



# Women RMG workers paying price for long-term unemployment: ILO



Garment workers who have not been paid for months gather to demonstrate in front of their factory at Malibagh in the capital in April. Photo: Sk Enamul Haq

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Long-term unemployment of women garment workers adversely affects their economic and social empowerment, according to a new brief from the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

It also may lead to adverse intergenerational impacts on health and education for children, particularly girls.

As the ILO has observed in previous recessions, loss of women workers' incomes in lower-income households has a greater longer-term impact when compared to men because women tend to invest more of their income in their children's health services, education and nutrition.

The brief also stated that the impact of the Covid-19 on women in the garment industry has worsened due to underlying challenges, including discrimination and harassment, underrepresentation of women's voice, wage gaps as well as unevenly shared unpaid care and family obligations.

The brief -- Gendered impacts of Covid-19 on the garment sector -- aims to raise awareness of the gendered reality of the Covid-19 and outline how the pandemic impacts women and men workers in the garment sector.

In a study conducted on garment workers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Kenya, Lesotho and Vietnam, the Better Work found that waged employment helped advance women's empowerment in societies considered to be highly gender unequal.

"Women account for approximately 80 per cent of the garment sector workforce, so they are heavily affected to start with by many of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, women also experience additional impacts due to the existing challenges they face in the workplace as well as expectations regarding women's obligations in the home," said Joni Simpson, senior gender specialist for the ILO's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

Recent ILO research highlighted how major buying countries' imports from garment-exporting countries in Asia had dropped by up to 70 per cent in the first half of 2020, due to the Covid-19. This has led to a sharp increase in worker layoffs and dismissals, while factories that have reopened are often operating at reduced workforce capacity.

The Asia-Pacific region employed an estimated 65 million garment sector workers in 2019, accounting for 75 per cent of all garment workers worldwide.

The brief highlights the short, medium, and long-term impacts of the crisis on women workers. It also includes a series of recommendations to help build a more just and resilient industry and greater gender equality.

As some factories retrench (and later rehire) workers, women are more likely be directly and indirectly discriminated against, based on gender-biased selection criteria. Common criteria of such retrenchment include contractual status, years of service, performance, qualifications and

absence records, and these may perpetuate discriminatory practices, resulting in dismissals that disproportionately impact women workers.

In the case of dismissals due to the Covid-19, this may lead to disproportionate dismissals of specific groups of women regardless of their actual skill level or years of service at a given factory, the ILO said.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, women leaders were underrepresented in trade unions, employers' organisations, factory management and other labour institutions. The same trend can be seen in Covid-19 response committees and decision-making spaces.

Existing barriers to women adopting more prominent leadership roles include gender norms and stereotypes, time constraints due to family responsibilities, and a lack of leadership and career path opportunities. These factors are further intensified by the social impacts of the coronavirus, the ILO said.

Recommendations include a greater focus on retrenchment and closure practices as well as addressing women's disproportionate unpaid care obligations so they can return to work as factories resume operations.

"Efforts to address the Covid-19 pandemic should account for the unique ways that women and men may encounter the effects of the coronavirus at work, at home and in their communities."

The importance of strengthening efforts to combat violence and harassment in the workplace is highlighted, in view of emerging data showing that the Covid-19 has increased the risks of gender-based violence.

In addition, the need to ensure women's voice, representation and leadership in dialogue and decision-making is also seen as key to ensuring a full and fair recovery from the pandemic.

"It is crucial that governments, businesses and other stakeholders understand the multi-dimensional impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on both women and men workers, and design policies that enable a smart, sustainable and gender-responsive recovery," said Jessica Wan, a Better Work Gender Specialist.

"Otherwise, the Covid-19 crisis threatens to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and will hamper the social and economic sustainability of the garment sector."