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The garment industry in Bangladesh under COVID-19: Lessons from the Rana Plaza disaster on how we understand worker safety

23 March 2021




How do we understand safety?

“Safety,” as defined in the dictionary, is the state of being “safe,” the condition of being protected from harm or other non-desirable outcomes; a place that is free from harm or danger-- a safe place.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safety>, Accessed January 2, 2021



POLL: Do you think workers are
safer now than they were prior
+ to the Rana Plaza building
collapse in 2013?

An aerial photograph capturing the aftermath of a catastrophic building collapse. A large, multi-story concrete structure has crumbled, leaving a massive pile of twisted rebar, broken concrete slabs, and debris. A dense crowd of people is gathered in the open space below the wreckage, some standing on the remaining fragments of the building. In the background, other urban buildings and greenery are visible, providing context to the disaster's location in a city.

*More than seven years after
the Rana Plaza disaster in
2013, issues related to fire,
electrical, and structural
safety in hundreds of the
nation's garment factories
have improved from before.*

According to the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety's website, 84% of factories under the Accord have corrected their outstanding structural issues.





Just How Safe Are Workers?



- Kabeer et al (2019) found in their survey of workers that the overwhelming majority (95%) said that they felt safe working in their present factory and 90% of workers said they could refuse to go into a building if they thought it was not safe.
- The authors attribute this to efforts made by the Accord and Alliance to focus on health and safety; they conclude that much of what these initiatives set out to do was accomplished.
- The authors cite improvements in workers' outcome standards
 - Better health and safety conditions
 - Relative job security and improved social benefits
 - And process rights (mainly representation in worker participation committees)
- **However, problems regarding wages, working hours, abuse and management rejection of unions and collective bargaining, have not improved.**
- They conclude that the factories they studied can be characterized, no longer by *sweatshop* conditions, but by *hardship* conditions.



One in four workers in Bangladesh has witnessed or experienced sexual harassment at work.



We create a false dichotomy when we say workers are safe due to inspections, when in fact substantial evidence shows that workers experience more workers' rights violations and precarious employment, especially women workers...We must raise the questions: what purpose does the uncritical, technocratic use of the word safe or safety serve and whom does it benefit. This notion of safety, as defined by the Accord as being the number of factories inspected, allows for market promotion as part of corporate responsibility program rather than actual holistic health and safety from workers' perspective or norms set by ILO. When viewed from the norms established by ILO that discuss workers' rights and evidence on workers' actual working conditions, workers have not been made "safer."- Saxena (2020)



A Global Pandemic



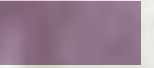
The Covid-19 pandemic put a spotlight on already unfair practices and heightened inequalities that were inherent in the system

+ Impact on garment workers worldwide

- 98.1% of buyers refused to contribute to the cost of paying the partial wages to furloughed workers that the law required.
- 72.4% of furloughed workers were sent home without pay.
- 97.3% of buyers refused to contribute to severance pay expenses of dismissed workers,
- 80.4% of dismissed workers were sent home without their severance pay

Anner, 2020: https://ler.la.psu.edu/gwr/news-items/Abandoned_CGWRWRCApril12020.pdf

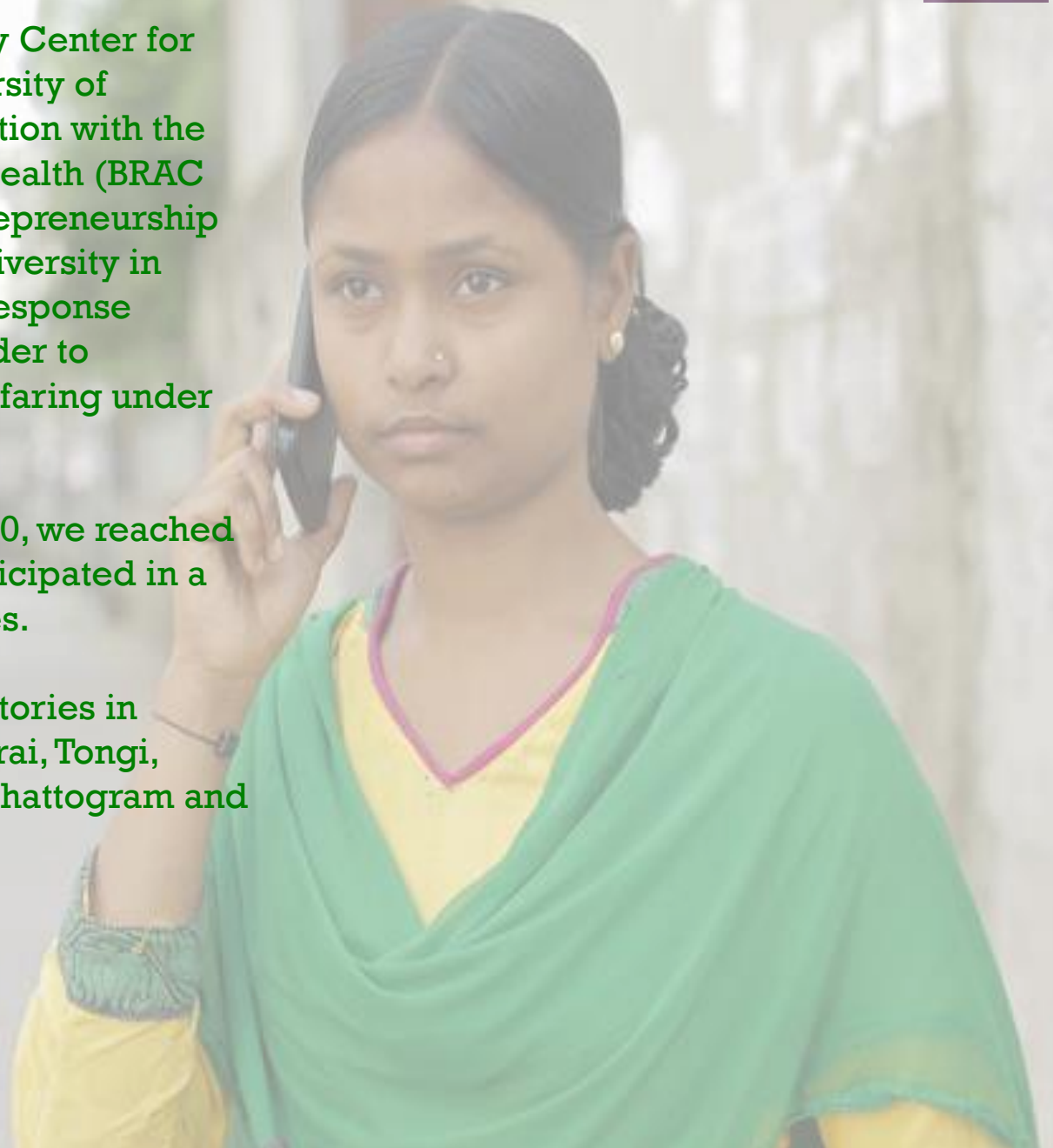
- *“...companies ... retain the right to invoke cancellation, and it's an open secret, frankly, that cancellations are more common than people think...If a shipment arrives and it doesn't meet any of our quality standards, or if the vendor says the shipment is going to be three months late, [companies] retain the right, for specifically prescribed reasons, to cancel the orders. And that is just how the apparel business works. (Personal communication with a major retailer, October. 2020).*



The Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies at the University of California, Berkeley in collaboration with the James P Grant School of Public Health (BRAC JPGSPH) and the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development (CED) at BRAC University in Bangladesh conducted a rapid response survey of garment workers in order to understand how they have been faring under this crisis

Between June 30 and July 13, 2020, we reached 1,057 garment workers who participated in a phone survey of about 35 minutes.

Workers were surveyed from factories in Dhaka city, Ashulia, Savar, Dhamrai, Tongi, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Tangail, Chattogram and Mymensingh.





Covid-19 Precautions

In our survey of over 1000 workers, in June 2020, 87% said their factory had introduced new precautions against the Coronavirus, including giving workers new protective equipment (91%), encouraging more hygiene measures (77%), sending workers with symptoms home (66%), encouraging distance between workers (75%).



Despite measures taken, however, workers are still very worried about contracting the virus.

59% feel that they are somewhat likely or very likely to get infected by the virus in their factory

54% of women and 45% of men would not be able to isolate at home if they contracted the virus, even though 66% said the factory will send workers home if they show symptoms.

One in four of the workers reported not being informed about paid sick leave or special leave provisions if they experience COVID-19 symptoms (Jackson 2020).

85.7 percent of respondents said that they had suffered from symptoms of the virus (chills, sneezing, fever). All respondents who had suffered from such symptoms, stated that they had not visited a doctor (Manusher Jonno Foundation survey, Oct. 2020)





Covid protocols were short lived...

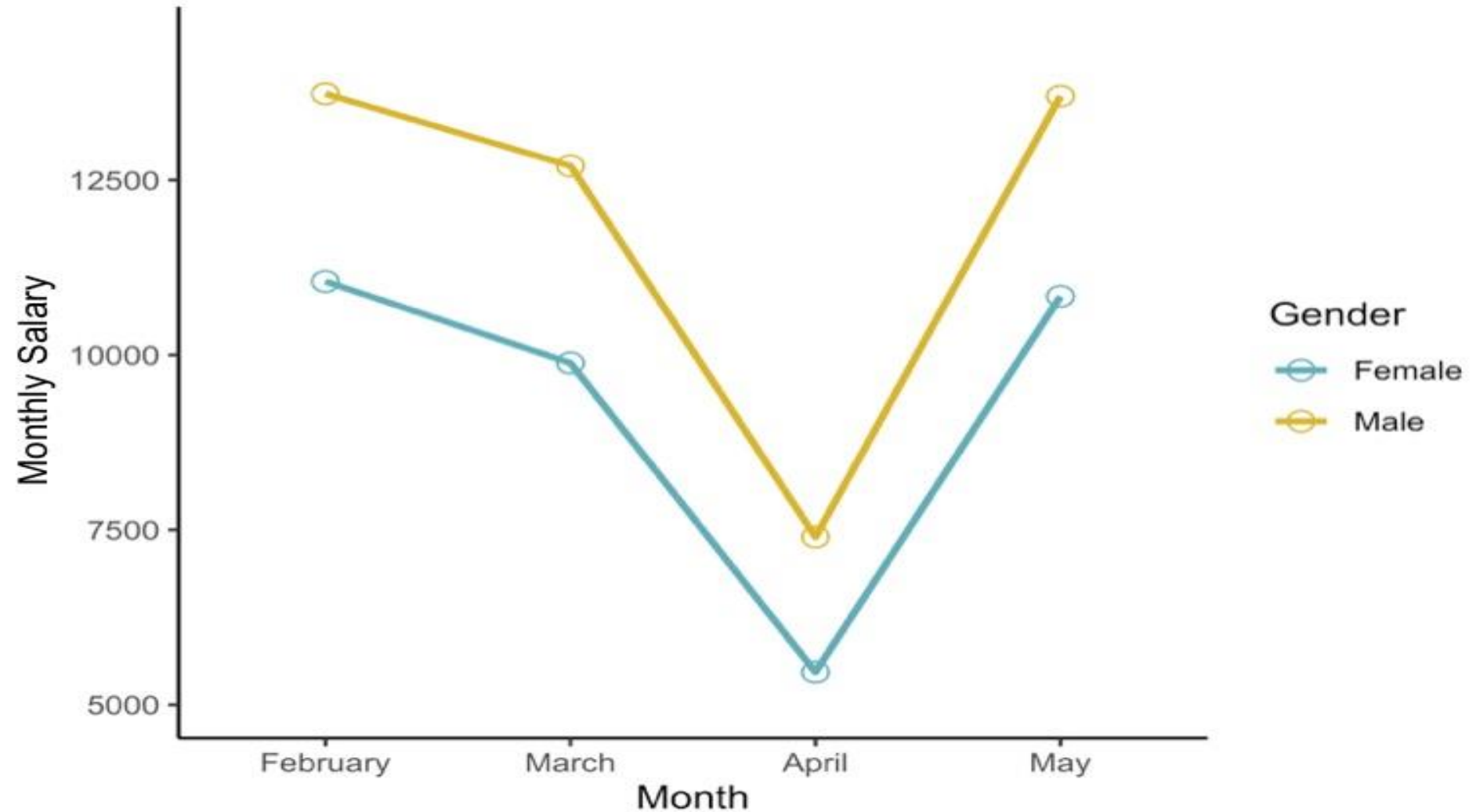
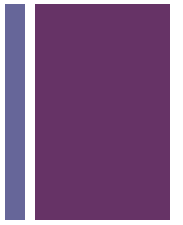
According to labor activist,
Kalpona Akter

They said there would be hand washing, there would be social distancing in the factory, there would be temperature checks and masks for them. But all of that was bullshit; for one week they maintained some of those [safety protocols], but keeping distance in the factory is a real joke. It's practically impossible...First of all, they decided to restart the factories with 30% of workers, so they can maintain the distance and then gradually they will increase that, but they didn't keep that promise. One or two factories added the heavy plastic curtain between the workers. Some of them kept one machine empty in between two workers, but that lasted for only a week or so, and then everything went back to normal (Interview, January 2021)



Economic Hardship on Workers


+ Monthly salary of workers (Feb-May, 2020)



The Clean Clothes Campaign estimates that between March-May 2020, the wage gap in Bangladesh (the amount of funding that is needed to make workers whole) was 30%, or \$501.62 million.



While the gap reduced in May from April, they estimate that many workers did not receive their Eid bonus as was promised them, causing this gap to remain.
Clean Clothes Campaign. (2020). "Un(der) Paid in the Pandemic."



According to the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science at Dhaka University, a worker must spend at least **BDT 3270** per month on a variety of foods to meet their calorific needs

During normal times, workers really have the ability to spend only about **BDT 1110** a month.

In April, when salaries hit their lowest point, female garment workers received only **BDT 5742** and male workers only **BDT 7739** for that month.

Those in helper positions in factories (82% who are women) received only **BDT 5170** in April. (compared to **BDT 8000** usually)

It is not surprising that 77% of workers said that it was difficult to feed everyone in their household.

69% of workers ate less protein rich foods like meat, fish and eggs in May compared to February, while` 40% ate more pulses, like lentils and chickpeas during this time



When asked how they have coped during this period, 60% of workers (65% women and 55% men) said they don't save or use their savings to pay for food;

92% (90% of women and 96% of men) said they reduce other expenses.





Mental Health of Workers

62% replied with a '6' or higher (on a scale of 1 to 10), for how worried they were about not being able to feed everyone in their household because of money



An Oxfam report describes the case of one worker who worked in a garment factory in Bangladesh and lost her job last April. She was eight months pregnant, but did not get any of the maternity benefits to which she was legally entitled. She said at the time: “With the pregnancy, fear of the virus, unemployment, lack of payment of benefits ... sometimes I feel I will lose my mind.”

+ Measures of mental health

82%

- Feel afraid that something awful may happen (in the last several days to nearly every day-between 1-14 days)

71%

- Feel down, depressed or hopeless (in the last several days to nearly every day-between 1-14 days)

65%

- Are not able to sleep (in the last several days to nearly every day-between 1-14 days)

60%

- Feel anxious (in the last several days to nearly every day-between 1-14 days)



Social Protections



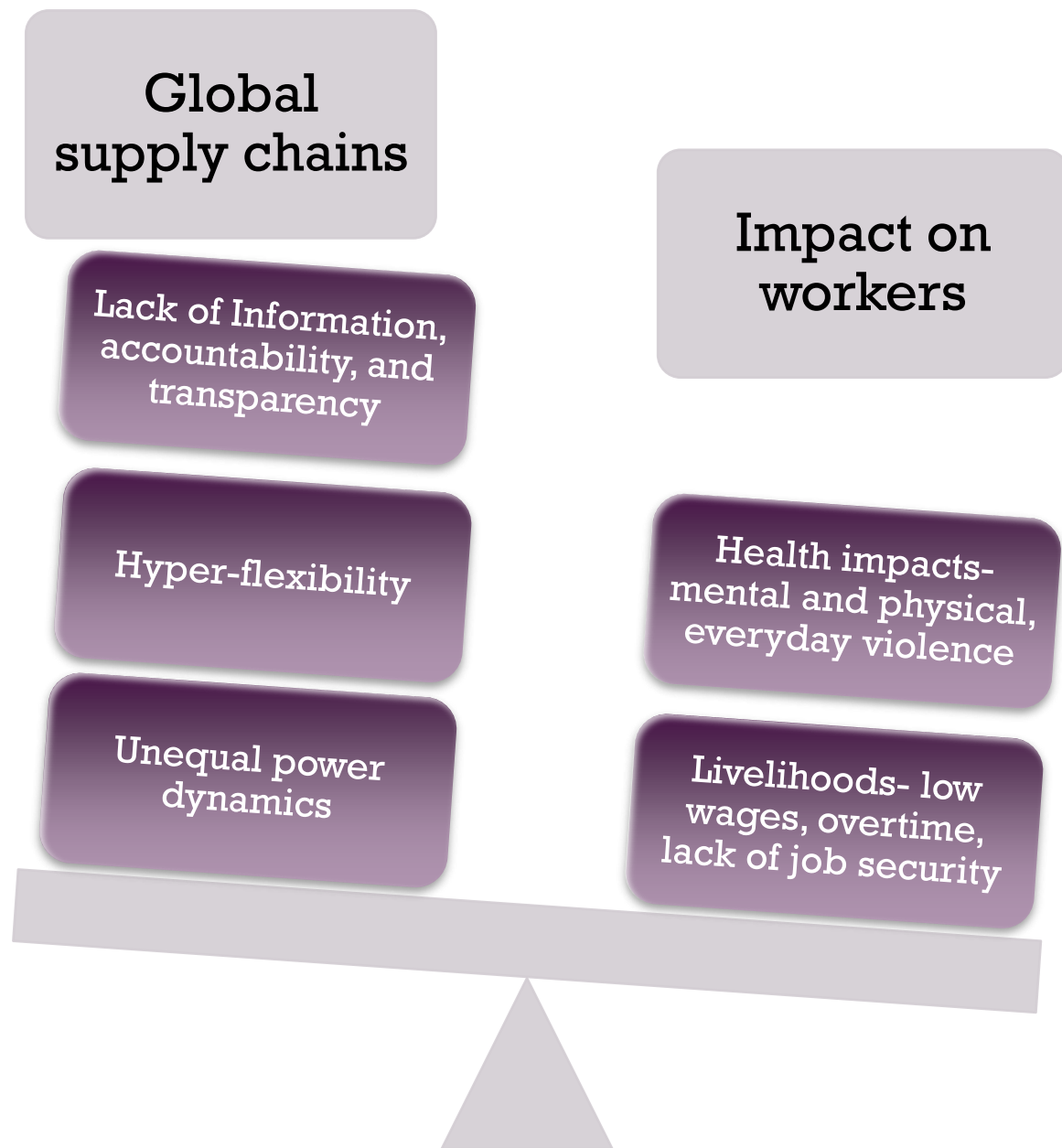
+ UN Report on Social Protections

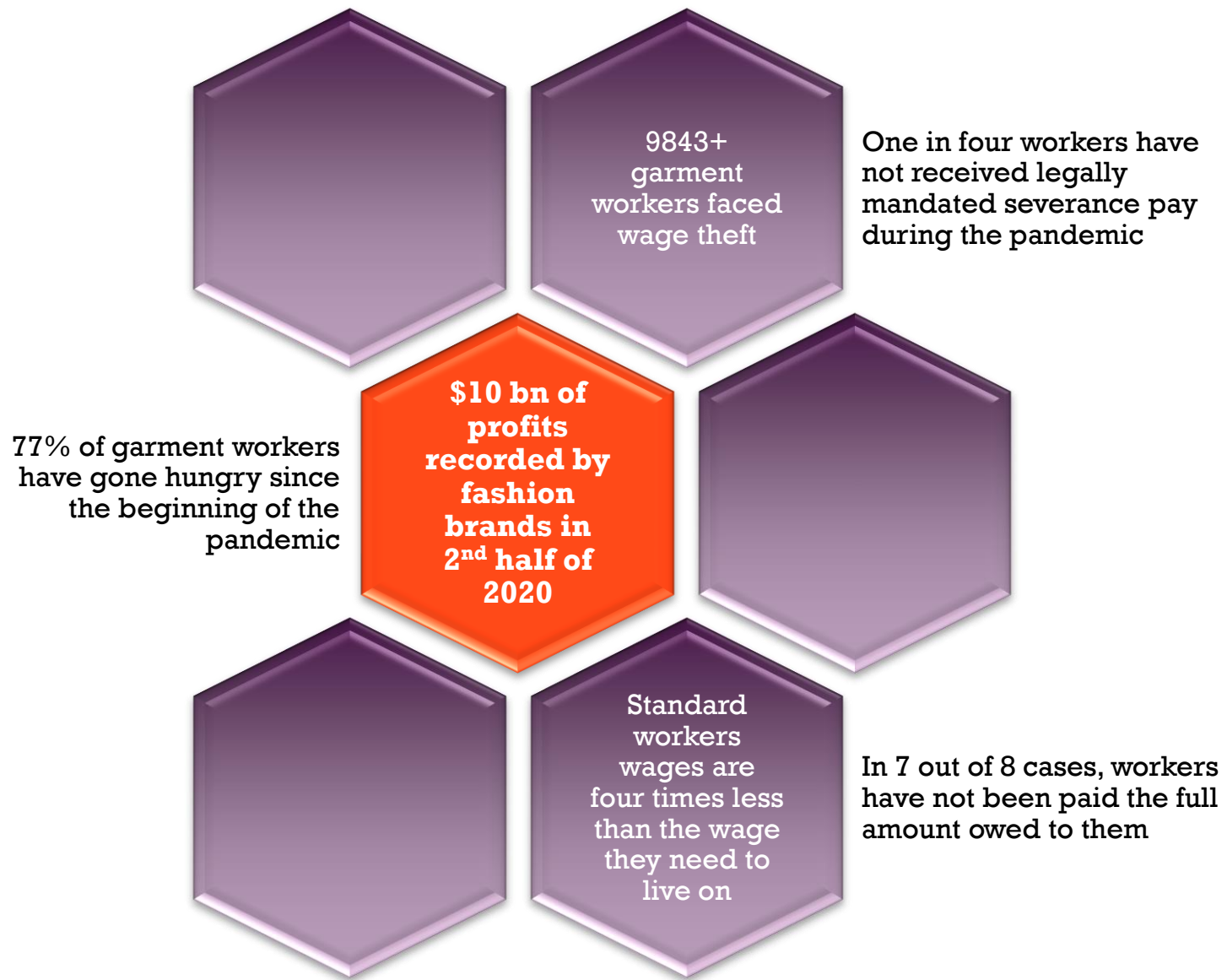
“Bangladesh is coming up with the fewest social protection initiatives in the Asia Pacific region, finds a United Nations position report prepared by the organisation's regional bureau. The organisation broke down “social protection” into eight categories... According to the report, Bangladesh is only providing income support, or social assistance. The report iterates the necessity of preventing job losses and providing social protection to those rendered unemployed.”

- “Social Protection Initiatives Scanty in Bangladesh, Daily Star, September 9, 2020



+ Global supply chains are
inherently detrimental to good
labor rights





Wage theft and pandemic profits: The Right to a Living Wage for Garment Workers,
Business and Human Rights Resource Center, March 2021

We asked them [global retailers] off the record why they extended payment terms on existing contracts if they clearly didn't have a cash flow problem, and the answer was (and I'm paraphrasing), **'because we could'** Because our competitors are doing it and they're gaining an advantage, so why shouldn't we do it? That's the mentality that defines sourcing in the industry. That is the logic of the sourcing. – Scott Nova, Executive Director, Workers' Rights Consortium (Interview January, 2021)





What this narrow definition of safety allows us to do...



This limited approach has served to reassure global retailers that they can continue “business as usual”

- Now that buildings themselves are structurally sound
- Now that the virus itself has been contained
- While continuing to pursue a sourcing strategy that is characterized by hyper-flexibility and limited transparency and contributes to increased incidents of gender-based violence and to overall declines in the mental and physical health of workers and leaves them insecure and without any social protections

How Will We Build Back + Better?

In order to make a real difference for workers in garment factories around the world, they must experience “safety” in the fullest sense of the word—a definition, if fully understood, would be one that would encompass protections to their health, wellbeing, and livelihoods.