

# Corona Pandemic: What can the apparel industry do during this Crisis?

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Credit: RBC

The Coronavirus pandemic can be called the worst international emergency experienced by humanity in the modern history due to its global spread and ability to catch people by a cruel surprise. There is no doubt that it would have catastrophic effect on the entire world.

Different countries are at different levels of the spread of this virus and while there are a few exceptions like Singapore, no country would be spared if its vagaries.

The economic impact of this humanitarian crisis is too mind boggling to fathom. Garment industry is said to be one of the worst sufferers. There are reports of global fashion giants downing shutters in the major consumption

markets of USA and Europe. Many of them have suspended the deliveries of the ready goods waiting at the ports and in factories across the globe, majority of them situated in Asia.

There is no doubt that, this would have a devastating effect on millions of garment workers and businesses that work on thin margins. As per BGMEA estimates, till 25th March, shipments worth 2.58 Billion US\$ have already been cancelled or suspended, involving 936 factories and 1.92 Million workers. In India, the factories in Tirupur have been shut 22nd March onwards. The factory owners have promised to pay full salary to workers. Rest of the factories in India have also been shut with National Lock down from 25th March. Industry in Myanmar has already seen some factory closures and it is not much different for other apparel manufacturing nations.

It is true that we are all in it together and everybody is suffering or will suffer. This involves Brands, retailers, importers, sourcing companies, apparel manufactures, subcontractors and most importantly, the workers. However, we must realise that the capacity to cope with disaster is not same for all. If we can work together and help each other, the pain of this Pandemic can be minimised. As it is said “Pain when shared reduces and joy when shared multiplies”.

The Indian Textile Minister Ms. Smriti Irani has made [an appeal the global apparel buyers](#) not to cancel the shipments. She has said “Let us show the world that we can do Commerce with Compassion.” BGMEA President Dr. Rubana Huq has also made a [spirited appeal](#) to buyers, not to abandon Bangladesh industry in the hour of disaster. It is time to listen to one’s heart and act in compassionate manner. As both Minister Smriti Irani and Dr. Rubana Huq have appealed to international buyers, I would like to focus on what can the industry do with special focus on addressing the health concerns and supporting workforce.

On the humanitarian response side, we have several initiatives taken by the fashion industry like:

- Retailers like [H&M](#), C&A, GAP and others are offering their supply chains to procure and supply PPEs
- [Brandix](#) in Sri Lanka and [IKEA](#) in India offered their facility as a quarantine centre to support health infrastructure
- Reliance has set up a dedicated Coronavirus hospital
- Leading designers like [Anita Dongre](#) have made significant contributions towards protecting artisans and small vendors. International designers like [Armani](#), [Versace](#) and many more are making donations to funds to support affected people.
- And there are many more noteworthy initiatives.

All these efforts need to be lauded and thousands more are needed globally as the challenge is enormous.

Here are some of my thoughts that the members of the apparel manufacturing industry may find worth considering. These are presented separately for the apparel manufacturers that are still operating factories

depending on their country, risk perception/ Govt. advise and the manufacturers that have closed the factories as a precautionary measure.

What can the factories that are still working do?

- **Follow the advisory on social distancing** for the workforce (physical distancing is a better term).
- **Use the factory communication channels to improve the awareness among the workforce** about the precautions to be taken at work, while travelling to factory and at community/ home. This will not only help your workers but, the community as a whole. Here is a useful article from 'Daily Star' [An Initial Guide for Factory Workers. by Saamita Seraj](#)
- **You could produce masks and protective clothing.** There are several buyers looking for these. the specifications of WHO. The [guidelines of AAMI for hospital gowns](#) could be useful or look for your National Standards. This would be a great contribution towards protecting the frontline health professionals fighting the battle against Corona Pandemic.
- **Use the time for training the workforce:** If you are not able to run all the lines full time due to material shortage, please use the time available to train the workforce on various topics that you did not get time to do earlier.
- **Prepare the workforce for the eventual lockdown.** They would greatly benefit if your trainers/ managers can guide them on how to lead their life during the lock down/ travel restrictions. People travelling to hometowns/ villages in large numbers can be very dangerous.
- **Create a helpline for your employees.** This will help them reach out anytime if they need help. Several companies have done that. For example: MAS from Sri Lanka.



**C**  **VID-19**

**#KnowTheFacts**

### HELP IS ONLY A CALL AWAY

It's a National level crisis and a global level pandemic. We know that it can be a time of fear, uncertainty and concern for you. Not knowing the answers will be as harmful as having the wrong answers. That's why we have set up a 24-hour MAS COVID-19 Helpline for all MAS employees.

**24**  **MAS COVID-19 HELPLINE: 077 222 6000**

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**During curfew and/or working from home, it's important to have a daily routine. Create a space to work as there may be others in your home doing the same.**

## What can the factories do that are currently closed?

- **Please create Whatsapp groups**, if you do not already have, to disseminate health related authentic advisory to your workforce in local language. Remember that there are a lot of rumours/ myths going around. Create smaller groups with anchor persons connected to coordinators to manage the logistics.
- **Motivate them to follow the instructions of Govt. health authorities.** People may act impulsively and put their own and others' lives in danger.
- **Provide emotional support:** Your workforce would be under severe distress and may not be equipped to handle the situation emotionally. Provide emotional support on how to manage themselves. Your HR Team may be able to help or look for good external source.
- **Have help lines active** so that your people in distress can reach out and receive advise. Share examples and stories of positivity to lift the morale.
- **Guide on how to manage financial stress?** There would be severe financial stress. Share simple to apply tips about do's and don'ts so that your workforce can navigate through the financial crisis as much as possible
- **Start small long distance training sessions** on soft skills through platforms like Zoom/ Google Hangout, Skype. We use these applications for training quite often.

Hope some of these thoughts are useful to you. I shall be pleased to hear your thoughts on how you think the industry can contribute further.

**One thing is certain, if we join hands with resolve, we can reduce a lot of suffering and bring smiles on a few faces in this hour of crisis. Let us work together to support the most vulnerable and most valuable players of our supply chains, the garment workers!**

### About the Author:

Dr. Rajesh Bheda, Managing Director, Rajesh Bheda Consulting, is a leading consultant, researcher and educator with over three decades of contribution to apparel industry. He is known for his book 'Managing Productivity in the Apparel Industry' and inspiring supply-chain collaboration for win-win performance improvement. He is consultant to International Trade Centre- Geneva, International Labour Organisation, EBRD, CBI-Netherlands, Asian Productivity Organisation-Japan and several Govt. bodies.

His organisation, Rajesh Bheda Consulting has emerged as a trusted partner of international brands, apparel manufacturers, industry associations and development agencies. Before forming RBC, he was Professor and Chairperson of Fashion Technology Department at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, India.

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Link for article:

[https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/corona-pandemic-what-can-apparel-industry-do-during-crisis-bheda?articleId=6648825957681557504#comments-6648825957681557504&trk=public\\_profile\\_article\\_view](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/corona-pandemic-what-can-apparel-industry-do-during-crisis-bheda?articleId=6648825957681557504#comments-6648825957681557504&trk=public_profile_article_view)

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