

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 17: [What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on human rights within the garment industry in India?](#)

Speakers: Dr Matthew Davis and Rishi Sher Singh

Matthew: Hello, I am Dr Matthew Davis, I'm an associate professor in organisational psychology here at the Business School.

Rishi: Hi there everyone, my name is Rishi Singh, I am joining you all from sunny Bangalore in India, and what a pleasure to be on this podcast.

Matthew: Fantastic. And welcome to today's Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast. And in this episode, we're going to be talking about the impact of COVID-19 and the pandemic on the garment industry in India. And, in particular, we're going to be thinking about what this has done for vulnerability and impact for human rights within the sector. And I'm delighted to be able to talk to Rishi who is an expert and, kind of, very well connected within the industry to talk about some of these issues in more detail.

So, Rishi, let's start off. Shall we give a little bit of context around what it has been like in India with the impact of the pandemic and in the garment industry in particular?

Rishi: Yes, thank you Matt. COVID-19 has impacted us indirectly or directly and, you know, my thoughts and prayers go out to people who have been severely impacted by this pandemic. In India, especially, the impact has been quite severe. We have now more than nine million people affected with COVID-19. Some people in my family and the wider network also were impacted by COVID-19.

So, yes, it's been quite severe. I would say the direct impact on businesses has been on reduced GDP, you know, the economy has really slowed down, and we have even had a lot of migrant crises in the country. Still, you know, some of the businesses are partially open, and some factories are running. Schools still remain closed in India, so there are a lot of precautions being put into place. But there are also things like travel bubbles, and thankfully there is a travel bubble between the UK and India, and people can still travel on very specific needs between the two countries.

But I think the biggest impact on business, of COVID-19, has been the fragmentation of supply chains. Supply chains have been badly impacted, the medium and small enterprises have almost got wiped off in India, and the garment industry, actually, belongs to this segment in a major way. So, the impact on the garment industry has been, also, quite direct and quite severe.

Matthew:

Thanks Rishi, that's really interesting to hear, and I know it's been a particularly tough time, and particularly for those workers and business owners who have been on the breadline, really, with this, haven't they? Loss of income and so on, and the hardship that has caused as well as the health issues. From what you said there, I know the garment industry has a bit of reputation for maybe having some poor practice in areas, and particularly with some of the more complex parts of the supply chain as well where it can be hard to see this, what is your perception of the impact that COVID-19 has had on the risk, maybe, of exploitation, or human rights and modern slavery within this sector?

Rishi:

Yes, no, it's an important question and workers have been hit quite directly by, you know, the socioeconomic impacts and also the impact of the pandemic. I would first point out, you know, the changes in vulnerability. Earlier, you know, before COVID-19 happened, women and children and migrants were considered as the vulnerable. They still remain vulnerable, I think the vulnerability has increased, especially some of you would have watched some scenes on TV, the millions of migrant workers walking on roads, some of them lost their lives while reaching their home villages etcetera.

So, I think the whole human rights risks have been shuffled, and in that shuffling the vulnerability have also got shifted. And I think it's important that you get present to that fact. So, there is obviously an increased risk of modern slavery, whether it is through children coming back into the workforce, or people working for lower wages and for longer hours. The garment industry has a direct impact on women, because women form the majority of the workforce. So, you know, certainly we're doing studies and research and talking to people on the ground, but this is what I have been hearing. There have been issues of mass layoffs, workers lost their livelihoods overnight, and they didn't have a social protection system as probably Europe has, or the UK has at this point.

People did not have anywhere to go in terms of finding new livelihoods. And the health and safety issue certainly remains as

a high priority, as a risk, whether it is linked to modern slavery or whether it is linked to certain groups like women and children. Earlier, health and safety was a topic of factories, but now safety is an issue of the whole community and the whole world. Something like wearing a mask properly is a subject of every household, which was earlier only spoken in factories. So, I think it's very difficult to say this is where we are headed, but certainly things have got shuffled up and the vulnerability has increased, especially in some groups like migrants, women and children, it has certainly gone much, much more negative.

Matthew:

That's a really clear overview, thanks Rishi. And I think what you were saying in terms of the vulnerability and the desperation there, maybe, if you've lost your previous job and have been forced to move around the country. I can see how that would present new challenges as well in this area. And I wonder, just thinking about the practical aspects of this. You were talking around hygiene and particularly some of the issues to do with migrant workers and with women in the industry. What do you think are the practical challenges that we're seeing at the moment, then? And it may be around due diligence or other aspects of just operating during this time of the pandemic.

Rishi:

Yes, I think the biggest challenge from a business point of view is that the orders are substantially reduced, the demand is reduced, and so suppliers have ramped down their capacities and it's very difficult to get capacities up again. So, the lack of business has impacted people on the ground, so workers have lost their jobs etcetera. So, all the things are picking up now, demand is coming back, but the capacity is not there, as such, to meet that increased demand because things got dispersed. I would say, from a practical point of view, when we look at our kind of work, look at monitoring of factories and we look at working conditions on the ground, the biggest challenge has been about social distancing.

So, today, I can't visit sites in India, I have to be very careful in moving along in groups. Also things like, you know, like when we were there in India last year we could do stakeholder forums, you could call people and we could have some consultations. We can't do that practically now with people in a room. And we have to make use of technology which has its own limitations. So, that, I think, has been a big challenge with COVID-19. Other things are... there are certain issues still hidden in the supply chain.

For example, child labour, we very broadly use the term child labour which is also linked with modern slavery, but we don't exactly know where child labour happens in the garment industry. It happens mostly at the informal levels of the supply chain, and although there is a lot of research out there, still we are not able to solve things like child labour. There is also growing attention of stakeholders towards very specific topics, as we have seen, climate change is becoming an important topic. So, we are seeing movements happening in various directions, whether it is labour rights, climate change, business and human rights, and I think that is a positive side about what is happening on the ground.

Matthew: That's interesting, Rishi. So, I think... listening to you speak I think you're touching on some of the issues we know have been quite longstanding in the garment industry, and not just in India, particularly around some of the informal or the subcontracting, and where some of these undesirable practices or exploitation happen. But it's interesting to hear you talk about some of the positives here as well, so around the focus on climate change or sustainability and decent work as well, that is, as a theme, which I think has been talked about much more certainly with European brands and retailers. And I just wonder, then, whether... I know you are always a very positive person, Rishi, big positive energy to you. I wonder whether you had any ideas around, I don't know, practical solutions or things that you see happening coming out of this pandemic? So, what the solutions or opportunities might be?

Rishi: Thank you, Matt. I belong to a community which believes in being optimistic, a state of optimism in adversity, so I think that has been tested in the times...

Matthew: I love talking to you, Rishi, you always make me feel happier.

Rishi: No, we also have a word for it in our community, which is known as Chardi Kala. So, I think it was tested, you know? The spirit of being optimistic in times when things are not going well around you. So, I think we have all been tested across the world. But, you know, I normally try to put things, moving forward, into three pillars, you know? And the first pillar is about communication, how we can communicate more and more to suppliers, stakeholders, to employers, to business partners, customers etcetera.

I think the whole idea is about going from policy to action. That has always been there, but in the times of COVID-19 the aspect

about policy to action, and action is making the difference, right, in terms of saving millions of lives. It is being tested more and more. The second pillar which I normally focus on is about empathy, you know, we all know health is wealth and we all know that we need to focus on things like our health, but diverse people have diverse needs, and it's very important that we map the vulnerabilities, who are the vulnerable communities? And we bring back the human side into our conversations, as we move more and more towards adopting technology, how can we still have a human side? Because finally we are solving human-related problems.

Matthew: I would agree, Rishi, I'm a psychologist. I completely agree, I think we need some more empathy and some more understanding generally across the world. So, I'm completely with you on that.

Rishi: Yes. And the last pillar is about engagement, you know? How do we do better due diligence of the supply chain? How do we develop local expertise? How can we enable more collaboration between businesses, between businesses and the government, and COVID has also tested that. But the whole idea about continual improvement, we normally use these words quite freely, but I think that has been tested. So, three pillars moving forward. I would say about communication, empathy and collaboration.

Matthew: Brilliant, thanks Rishi. I think that's really, really clear and I think a positive way to think about this in terms of how do we start tackling what are really difficult, complex, longstanding issues, many of these things, as well. And I think I would find it hard to argue against any of these as a positive approach to be taking. And particularly this idea of collaboration and making sure this isn't seen as just one person's problem. It's a shared endeavour, isn't it? Something we need to tackle jointly. That's great, thank you so much.

So, I think that's a really nice way to end the conversation, so thinking about what the impact of COVID-19 has been within India, a little bit more in general, some of the issues are really there in the garment industry and what the effect might have been, and then some of these practical challenges and ways forward as well. I think, obviously, we've touched on some really big issues here, Rishi, and we could talk all day about this, and we're looking at these in much more detail, aren't we, and seeing what the impact of the pandemic has been in the new research

project that we're working on together. And I'm delighted that we're going to be looking at this over the coming months.

So, if you're interested in this topic or finding out more, you can have a look at our web pages, we've got a series of podcasts where we're exploring these issues in greater depth, and I would encourage people to get in touch if they would like to know more, to get involved in the projects. But with that, from me I'd like to say thanks very much for listening. Rishi?

Rishi:

Thank you Matt for the opportunity, lovely engaging with everyone. Things are changing very fast on the ground, so I'm sure by the next podcast things would have changed again. And our spirit of collective action is being tested right now, and I'm sure we will go on the other side. We will go. But there is a lot of work needs to be done.

Matthew:

Brilliant, thank you so much. And thank you for listening. As I say, if you wanted to find out any more, the contact details and the project website details will be in the description below this episode. Thanks very much.