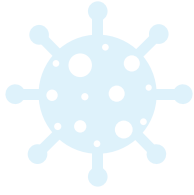
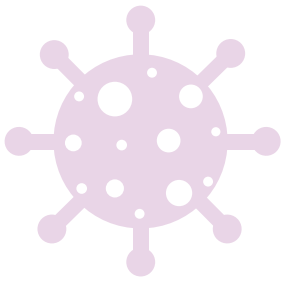


# TRACKING MEDIA COVERAGE OF WOMEN TRADE UNION LEADERS DURING THE **COVID-19** PANDEMIC

Iffat Jahan Antara





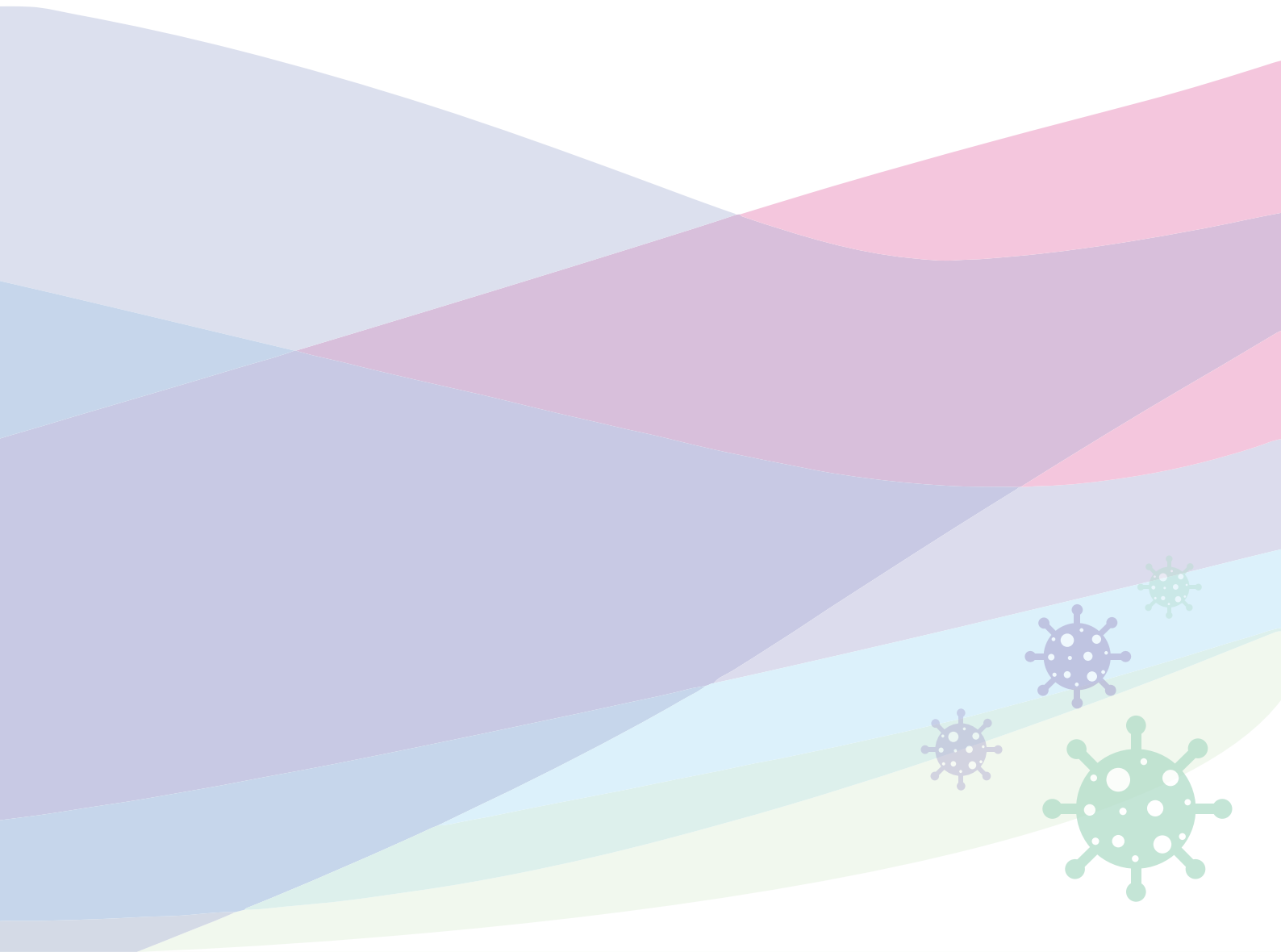


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**October 2020**

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## Introduction

The ready-made garment sector is the largest export industry in Bangladesh. It employs approximately 4.1 million workers and contributes 84.2 per cent of the country's total exports and 20 per cent of the gross domestic product value.<sup>1</sup> Women make up the majority of workers, at 60.8 per cent (Uddin, 2018). Trade unions have a crucial role in protecting workers' rights and improving working conditions, although the number of trade unions in the country is small. There are only 877 registered trade unions in the ready-made garment sector for 4,621 factories registered with the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA 2019).

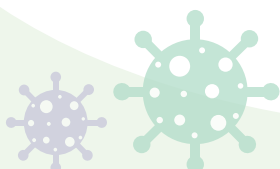
Culturally, trade unions have been male dominated, with women's leadership discouraged (Nawaz and Haque, 2020), and issues important for women workers are not considered important by the men's leadership. Consequently, only a small number of women workers have joined a trade union, and only a few trade unions have female leadership. With new resources from transnational coalitions and domestic support, however, women workers are showing a growing willingness to mobilize and join in worker protests (Hossain, 2019). Female trade union leaders have been more vocal and visible in protecting workers' interests and leading recent labour movements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the ready-made garment industry and on garment workers' livelihoods. In the first two months after Bangladesh identified

the first COVID-19 patient on 8 March 2020, US\$3.16 billion worth of orders for 1,140 factories were cancelled, according to the BGMEA.<sup>2</sup> Affecting approximately 2.3 million workers, the cancellations led to many workers being sent home without pay and job loss for thousands of workers in the six months between March through August.<sup>3</sup> The Economic Times reported nearly 1 million workers had lost their jobs as of 25 March 2020.<sup>4</sup>

To better understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the ready-made garments industry and the 4.1 million workers it employs, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development undertook a media tracking exercise. The tracking exercise sought to analyse the roles of different actors, including trade unions and workers' rights activists, as they navigate the crisis while dealing with international buyers, ready-made garment owners and the government. The media tracking followed coverage by print and online media on the situation of the ready-made garment sector during COVID-19, with special focus on female-led trade union activities. The tracking began 15 March and ended 15 August 2020.

We found that female trade union leaders fought for factory closures to protect workers from mass infection at the beginning of the pandemic in Bangladesh. But factories stayed closed for one month only, and even during that period, workers suffered from the non-payment of wages, layoff, misinformation





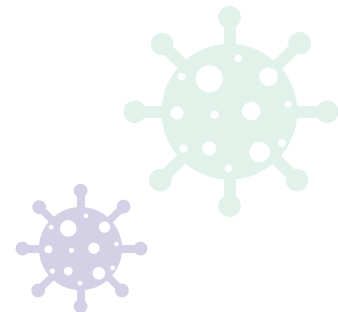
and lack of information about their work situation. After long debates over whether to open factories or not, the BGMEA decided to reopen factories partially from 26 April 2020, following the health safety guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.<sup>5</sup>

The end of the lockdown and reopening of the factories have brought their own set of challenges. COVID-19 infection among ready-made garment workers have increased, and there are reports of an increasing number of worker termination, retrenchment and layoffs. Workers and trade union leaders have had no other choice but to organize rallies, human chains and sit-ins to claim their jobs and livelihood security while the virus infection was and is still at large.

Loss of jobs is not the only issue that workers and trade union leaders have been dealing with. Although there were several declarations

and requests from the government to factory owners to lay off no one, coupled with a stimulus package of 1.5 million taka from the government to cover wages, there were daily reports of workers' protests demanding due wages. However, these reports paled against the greater coverage of order cancellations.

All the major actors of this struggle—trade unions leaders, the BGMEA and the government—lobbied buyers and brands to revive their cancelled orders and clear due payments. International labour rights groups also initiated campaigns with similar demands, which gave local suppliers the power to voice their demands.<sup>6</sup> The media tracking showed the lobbying and advocacy roles and/or voice of the trade unions leaders were more visible in social media and international media than in the national print media.



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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.bgmea.com.bd/home/pages/tradeinformation>.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.bgmea.com.bd/>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/15/arcadia-group-cancels-over-100m-of-orders-as-garment-industry-faces-ruin>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://retail.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/apparel-fashion/apparel/garment-workers-going-unpaid-as-fashion-labels-cancel-orders/74863696>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/public/first-page/rmg-units-to-reopen-partially-from-today-1587834829>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.supportgarmentworkers.org/payup-fashion>.

## Research methodology

The media tracking involved following of the ready-made garment sector and related trade union activities in national daily newspapers and social media. The websites of international news media and labour rights and fair trade organizations, blogs and YouTube channels were followed for news events and critical analysis. We determined which events and analyses to follow after identifying actors and stakeholders based on previous research and knowledge of the research team. In addition to the national daily news coverage, we also tracked opinion pieces, editorials, webinars, online discussions, online interviews and TV talk shows that involved our targeted actors and stakeholders.

**We also received labour rights-related news links from the Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust regularly during the lockdown period, which were reviewed.**

Photos and videos of trade union activities in social media and reports by labour rights and other research organizations on the COVID-19 impact on the ready-made garment sector were also followed. The analysis was included in the media tracking briefs. Key words, such as tripartite

consultation, stimulus package, health safety, factory closure, workers' protest, ready-made garment workers, ready-made garment and BGMEA, were used to search news online.

***Selecting the national daily newspapers and other forms of media:*** After reviewing all the major national daily newspapers during the first phase of the media tracking, the research team selected seven dailies that published the most up-to-date news on the ready-made garment sector and trade union activities: Daily Star, Prothom Alo, Dhaka Tribune, New Age, Financial Express, Kaler Kantho and The Business Standard. Additionally, national and international media were monitored once a week when they appeared in the key word search. They included The Observer, BDNews24, Bangladesh Today, The Guardian, United News Bangladesh, DW News and a few other online news portals. Social media pages of trade unions and the websites of labour rights campaigns, such as #Payup Campaign, Clean Clothes Campaign and Fair Wear, were included as important news sources of trade union activities and followed thoroughly. We also received labour rights-related news links from the Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust regularly during the lockdown period, which were reviewed.

***Identification of stakeholders and actors:*** For the media tracking, the research team identified actors and stakeholders related to the ready-made garment industry and trade union activities. This included: BGMEA, the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), individual

factories, the Ministry of Labour and Employment, the Department of Labour, the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, IndustriAll and the National Garment Workers Federation. Female labour leaders and their unions and/or organizations included Taslima Akhter of Bangladesh Garment Worker Solidarity and the Bangladesh Garment Sramik Sanghati; Joly Talukdar of the Garment Worker Trade Union Center; Nazma Akter of Awaj Foundation and Somnilito Garment Sramik Federation; and Kalpana Akter of Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity.

The team also identified research organizations, international organizations, labour rights groups and national labour rights and non-government organizations that have been involved in advocating workers' rights for wage and health safety. These organizations included the Center for Policy Dialogue; the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies; the Policy Research Institute; Karmojibi Nari; Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies; and the International Labour Organization (ILO). Their websites were followed weekly for news of any events, demands or debates. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Prime Minister's Office, the Prime Minister's Private Sector Advisor, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries and the Ministry of Commerce were included as important actors because they were involved in important decisions during the lockdown period.

**Data collection, storing and analysis:** All data were collected online from websites

of the targeted actors, organizations and newspapers. The research team developed a format of storing the news by date with online links, actors, key words, a brief summary of the news and other necessary details. An online database was created for storage, and the news items were also stored in PDF format for long-time use. If there were several news items on the same date, they were segregated according to issue. Critical analysis was done following the series of events around an issue related to labour rights during the pandemic. Single news items with several issues were segregated during the analysis, and the newest statistics and information were included.

### **Limitations**

The media did not report on the role of women trade union leaders separately. While our focus was on the role of such women, media coverage treated them as part of larger trade union activities around COVID-19 and protecting the rights of workers and negotiating with the government and with buyers. Although observations could be gleaned about female trade unions leaders' activities in many cases, the media reports did not permit distinguishing between general trade union activities and those led or initiated by women.

Another limitation of the study by its nature is that it relied wholly on what was printed in the media or what appeared in social media. No interviews or direct observations were done.

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<sup>7</sup> Basic/plant level trade union – a primary registered organization of workers at their working place and must be consist of 20% workers of the factory. A number of basic trade unions of the same industry, in this case the RMG industry, form a trade union federation and sometimes national level federation (Faisal, 2016).



## Findings from the media tracking

**O**ur media tracking research found several types of activities that female trade unions leaders engage with as well as how effectively they used new forms of media, such as social media. According to our findings, the media representation of female trade unions leaders is partial, and there is a lack of female leader representation in decision-making and in negotiating with the government. The following elaborates on the findings.

### ***Women leaders used social media better than male leaders.***

Social media was the most popular media to reach a larger audience. Our analysis of the media tracking found that female leaders effectively used social media for their campaigns and protests. Taslima Akhter, Nazma Akter and Joly Talukdar were a few of the leaders who were highly active in social media in placing demands, giving statements, connecting to national and international rights communities and bringing government and factory authorities'

**Through the social media pages of their organizations, these leaders repeatedly published demand points and statements regarding wages, factory closures and layoffs.**

attention to crucial issues. In addition to joining webinars, online interviews and discussions with other organizations, the female leaders conducted several online live discussions on the ongoing situation. Through the social media pages of their organizations, these leaders repeatedly published demand points and statements regarding wages, factory closures and layoffs. Thus, they were able to gather public support, reach the international fair-trade community and to spread their message beyond the national level. Engaging in social media seems to be effective because it allows trade unions to provide visual evidence of their activities and demands related to workers' rights that gives the movement more visibility on their own terms and may avoid the risk of misrepresentation by the print media. Male leaders were less represented or visible in social media.

### ***Plant-level women leaders were not highlighted.***

Women's leadership in trade unions was larger than what was being portrayed in the media. Although smaller in numbers, there are female leaders in plant-level unions or in the basic<sup>7</sup> unions under national unions and federations. These leaders have a vital role in mobilizing workers and increasing awareness about workers' rights. Yet, there is almost no representation of them in the media. Leaders like Nazma Akter and Kalpona Akter are the prominent voice of female leadership in the ready-made garment sector trade unions and they are most quoted in

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international media. We noticed Kalpona Akter and Nazma Akter regularly quoted in international media and platforms, such as the Associated Press, Tradecraft, The Guardian and the Nikkei Asian Review. Media representation, mostly online, of their activities and protests gathered public support, manifested as mass criticism from civil society in the media for workers' safety and livelihood protection. Their continuous demand and pressure for factory closures to prevent COVID-19 infection among workers finally resulted in closing of factories for one month. However, the plant-level unions are responsible for strengthening the national-level unions. Greater recognition of the contribution of women plant-level leaders would give them more prestige and motivate more female workers to join trade unions. It would be important to explore if their activities are not being reported on or if there is a lack of activity in these plant-based trade unions.

***Female leaders were more vocal for women's issues.***

In the male-dominated trade union culture, women trade union leaders have been successful at gaining concessions on issues specific to women workers, such as improving maternity benefits and day-care facilities (Nawaz and Haque, 2020). Although they benefit both male and female workers and the ready-made garment sector as a whole, we found that only women leaders were vocal on issues specific to women workers. These issues included workplace sexual harassment, maternity leave and unlawful termination of pregnant workers. It was the female trade unions leaders who were seen to advocate for the ratification of ILO Convention No. 190 on workplace violence and harassment. There was evidence of

retrenchment of pregnant workers during the pandemic situation (BIGD, 2020e), and according to the media scans, only women leaders brought attention to this issue. This is a matter of concern because one would expect that male and female trade unionists would prioritize these issues equally.

***Information and communication among workers, trade unions and factories and unity among trade unions was lacking.***

The review of the media reports indicated that female trade unions leaders led activities to ensure workers' rights and

**Trade unions leaders pleaded for factory closure but also argued that, without wages, workers would be left without food and health care. In some cases, conflicts of interest and positional differences were noticed.**

well-being in the first part of the COVID-19 period and received solidarity and support by leftist parties and other workers' federations, such as the Bam Gonotantrik Dal, the Communist Party, Krishak Shramik Mukti Andolon, Ganasamhati Andolon, the Bangladesh Confederation of Labour, Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad and the Bangladesh Garment Workers Federation, on several occasions. International solidarity and support were provided by such organizations as the Industrial Workers of the World Union in Ireland, Clean Clothes Campaign, Fair Wear and several others.

Although the trade unions aimed to protect workers' rights and ensure workers' well-being, there seemed a lack of communication between workers and trade unions actors. When trade unions were struggling and negotiating to extend factory closure, thousands of workers were reportedly returning to their workplace by walking or using whatever means they could find during the countrywide lockdown. These workers walked long distances to reach Dhaka, only to learn that the closure had been extended and they had to return to their villages. Those who wanted to stay in Dhaka could not because landlords did not let them enter their previous premises out of fear of coronavirus infection. This raised questions about the role of both factory authorities and trade unions. With a larger network of workers, why had trade unions failed to inform them not to return?

Trade unions leaders pleaded for factory closure but also argued that, without wages, workers would be left without food and health care. In some cases, conflicts of interest and positional differences were noticed. According to the media coverage, protests broke out after a diminished wage level, at 65 per cent of salaries, was decided in a tripartite meeting; trade union leaders who were not part of that consultation rejected the decision. Some trade unions demanded full wages and a full bonus throughout the pandemic, and some negotiated for partial wages. Some trade unions came out on the streets to protest amid the pandemic.

### ***Publicity of success stories was limited.***

Protests brought about significant results in meeting the demands placed by trade unions and workers, as stated by the trade unions leaders. In online interviews and social media discussions, trade union leaders like Joly

Talukdar claimed that any improvement or well-being initiative of workers' situations since the lockdown regarding wage or health safety were a result of their protests and movements during the pandemic. Many workers received wages and some factories began following health safety guidelines after protests demanded it. The Garment Workers Trade Union Center leaders successfully negotiated due wages and benefits for 50,000 workers from factories permanently closed due to the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Nazma Akter's national federation was able to negotiate with the garment factory owners to give laid-off workers their basic salary and other compensation benefits. Both the Garment Workers Trade Union Center and Bangladesh Garment Workers' Solidarity organized several street protests and stand-ins in factory areas, like Ashulia and Savar and inside Dhaka, demanding on-time payment of the festival bonus and wages for July 2020, which factories were delaying. Fearing a larger labour unrest, the Ministry of Labour and Employment conducted its 65th tripartite meeting, in which participants set a deadline to clear bonus and wage payments and instructed the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments to monitor the proper implementation of this decision through a newly formed inspection team.

Such success stories were less highlighted in the media and found mostly in the online news. This raises a number of questions: The women leaders' perceptions of their own successes may not be shared by the print media. To know whether this is a result of media bias or whether the female leaders were overemphasizing their achievements would need further probing. Various other actors, such as the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments and the Ministry of Labour and Employment and even the trade associations BGMEA and BKMEA,

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://tbsnews.net/economy/rmg/be-blip-98536>.

would like to claim credit for the negotiated payment of wages and the safeguarding of jobs. However greater coverage of the success stories claimed by women trade unionists in the online, print and digital media would create more positive views about female leadership and might motivate more female workers to join unions.

***Female leaders and female-led trade unions were more visible in demanding and protecting workers' rights.***

Throughout the media tracking period, we observed that female labour leaders and their trade unions were more vocal and visible in the media, demanding and protecting workers' rights. During March and April, they repeatedly made requests and demands for factory closing and no layoffs of workers, respectively, to protect workers from coronavirus infection and protect their livelihoods. Leaders like Taslima Akhter of Bangladesh Garment Workers' Solidarity presented a six-point demand to BGMEA and BKMEA<sup>9</sup> and Joly Talukdar of the Garment Workers Trade Union Center warned of labour unrest<sup>10</sup> in the event of layoffs. In April 2020 when BGMEA and the government decided on the 65 per cent of salary payment and 50 per cent of festival bonus, female leaders protested in every possible way. They published several press releases rejecting the decision<sup>11</sup> and sent a letter to the Home Minister<sup>12</sup> asking for the prime minister's intervention to pay workers' their full bonus.

Female leaders were visible and vocal in the international media in highlighting the effect of COVID-19 on workers and their livelihoods. They focused buyers', brands' and

international rights organizations' attention to order cancellations, which were resulting in job and wage losses and ultimately affecting workers' livelihoods. Thus, they were able to influence other national and international trade unions and fair-trade groups to make many international brands reconsider their order cancellations, resume their work orders and agree to clear all payments owed to suppliers. The mass criticism and pressure on authorities appeared to have influenced

public announcements of decisions in favour of workers. The BGMEA president's mention that there could be 55 per cent job cuts during June due to the lack of orders created mass criticism and protests from trade unions

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leaders.<sup>13</sup> Leaders organized protest rallies and gave several statements about the possibility of a larger labour reaction if such situations reoccurred. As a result of the wide criticism and protest through social and print media, BGMEA backed off from its statement and said there was no announcement on job cuts or layoffs. Moreover, the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments published a circular urging the BGMEA not

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/taslima.akhter.1971/posts/10157460022643406>.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/public/first-page/one-fourth-bgmea-plants-flout-govt-order-say-police-1587131762>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/gwtucbd/photos/a.501397433723049/785581578637965/?type=3&theater>.

<sup>12</sup> See [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=2653007638268477&id=1667547893481128](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2653007638268477&id=1667547893481128).

<sup>13</sup> See <https://sarabangla.net/post/sb-432576/>.

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/dont-terminate-any-rmg-workers-suggests-dife-1910877>.

to terminate any workers and thus to avert labour unrest in the country.<sup>14</sup> Whether factory owners followed this circular or whether it prevented job cuts remains a matter of further investigation; however, making public announcements surely created an opportunity for accountability for trade unions leaders.

***Female leaders used evidence to articulate problems.***

The media showed female leaders using statistics and numbers while arguing issues. The BGWS did their own media research to

**They also conducted several online webinars and discussions and published statements regarding workers' rights during the pandemic. News coverage of protests, demonstrations and labour leaders' activities were less reported in the print media than the news of order cancellations and the role of manufacturers' associations.**

find out the actual number of COVID-19 infections among workers. The published report brought the issue to the attention of the government and the BGMEA. Both the BGMEA and the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments started factory inspections to monitor whether health safety guidelines were being followed properly. The Garment Workers Trade Union Center and the Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation published numbers of terminated and laid-

off workers, which were also reported in the international media.

***Representation of female leaders in government tripartite meetings was minimal.***

We observed smaller participation of female leaders in the tripartite meetings that the Ministry of Labour and Employment organized. Although the media did not report the full participant lists, only male leaders were routinely quoted after these meetings. The tripartite meetings had representation from IndustriAll Bangladesh Council, the National Garment Workers Federation and a few other national trade unions, which are mostly led by men. The IndustriAll Council recently appointed a female union leader as president. Generally, the number of female participants in these meetings, where important decisions regarding wage and layoffs are made, is extremely low and a matter of concern.

***Representation of trade union activities between print and social media was unbalanced.***

An interesting finding in our media tracking is that there were fewer reports on trade union activities in print media compared with social media, with only their statements quoted after important decisions were announced. Although mobilizing workers to claim their rights requires in-person communication to a great extent, as proved in several occasions, female trade unions leaders were successful in using social media platforms for their activities during the pandemic. Some leaders conducted both online and offline activities and some only online activities, ranging from live virtual dialogues with activists and experts, online protests, TV talk shows through virtual media, road rallies and demonstrations, to raise demands such as

keeping safe distance to conducting online surveys. Prominent female labour leaders such as Nazma Akter, Joly Talukdar, Kalpona Akter and Taslima Akhter used social media platforms effectively by publishing their demands, press releases and activities with photographs. Their posts showed protests in several industrial areas and violent attacks on protesting workers. They also conducted several online webinars and discussions and published statements regarding workers' rights during the pandemic. News coverage of protests, demonstrations and labour leaders' activities were less reported in the print media than the news of order cancellations and the role of manufacturers' associations. There was disproportionately more news about the government's role on ready-made garment and owners' association activities

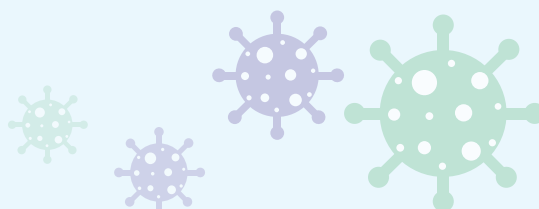
and statements rather than trade union activities. We did not find any news reports or discussion in the print media that highlighted the success stories of trade union protests, but we found them in the online media.

An array of activities was left uncovered by the formal media coverage. This may suggest a bias in media reporting, whereby issues of workers and their struggles receive limited coverage. Thus, the perspectives and views of trade union leaders were less heard, and public information on workers' situations was limited. Social media, however, provided an open platform. It had a greater audience, was easier to access and reached all kinds of stakeholders related to the struggle.

## Recommendations

Based on the tracking analysis, we offer six suggestions for trade unions, media outlets and the government the following recommendations are made:

1. Engaging in social media could be highly effective for female trade union leaders to increase their visibility. This can make their activities more visible and may increase participation of female workers in the trade union movement.
2. It is important to highlight the contribution of female plant-level leaders because it will increase the sense of "belongingness" of female workers to trade unions and motivate more female workers to join trade unions.
3. All unions, regardless of male or female leaders, should prioritize issues specific to women workers' interests (such as sexual harassment in the workplace and maternity benefits).
4. Female leaders need to be given more space in tripartite committees and meetings, and their participation needs to be increased.
5. Print and TV media should provide more balanced reporting of trade unions', government and employers' views and activities to ensure that the public has a more balanced view of their activities in the ready-made garment sector.
6. Bangladesh should immediately ratify ILO Convention No. 190 on workplace violence and harassment to counter the risks of increased sexual harassment and gender-based violence against women due to the increased vulnerability of jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic.



## Conclusion

Media have had an important role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Media reports naming and shaming brands and revealing their cancellations put them under pressure to rethink their role as buyers. It made the struggle highly visible and mobilized mass opinion and support that was crucial to make decision-makers favour workers in their decisions. However, the reporting should also be critical. The media paid attention to the national economy, the scale of orders lost and reduction in revenue and export orders but sidelined fundamental issues of labour governance and systemic issues such as the inadequacy of wages. Workers are working at wages that do not allow them to cover eventualities such as a few months of job loss and there is no social protection in the form of unemployment benefits.

Female leadership in trade unions brought about significant changes in the ready-made garment workers' movement. The labour

rights movement and minimum wage movement have strong female leadership, but the number of female leaders remains small. Only a few female leaders were repeatedly quoted, which indicates the scarcity of women in trade union leadership. While the potential and strength of female leadership was revealed through the media coverage, it also exposed the fragility in terms of numbers and coverage. This reinforces the need to continue strengthening women's leadership in the trade union movement.

Finally greater media attention to ensuring a balanced reporting of ready-made garment issues from the perspectives of labour, employers and government is needed.

**Female leadership in trade unions brought about significant changes in the ready-made garment workers' movement. The labour rights movement and minimum wage movement have strong female leadership, but the number of female leaders remains small.**

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