

Understanding the Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Informal Apparel Workers in Bangladesh



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This briefing presents the results of a survey conducted with informal Ready-made Garment (RMG) workers in Bangladesh to assess their heightened vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to food security, debt, reduced employment, and occupational safety and health (OSH) practices. Learnings from this research will support emergency response efforts and inform the implementation of longer-term programming for informal RMG workers. With funding from the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), the study was led by BRAC, ELEVATE, and Bangladesh Labour Foundation (BLF) from August through September 2020, covering 1,863 vulnerable informal workers and 198 factory managers in the industrial hubs of Keraniganj and Narayanganj.

Background

The global apparel industry and its 75 million workers were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic downturn. In Bangladesh, the second largest exporter of garments in the world, at least \$3B of orders were [cancelled](#) and at least 1M [workers were laid off](#) or furloughed. The country's Ready-made Garments (RMG) sector, which produces for both domestic and export markets, 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. The Fund's current geographic focus is in Keraniganj and Narayanganj, two major apparel production hubs with a high density of informal factories and highly vulnerable workers.

As the scale of heightened vulnerability in these communities became clearer, GFEMS began work with its existing portfolio partners – BRAC, ELEVATE, and Bangladesh Labour Foundation (BLF) – to deliver a suite of support services to affected informal workers and factories. With support from the UK government, BRAC is distributing cash support to 1,500 vulnerable informal worker households, and 110 factories and 1,500 households will receive hygiene kits, thermometers, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Support will be coupled with awareness training to ensure appropriate utilization of supplies and to promote COVID-19 prevention measures.

Before delivery of these services began, BRAC, BLF, and ELEVATE conducted surveys from mid-August through September 2020 to target vulnerable households of informal RMG workers and operational informal factories. The information gathered provides a snapshot of the increased vulnerabilities they face during the pandemic.

Research Design

ELEVATE, in consultation with local partners BLF and Phulki, developed a survey to capture heightened worker vulnerabilities and identify recipients for the emergency support services. BRAC and ELEVATE leveraged mobile survey technologies, [TaroWorks](#) and [Laborlink](#), respectively, to complete field-based data collection. In Narayanganj, BRAC used an existing database to identify vulnerable clusters where informal RMG workers reside and work. BRAC's community workers conducted door to door household surveys in the target clusters with informal RMG factory workers and informal factory managers. In Keraniganj, ELEVATE partnered with BLF to collect data from workers and factory managers. BLF field staff leveraged decades of hyper-local experience in production clusters to deploy the survey to workers using two methods: tablet-based responses and interactive voice response through respondents' mobile phones. BLF staff helped workers call a toll-free number, listen to multiple-choice survey questions, and answer using their mobile. BLF also relied on an existing database of workers in informal RMG factories in Keraniganj during this process to target vulnerable workers and factory managers. Surveys were conducted in each area until sufficient data had been collected to provide emergency support based on pre-determined vulnerability criteria.

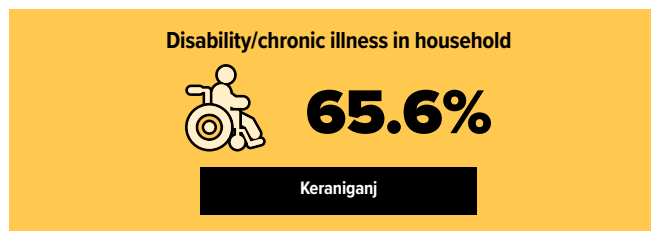
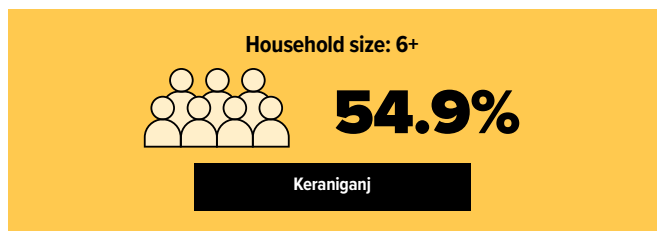
Key Results

The findings here represent all data collected from informal worker households and factory managers. In total, 1,031 informal worker households and 77 factory managers in Narayanganj and 832 informal worker households and 121 factory managers in Keraniganj were interviewed. All told, these findings paint a picture of exceptional vulnerability in both the communities.

Table 1: Selected demographics of informal workers and their households in Keraniganj and Narayanganj

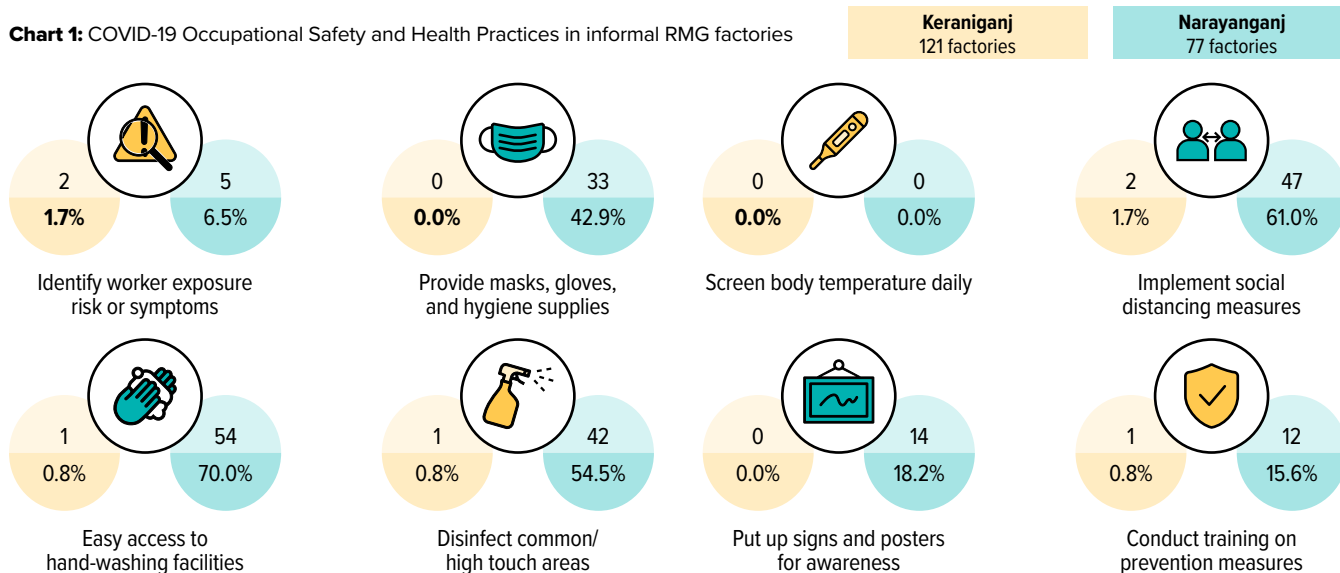
Selected Demographics	Gender: Female	Age: Under 14	Age: 14-17	Urban/ Peri-urban	Household size: 4-5	Household size: 6+	Pregnant/lactating woman in household	Disability/chronic illness in household
Keraniganj (832)	172	92	212	597	323	457	215	546
	20.7%	11.1%	25.5%	71.8%	38.8%	54.9%	25.8%	65.6%
Narayanganj (1,031)	249	101	258	1,031	559	158	128	194
	24.2%	9.8%	25.0%	100%	54.2%	15.3%	12.4%	18.8%
Total (1,863)	421	193	470	1,628	882	615	343	740
	22.6%	10.4%	25.2%	87.4%	47.3%	33.0%	18.4%	39.7%

KEY VULNERABILITIES



Numerous vulnerability factors appear in both communities, as illustrated in Table 1. Roughly one in ten workers surveyed was under the age of 14 (meeting the Government of Bangladesh’s [legal definition](#) of a child laborer), with an additional quarter between 14 and 17. Findings suggest that these factories are overwhelmingly managed by and employ men. Over 95 percent of the 198 factory managers interviewed across both regions were male and four in five workers were male. The majority of factories are small scale. In Keraniganj, most factories (85 percent) employ 10 to 20 workers per factory. Narayanganj had more variability in factory size, with a higher frequency of even smaller factories: 56 percent of factories employ less than 10 workers and 38 percent employ 10 to 20 workers.

Chart 1: COVID-19 Occupational Safety and Health Practices in informal RMG factories



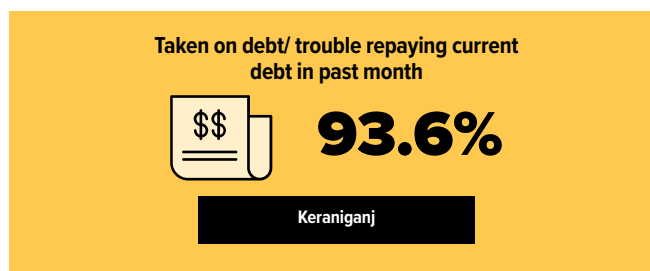
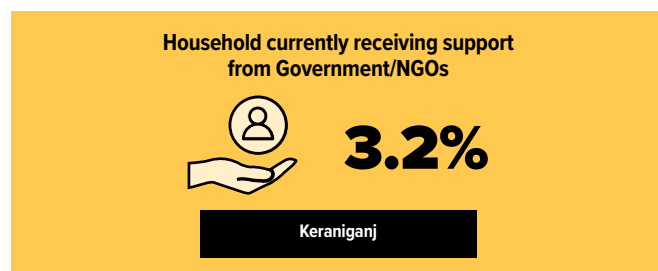
Factory managers reported low engagement with Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Practices related to the pandemic (see Chart 2). In Narayanganj – a larger industrial area where formal (regulated) and informal factories operate in close proximity – a slight majority of factories provided prevention measures like hand-washing stations (70%), disinfectant (54.5%), and PPE (42.9%). However, almost no factories in Keraniganj – a smaller zone, where almost all factories are informal - provided any type of OSH practices, [as defined by the International Labour Organization](#). These findings again suggest that workers in Keraniganj do not benefit from basic safety and health protections, making them especially vulnerable.

Higher rates of reporting on COVID-19 symptoms in Narayanganj, as noted in Table 2, may be reflective of both [an outbreak in the area](#) during the summer months as well as a greater investment in both basic health awareness and OSH practices as compared to Keraniganj.

Table 2: Conditions of informal workers and their households in Keraniganj and Narayanganj during the COVID-19 pandemic

Pandemic Conditions	Experienced COVID-19 symptoms in past two weeks	Household currently receiving support from Government/ NGOs	Household currently receiving support from factories	Current income adequate for basic household needs	Less than one week of food supplies available	Owed payment from employer	Taken on debt/ trouble repaying current debt in past month	Experienced reduced employment in past month
Keraniganj (832)	59	27	20	30	790	113	779	746
	7.1%	3.2%	2.4%	3.6%	95.0%	13.6%	93.6%	89.7%
Narayanganj (1,031)	406	696	33	53	941	119	641	507
	39.4%	67.5%	3.2%	5.1%	91.3%	11.5%	62.2%	49.2%
Total (1,863)	465	723	53	83	1731	232	1420	1253
	25.0%	38.8%	2.8%	4.5%	92.9%	12.5%	76.2%	67.3%

KEY VULNERABILITIES



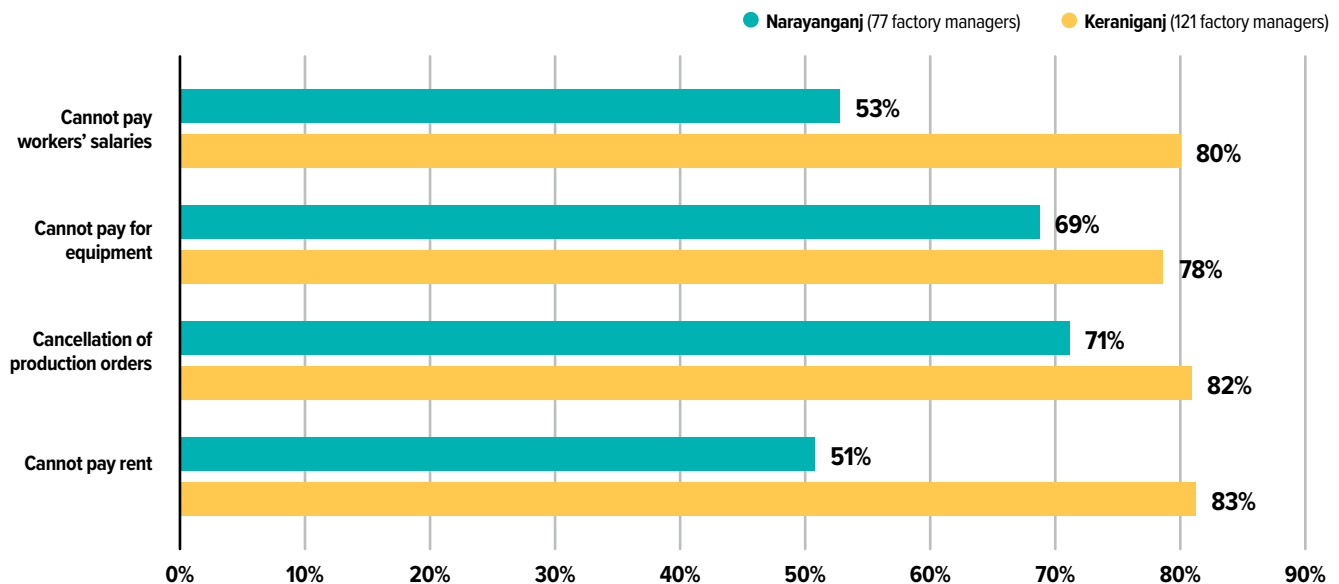
The findings in Table 2 indicate heightened financial vulnerability among surveyed informal RMG workers. The majority of workers, including nearly all in Keraniganj, reported new or exacerbated debt in the last month; those figures correspond with the majority of respondents who experienced reduced employment in the same time period.

Almost no workers in Keraniganj reported receiving support from the Government of Bangladesh, NGOs, or their employers. Narayanganj, comparatively, has a more active NGO presence and, as a COVID-19 “Red Zone,” received more government support. These two factors explain why a higher percentage (67.5%) of workers reported receiving Government or NGO support. This support was often insufficient, however. Nearly all worker households were food insecure, with less than one week of food supplies available (see Table 2).

Key Results Continued

Nearly half (46.5 percent) of all factory managers surveyed reported reducing their workforce, either through lay-offs or reduced hours, in the spring and early summer due to the pandemic. Nearly three quarters of managers reported losing over 25 percent of their revenues during this period and reported that their factory continues to remain under some financial pressure. In all categories, Keraniganj factory managers reported greater negative impacts than their counterparts in Narayanganj (see Chart 2). Approximately 12.5 percent of workers were still owed payment from their employers. Of those workers owed payment, the vast majority (84.1 percent) were still owed one month or less of salary.

Chart 2: Impact on informal RMG factory operations in the past month during the COVID-19 pandemic



Implications/Recommendations

BRAC has begun its campaign of emergency support services and awareness raising in Keraniganj and Narayanganj. This emergency support provides a much-needed stopgap measure to prevent workers from further losses that exacerbate their vulnerability to forced labor and other forms of exploitation. In early 2021, BRAC, with support from GFEMS and the UK government, will begin the delivery of a larger program to reduce vulnerability among informal RMG workers in Keraniganj and Narayanganj as well as in the source communities where migrant workers originate. BRAC will target – and expand upon – this same worker population in the upcoming project, ensuring continuity of support.

These findings illustrate the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on an already vulnerable population. In particular, the data illustrates the particularly high level of risk in Keraniganj, where NGO access and [data](#) are limited. In Keraniganj, where all factories are informal, there were higher rates of disability, food insecurity, debt, and unemployment. Narayanganj is a larger factory / industrial area that has both formal and clusters of “non-compliant” informal factories. The proximity of informal factories to regulated factories could be a factor in the slightly higher level of OSH standards compared to Keraniganj.

The Fund’s apparel programming in Bangladesh aims to respond to these and other critical vulnerabilities faced by informal workers in Bangladesh. However, these findings are a reminder that greater investment and attention to informal RMG workers, particularly in Keraniganj, will continue to be necessary. Coordinated support from governments, civil society, and the private sector can speed these worker protections as the industry strives for a responsible recovery.

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