers	42%	10%
Contributing family workers	38%	0
<b>Organisation</b>	Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP)	Labour at Informal Economy (LIE)
<b>Key Informants</b>	Khondker Rebaka Sun-Yat	AR Chowdhury

Invisible and vulnerable, HBWs in Bangladesh remain unrecognised in government registers. Much of the public attention for social assistance is directed at rural areas. Within the urban spaces, slum dwellers, pavement dwellers and other such extremely deprived groups remain the government’s priority in general and especially, during disasters. The protracted nature of this pandemic uncovered the acute lack of resilience of the urban HBWs, now teetering at the edge of poverty. Work recovery has been slow and earnings are still only at 41% of pre-crisis levels. Consequently, unpaid loans have mounted due to insufficient earnings to cover survival essentials; in August 2021, 87 percent respondents reported borrowing in the previous twelve months. At this time, there is little doubt that not only should they be covered under emergency relief more comprehensively, special policies are also needed to protect them from slipping into poverty and to help them continue to contribute to the nation’s economy.

**Respondent profile**

All the sampled respondents work and reside in Dhaka, and a sizable number associated with CUP are Urdu-speaking Muslims originally from Bihar who moved to Bangladesh at the time of India-Pakistan partition in 1947. They couldn’t repatriate to Pakistan in 1971 when Bangladesh came into being. Though since 2006 they have been granted Bangladeshi citizenship, they are not eligible for the national passport. Most of them have been living, for several generations now, in camps set-up specifically for them, and they remain marginalised to a large extent. Because the country’s social security mechanisms are weak anyway, especially in the urban areas, and because they largely miss women HBWs, this group is extremely disadvantaged and has little access to the existing government assistance available to citizens of the country.

Bangladesh is one of the top contributors to the global garment business; since 2015 value of “Articles of apparel & clothing accessories” exports from the country have been second only to China, until 2020 when Vietnam pushed it to the third place<sup>1</sup>. Ready-made garment exports contribute substantially to Bangladesh's foreign earnings and have been a key driver of its economic growth. While the country is known to be an important supplier for international garment brands, the associated HBWs are vulnerable and bypassed by the existing government social assistance programs. Global brands sourcing from the country are also not known for their safe work practices or for contributing to safety nets for these informal workers. As A.R Chowdhury, Chairperson, Labour at Informal Economy (LIE) says, “During this crisis the global garment brands have been conspicuous by their absence in lending a helping hand to support women HBWs who are an integral part of their supply chains.”

### Work and Earnings

Working largely from the bustling city of Dhaka, women HBWs are well-integrated into the garment sector and add substantially to the nation’s economy. Respondent HBWs are skillful in tailoring, stitching, button-making and embroidery. A large majority of them contribute to the garment supply chains.

The disrupted local and global garment supply chains have severely diminished work and earnings with many resorting to multiple activities to make a living. Depressed global demand and on and off restrictions on market operations over long periods have hindered a healthy pace of economic revival. 90 per cent of the HBW respondents in Dhaka had no work during the 2020 lockdown (see table below). By August of that year 50 per cent had managed to find some work. However, earnings that had reduced to about seven per cent of the pre-crisis level during lockdown for the six respondents who had work, increased only up to 27 per cent for 30 respondents. The other 30 respondents still had no work in August 2020.

<b>Respondents with zero work</b>				<b>Earnings as a % of pre-crisis (Feb. 2020) period</b>		
<b>Pre-crisis</b>	<b>April-May 2020</b>	<b>Aug.20 20</b>	<b>Aug.20 21</b>	<b>April-May 2020</b>	<b>Aug. 2020</b>	<b>Aug. 2021</b>
0	54	30	7	7.3%	27.4%	41%

In August 2021, 7 respondents reported no work. 6 of these had remained without work all through since 2020. For over 72 percent of the remaining 54 HBWs work was erratic and irregular due to movement restrictions, and loss of markets and work orders. 94 percent reported reduced demand and over 78 percent suffered reduced prices of their products when compared to August 2020. HBW earnings that had started an upward

<sup>1</sup> Statistics available from the World Trade Organisation at <https://stats.wto.org/>

climb in August 2020, could only inch up to about 41 percent of the pre-crisis levels in July 2021.

### **Product line**

About 80 percent respondents reported continuing in the garment and textiles sector in August 2021, down from over 95 percent in the previous year. The small proportion (5 percent) of respondents that worked in the food sector have now expanded to close to 20 percent. Notably, about 12 percent of the total had to engage in multiple activities related to garments, textiles and food to make a living. They reported cooking and vending food, running small tea stalls, cooking on order, and selling vegetables from home when not tailoring clothes, crafting and attaching buttons to garments, embroidery or stitching bags.

### **Employment status**

Due to lack of supply chain revival, contractors and middle-men couldn't get any work orders for piece-rate workers, the usual way in which work came to the respondent HBWs. As a result, while 81 percent of respondents had reported being piece-rate workers in August 2020, this dropped to 21 percent by August 2021. Having to search for jobs themselves, own-account workers increased from 10 percent to 42 percent; 38 percent identified themselves as contributing family workers, this figure was zero in August 2020. Since work was scarce and hard to come by, it was shared among family members; there was no question of hiring anybody from elsewhere. None of the respondents reported being a self-employed employer in August 2021, and a year earlier this figure was at 7 percent.

### **Health risks**

As if the lack of work and earnings was not depressing enough, health scare and related expenses made the situation terrifying. While Bangladesh has been on a high growth-path in the last fifteen years, its health infrastructure is among the weakest in the region. As the country struggled to prepare for and manage the crisis due to spread of disease across the heavily congested population, it was hit by the deadly cyclone Amphan in May 2020. This increased the pressure on government machinery. Strict and severe lockdowns could never be fully enforced. Medical services crumbled under pressure as cases started to rise, and many people seeking medical help were sent back home. In August 2020 five Dhaka respondents reported COVID cases in their families. Of these, four died without any medical help because of families' lack of trust in available health service.

### **Vaccination**

The hope that vaccination would help reduce the threat of rising infections hadn't really started converting into reality even by October 2021 when other nations in the region were moving at a promising pace. Poor progress on vaccination due to shortage, registration difficulties and mis-management keeps the risk of contracting infection

high, creating uncertainty in resuming business at full steam. In the region, Bangladesh is the slowest in vaccinating its citizens; by September 27 only 15 percent of its total population had received at least one shot<sup>2</sup>. Only one of the study respondents had been vaccinated till August 2021; over 82 percent of the respondents were still waiting.

### **Relief Response**

At the start of the pandemic the government's response to the crisis looked unplanned and mismanaged. And as Khondker Rebaka Sun-Yat, Executive Director of CUP, shares, "Government's assistance has been mostly focused on rural areas, those residing in urban areas are challenged in accessing its support." Even though the government expanded coverage of its cash and food assistance programmes, only five per cent of the 60 respondents could access its cash support and about 40 per cent received its food assistance. Outreach of HBW organisations was far better as close to 80 per cent respondents received food arranged through them; a large majority also received sanitising material and information on protecting themselves from the disease.

### **Organisations of HBWs**

Notably, in the absence of their organisations, HBWs would most likely not have been able to access any of the relief and other support they managed to. Since the start of the pandemic, CUP and LIE have been working persistently to support its members by linking them to government and other relief. Both have been working with their member organisations and grassroots leaders along with local and national governments to identify the most needy; to raise funds and resources; to advocate for immediate policy support to reduce the distress; and to coordinate relief delivery. For instance, in 2020 CUP raised Taka 40 lakh, resourced food rations, and has been supporting BRAC and government of Bangladesh initiative to identify among the informal workers, possible COVID patients and refer them to hospitals. LIE managed to get food support to its members and successfully advocated strongly to stop interest payments on loans during this crisis period. However, relief which had already been insufficient and uneven in 2020, almost dried up for women HBWs during 2021. Fund sources of their organisations too contracted.

Notably, even with their own depleting resources, HBW organisations have turned the crisis into an opportunity to lobby harder for HBW access to social welfare at local and regional levels, with both political and government authorities. Their community leaders have continued to work through the pandemic towards recognition of women HBWs and to develop and strengthen social security systems specifically targeted at them.

Member organisations and their leaders had to learn to operate quickly in a situation of health concerns and restricted mobility. Members had to be supported materially and

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>

emotionally using the available tools—mainly digital—to communicate, plan, and deliver support. For members and organisations, the crisis brought into prominence the need to advocate intensely for recognition of HBWs and the vulnerabilities they face despite making a singularly large contribution to the economy. Both CUP and LIE are committed to work with local and central governments to develop and strengthen social security systems for women HBWs.