



## Letter to Editor

## Garment Employees are at Higher Risk Than any Other Workers in COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh

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## Dear Editor

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease, which was first identified on December 29, 2019 in Wuhan, China and has spread globally. As a result, pandemic worldwide declared by the WHO on March 11, 2020. The government of Bangladesh imposed countrywide lockdown from March 25 till May 30, 2020 to control the spread of the coronavirus (1). There were around 223,453 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1.3% fatality rate as of July 27, 2020 (2). Hundreds of new cases being confirmed daily and continuing surplus previous day cases.

According to Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) roughly, 4500 garment factories employing around 4.5 million workers (2.5% of the total population), and is the second-largest exporter of garments sector worldwide after China (3). However, garments industries in Bangladesh, carried around 82% of total exports and contributes over 14% of total country's GDP (3).

Despite a spike in COVID-19 confirmed cases, unfortunately, the BGMEA reopened hundreds of garments factories since April 26 with permission of the Government of Bangladesh, as a result, thousands of garments workers have returned back to their workplace across Bangladesh. The majority of the factories operate the production within limited space, where maintaining the social distancing norms is difficult to implement (4). The workers do not use personal protective equipment (PPE) other than face mask which is made by cloth, and all of them are facing threat to their life because the cloth's mask cannot prevent

coronavirus. Furthermore, there are many workers who are not wearing face mask despite increasing COVID-19 confirmed cases among garment workers. Generally, in these multistoried garment factories, due to sketchy space, which consists of a few lifts and stairs where thousands of garment workers performing their daily duty in each shift, huge gathering of workers in the entry and exit points, so that, maintaining minimum social distance would be very difficult for them. These factors have created new trepidation of the further community spread of the novel coronavirus (nCoV). It is reported on May 12, more than 100 factory workers have identified COVID-19 positive (5).



Garment workers were washing their hands without social distance after reopening garment factories in Bangladesh despite COVID-19 concerns. (Photo Courtesy: Peoples dispatch, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

Since garment workers are getting very low paid around 95 US\$ per month, as a result, it is obvious for them to stay 3-4 people in a small room as well as they use same kitchen and the same washroom which does not allow them to maintain social distance (6). In some cases, two to three families (mother and child) are staying and having their

food together in the same tiny room (7). The public transport has become overcrowded and congested as there are limited options available during the lockdown period. Moreover, thousands of workers come out toward work place through the narrow walkway, it is almost impossible for them to maintain social distance from each other. Therefore, the risk posed to the lives of thousands of workers.



*Garment workers are on the way to work.*

The majority of garments workers have suffered from malnutrition along with different types of health-related problems (8). As a result, their immunity system usually become weak and they are not under health coverage eventually, so they are more vulnerable in this COVID-19 pandemic.

Several companies in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe have canceled their orders that were placed before the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings are poised to drop. Foreign remittances projected to fall by 22 percent, from \$18.32 billion in 2019 to \$14 billion in 2020 (9). As a consequence, thousands of garment workers will lose their job and will go back home again with infections. After reopening garment factories, the COVID-19 confirmed cases among garment workers raised significantly by 52% (10). Therefore, garment workers can also be a terrible source of infection for their family and the community as well. Considering the present situation, we can confidently say that reopening garment factories made it more vulnerable to the garment workers. Thus, we can hypothesize that over 200 million people (if we count average 4 members in a garment worker's family) who are related to the garment industry may be affected by COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. Finally, we can assume that more people are likely to contact the novel coronavirus in Bangladesh due to the reopening of garment factories which will be a threat to our society.

#### **Ethical consideration**

Not applicable.

#### **Conflicts of interests**

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