

HEALTH CHALLENGES FACING CLOTHING AND TEXTILE WORKERS DURING POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Thousands of workers all over the world are affected with the outbreak of covid-19 virus especially in clothing and textile industries. This paper illustrates the challenges facing clothing and textile workers during post covid-19 pandemic. The common jobs handled by clothing and textile workers are sewing, ironing, packing and lifting heavy loads which are monotonous, continuous and prolonged. This paper indicates that working for a long period without rest, absence of personal protective equipment and inadequate provision of ergonomic facilities at workplace leads to major health-related issues such as musculoskeletal, cardiovascular respiratory, neurological, nutrition and mental health problems among clothing and textile workers. It was recommended that government should provide adequate equipment that will enable clothing and textile workers to work with little effort.

Keywords:

Health, Challenges, Clothing and Textile, Workers, Post covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

Covid-19 has given significant impact on the health and economic development worldwide. The clothing and textile industry may not be the first thing that comes to

mind when one thinks of COVID-19, like so many industries, it has been significantly impacted by the global pandemic. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a new infectious disease caused by a new virus (Hughes,

2020). The impact of this virus is not limited in a particular country or area – it becomes global (Cernansky, 2020). The whole world is now in unweaving. This virus does not only have effect on health, but also on the global economy. As efforts to mitigate the public health emergency intensify, the novel Coronavirus disease (COVID- 19) has had an

immense impact on all social and economic sectors, including the clothing and textiles industries. The large-scale quarantines, travel restrictions, and social-distancing measures drive a sharp fall in consumers and businesses expenditure. This situation created economic recession globally (Chinazz et al, 2020).

However, many efforts have been made by government and clothing/textile industries in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19 virus. For example, a few countries introduced lockdown approach for movement control order (MCO) and as well as the use of face mask. The impact of this approach made consumers to stay at home and enforce the use of face masks for all citizens (CNN, 2020).

Furthermore, the workers in the clothing and textile industries are exposed to work which require high concentration such as cutting, stitching and finishing which causes headache and visual discomfort. The workers also receive low income to survive and spend a majority of their time in the factory. They find it difficult to buy the required calories and to cook food. For this reason, they choose to take unhygienic food which cause various types of health problems like food poisoning, diarrhea, gastric pain, malnutrition, abdominal pain and ignorantly expose themselves to covid-19 virus while working. A study found that workers in the readymade garment industry suffer from some health problems like malnutrition, less appetite, diarrhea, hepatitis (jaundice), food poisoning and so on, that are related to the food and personal hygiene they do normally observe.

Concept of Clothing

Clothing constitutes garment and accessories as worn by individuals. Ozougwu (2004) defined clothing as a major aspect of personal appearance that often bears cultural shared meaning. The term “clothing” described by Edegbai (2014)

embodies wearing of apparel and accessories such as garments, jewellerys, shoes, scarves. Bags that man places or put on the body. They further refer to clothes as "second skin" that covers the body.

Functions of Clothing

Clothing is used to cover the body, to make you feel more attractive, and to communicate with others. People wear clothes for many reasons. Some of these reasons are physical. Clothes are worn for comfort and protection, it also gives self-confidence and express one's personality. Clothes also help one to identify with other people. Knowing something about the role of clothing helps you to understand yourself and others better. Clothing is a complex but fascinating part of everyone's life opined Arubayi (2002).

According to Brannon (2010) physically, clothing serves many purpose such as protection from weather, and can enhance safety during hazardous activities such as hiking and cooking. It protects the wearer from rough surfaces, rash causing plants, insect bites, splinters, thorns and prickles by providing a barrier between the skin and the environment. Clothes can insulate against cold and hot conditions. Further, they can provide a hygiene barrier, keeping infections and toxic materials away from the body clothing also provides protection from harmful radiation. Therefore clothes are worn for:

- 1. Protection:** Our skin is uncovered and exposed. We can be easily affected by elements rain, snow, wind cold and heat. We can be harmed or injured on the job or while participating in sports. In some cases, we need to protect ourselves with our clothing. Clothing aids comfort. It absorbs perspiration, prevents sudden chills, and act as a buffer between the body and accidental burns; scratches and rough surfaces. The right garment can insulate the body against extremely cold temperatures.
- 2. Safety:** Clothing also serves to protect your skin from harm or injury. Some sports and occupations requires protective clothing for safety reasons. Football players wear helmets and protective padding to help prevent injury during rough play. Clothing can offer protection. Some items are even labelled with the term "Safety" to identify them from regular day-to-day clothes and accessories. Fire-fighters wear asbestos clothing in hazardous situations. Police officers wear bullet proof vests. Road workers wear florescent orange vest so that drivers can see them easily and prevent accidents.

3. **Sanitation:** Special clothing and accessories are often worn for sanitation reasons. People who work in factories that produce food and medical products wear sanitary clothing, face masks and hair covering. This precaution prevents contamination of the products by germs. In operating rooms, doctors and nurses wear special disposable sanitary uniforms, gloves and face masks.

4. **Modesty:** Modesty refers to what people feel is the proper way for clothing to cover the body. Different groups of people may have different standards of modesty. For example clothes that a woman might wear to a fancy party would probably be unacceptable at work the next day.

5. **Identification:** Clothing can also identify people as members of a group. Certain types of clothing colours, and accessories have become representative of certain groups, activities and occupations. By simply dressing alike, people can show that they belong to the same group e.g. Air Crews, Air hostess, Doctors, Pilots etc.

6. **Uniforms:** A uniform is one of the easiest ways to identify group members. Uniforms can provide instant recognition or create a special image for the group. Members of police force, fire department and military wear uniform so that they can be recognized quickly and easily for public safety. Athletic teams wear different colours to identify their teams and to differentiate them from their opponents. People who work in service occupations, such as restaurant workers, airline personnel, and hotel staff also wear special uniform. These uniforms help to identify the worker to their customers, as well created an image for the company.

7. **Styles and Colours:** Some occupations required a unique style of dress. Judges wear the traditional black robe. Ministers, priests and other clergy member may wear special clothing for conducting religious services. The style of the clothing often dates back to many centuries to show visually that they are doing what is linked to the past.

8. **Status:** King and Queen wear crowns to set them apart from the rest of their subjects. Their crowns indicate their status, or position or rank within a group. Clothes and other accessories are used by people to show their level of importance. They may also be used to give the wearer a sense of importance. Status symbols are clothes or other items that offer a sense of status for the ordinary person. Usually these items are more expensive or the latest in design.

9. **Decoration:** People decorate themselves to enhance their appearance. They wear clothes, jewellery, and cosmetics in hopes of improving their looks and attracting favourable attention. Adornment or decorations, also helps to express their uniqueness and creativity.

Clothing and accessories can be used to improve appearance in different ways. Clothing can also be decorated to make it special and unique.

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Clothing and Textile Industry

When COVID-19 hit, the impact on the clothing and textile industry was immediate. Due to public health concerns and social distancing measures, within days, governments around the world demanded the closure of non-essential retail, including fashion.

After closing their doors, many retailers pivoted to online sales, began fundraising for local and international charities, and developed plans to support employees. In countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, many frontline retail workers became eligible for federally sponsored wage subsidies while they are unable to work due to shop closures. Some fashion councils launched hardship funds to support independent fashion businesses, which now face even more uncertain futures as consumer spending on fashion continues to spiral.

We watched these early responses to COVID-19 with great interest. Here was an example of the clothing and textile industry, one of the most exploitative and inequitable industries in the world (Bick et al., 2018), acting in a way that was nimble, responsible, and compassionate. As Vogue UK described it, the 'kindness' of the fashion industry was shining through. However, as the crisis has continued to unfold, longstanding tensions have begun to surface. Fashion and apparel retailers closed the doors to their brick and mortar storefronts with promises to support their 'communities', all the while halting production in global factories, leaving millions of clothing and textile workers without job security and, in some cases, without payment for work already done (Anner, 2020).

The Impact of COVID-19 on the clothing and textile Workers

The impact of COVID-19 on the clothing and textile industry is ruinous. The brands and retailers have no income as well as they have to bear other associated costs. They canceled orders from the manufacturers. Only in Bangladesh, it is

predicted that around \$6 billion in export revenue will be lost during this financial year amid cancellations from some of the world's largest brands and retailers (Paul, 2020). And, now the manufacturers couldn't pay the wages to the workers as they didn't get any financial support from the buyers. Moreover, they have already invested lots of investment in purchasing raw materials for production, which is now closed. So, they are not in a capable situation to provide wages to the workers.

With having limited income and no savings, the workers faced a huge financial crisis and health challenges during and after this Pandemic. The workers are granted leaves without payment. A recent survey has found that about 72.4 percent of manufacturers in Nigeria were unable to provide their workers with some income when furloughed, while 80.4 percent of them stated that they were incapable to provide compensation when order cancellations resulted in worker dismissals (Anner, 2020). However, there is still a challenge for those factories, whose still receiving orders from the brands, ensuring a safe transportation system for the workers while all kinds of transportation bans (Anner, 2020).

Thousands of workers may lose their jobs and face various health issues, particularly in the clothing and textile industry, which is the highest employment sector in Nigeria. The African Development Bank (ADB) predicted that 894,930 workers would be unemployed in Nigeria if the virus spread (Perera, 2020). A similar situation is in Cambodia. Due to the shortage of raw materials, tens of thousands of apparel workers could lose their jobs in Cambodia.

The brands and retailers not only cancel the buying orders but also refused to take responsibility for garments. The workers didn't get their salaries (Kelly, 2020). Scott Nova has said: "Many of these workers live in countries where labor laws and protections are not upheld," (Kelly, 2020). In Cambodia, there is a law to seek Government permission before sacking workers along with paying them 40 percent of the \$190 (£161) monthly minimum wage for up to six months (Kelly, 2020). Albit, some factories have already suspended workers without paying normal salaries which may lead them to the defaulter.

Health Challenges facing Clothing and Textile workers during post Covid-19

1. **Musculoskeletal problems:** Around 14 studies were reviewed and majority of the studies have documented that musculoskeletal problems were among the most common health problems in the clothing and textile industries. A study conducted in Sri Lanka reported a prevalence of 15.5% for musculoskeletal problems in clothing and textile workers during covid-19 pandemic (Thomas, 2020). Findings reveal that neck and shoulder pain both occurred together and it was commonly reported among sewing machine operators.
2. **Cardiovascular problems:** Cardiovascular and hypertension were documented in five studies. A longitudinal study of morbidity and nutritional status of workers employed in a clothing and textile industry conducted in Bangalore reported that both cardiovascular illness and hypertension increased by 0.53% in two years (Roy, 2009). The prevalence of hypertension documented in studies were 1.9% , 10.5% and 16.07% (15). A study done in Bangladesh to find out the health status of the female garment workers reported that 41.5% of the female garment workers had hypertension and 39% of them were suffering from heart diseases caused due to heavy workload (Joseph et al., 2011).
3. **Gynecological problems:** Gynaecological problem was among the common problems reported in female workers. A study conducted in Nigeria to assess the change in the morbidity profile among clothing and textile industry workers revealed that gynecological problems showed an increase of 5.35% in two years (Chandra and Dubey, 2014). The problems were menstrual irregularities, polycystic ovaries, vaginal discharge, infertility, cancer cervix, and uterine prolapsed and urinary tract infections.
4. **Respiratory problem:** Ahmed and Raihan (2014) reported that the high dust level present in the factory caused by cotton has given rise to asthma and respiratory problems. Study conducted in Sri Lanka showed that a very low proportion i.e. 3.4% of the workers had respiratory symptoms (Roy, 2009). Respiratory illnesses (rhinitis, respiratory infections, bronchitis, and bronchial asthma) and thyroid related illnesses increased by 2.14% among clothing and textile workers (Chandra and Dubey, 2014).
5. **Gastrointestinal problem:** The common ailments of gastrointestinal problem among clothing and textile workers are hyperacidity and heart burns. A study conducted in Bangladesh among readymade garment

industry workers revealed that 55% of workers had stomach ache, 71.5% had gastric pain, and 75.5% had abdominal pain (Ahmed and Raihan, 2014).

6. **Neurological problem:** A study conducted in Bangalore revealed that the other neurological ailments faced by the workers such as hand tremors, peripheral neuritis and headaches had an incidence of around 12% in two years among the workers (Joseph et al, 2011).
7. **Nutrition problem:** some findings showed that the common problem faced by clothing and textile workers are malnutrition and anemia. The prevalence of malnutrition ranged from 68.8% (5) to 20.4% (Roy, 2009). It is also important to note that the studies showed that prevalence of anemia was more common among women than men (24). The study conducted in Bangalore also revealed that on repeated nutritional assessment, over a period of 2 years, the workers also showed an increased BMI.
8. **Mental health problem:** according to Chandra and Dubey (2014), mental health disorders were found to be common disorders among clothing and textile workers. They noted that somatic illness (11%), anxiety (7.6%), social dysfunction (7.1%) and symptoms of depression (6.8%) were reported among garment workers in bangladesh.

Conclusion

A pandemic can become the ultimate driver of industries to collapse, as it affects all human activities. The situation has become more difficult just because nobody has the idea of the duration of the corona pandemic on the globe. The impact of this disease on the demand and supply chain has become a daily topic. Furthermore, it is evident from the literature review that the clothing and textile workers are exposed to various health problems during post covid-19 pandemic. It was revealed that musculoskeletal problem, cardiovascular problem, gynecological problems, respiratory problems, gastrointestinal problem, nutrition problem, neurological problem and mental problem are health challenges observed among clothing and textile workers. It was revealed from literatures that musculoskeletal problem is the most common problem among the clothing and textile workers as documented in the study. The causes of musculoskeletal problem

were related to continuous sitting, bending and twisting at the waist, abnormal posture and movements during work and continuous standing.

Recommendations

It was recommended that;

1. The industries should provide the adequate and convenient protective dress during the production line.
2. Pre-employment medical examination and Personal protective devices should be compulsory for all workers at the clothing and textile industries.
3. Government should provide adequate equipment that will enable clothing and textile workers to work with little effort.
4. More researches should be carried out with the support of academia to see the indirect effects of the outbreak on clothing and textile industry.

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