

## IN FOCUS: AMADER KOTHA in the Time of COVID-19

—Savitri Restrepo Alvarez, Project Manager, ELEVATE

Almost two months after the 10-day government shutdown began, thousands of garment workers started to return to work as RMG factories began to reopen and resume operations. Amidst the rush to reach their workplaces and the new challenges from the ongoing ban on public transports and other social-distancing measures, the COVID-19 crisis continues to have a major impact on both the volume and content of incoming calls to the Amader Kotha Helpline.

**When the first known COVID-19 cases were reported in March, the Helpline received a spike in COVID-related calls.**

By the end of the month, the Helpline's call volume had nearly doubled to 2,387 calls from average in normal times. By

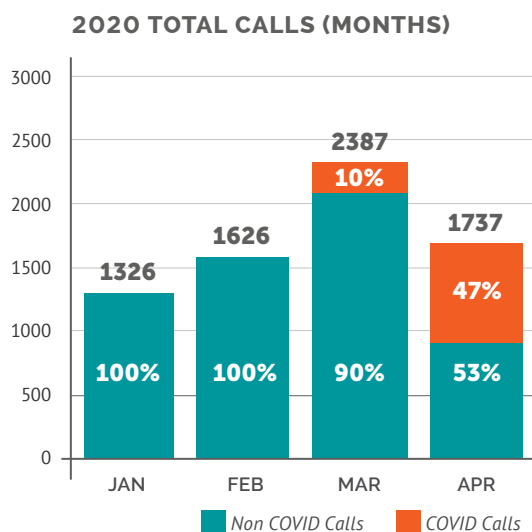
April, COVID-related calls contributed to almost half (47%) of the total calls from workers, most of them about immediate health and safety inquiries, compensation and job security including termination and pay-outs, and government-mandated policies and regulations including the nationwide National Holiday.

Even though the Helpline was originally established to provide workers with a mechanism to report occupational safety issues, the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly changed the lives, workplaces and needs of workers. In light of these evolving circumstances, at Amader Kotha we are doing all we can to continue to protect workers across Bangladesh. We have reconsidered how we capture call information by adding new call categories including:

- 1. Non-Urgent: Safety & Health** focused on hygiene and preventative measures,

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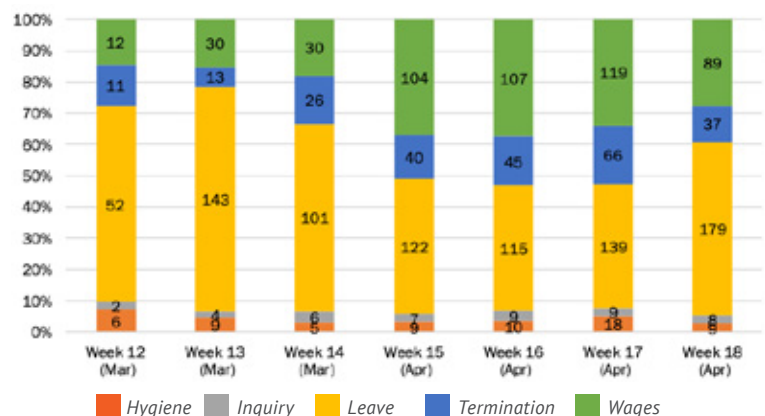
**Chart A: COVID calls as a percentage of total calls**



**Chart B: Breakdown of COVID-related Calls by Category**

COVID SUBCATEGORIZED CALLS from mid-March to end of April 2020

\*A call can fall into multiple categories at the same time





## Helpline Officers Shift to Remote Operations and Support Workers During Critical Time

—Suraiya Haque, Founder and CEO, Phulki

The COVID outbreak is in full swing in Bangladesh, affecting the 4.1 million workers in the readymade garment sector directly and millions more indirectly as workers and their families face an uncertain future.

**At the Helpline Operations Center at Phulki's headquarters in Dhaka, we did not have to wait to hear from news reports about the first coronavirus death—call volumes were already increasing dramatically as workers phoned to express concern about wages, the status of factory closings, and their health.**

When the government mandated that all offices close, the Helpline officers and staff returned to their homes until further notice. Faced with increasing call volume and a mandate that Helpline officers return home, the Amader Kotha team immediately explored our options.

With support from the tech team, incoming calls were re-directed to on-duty Helpline officers in their homes. Helpline officers with home Internet access were designated to upload case data into the online tracking system used to capture information about worker concerns and what is done about them. An online chat system was set up to allow real-time support and oversight as calls came in from across the country. Hours were reduced to 10 am - 8 pm with a recording system set up for after hours. Calls made to the Helpline off hours are returned the next business day.

When Helpline officers left their work stations, they were not sure if we would be able to continue to answer calls; we thought the Helpline would have to close. When the call handling equipment was re-designed for use with mobile phones, we were relieved to know the Helpline could do its part to provide support for workers, and the factories and brands that rely on them.

While we look forward to returning to our Helpline Operations Center at Phulki's headquarters, we are managing to support workers in these difficult times. 🤖

### Medical referrals and support

Our Helpline officers are providing necessary medical referral information to callers. Helpline officers guide them to where they need to go for a test and also introduce them to the nearest available medical team. In one recent case, a 32-year old worker called to say that he suspected he had contracted the virus. The factory management told him not to work and to remain home for 14 days. When the Helpline officer was asked what steps the worker could take, the Helpline identified the nearest government health institute office and shared the information with the worker.

### Mental health support

During the lock down period workers are alone at home. Workers are calling the Helpline to share their problems. Helpline officers are available to guide them as best possible. In one recent case, a worker reported that his factory would re-open the next day. When the worker reported this to his landlord, the landlord insisted that if he returned to the factory he would have to leave the rented house. The caller was distressed. The Helpline urged the caller to appeal to his landlord explaining that the factory job was the caller's only source of income and he needs to send money to his family during this difficult time. At the same time, the Helpline officer told the caller that it was necessary to follow all safety precautions so that the landlord understands he has limited the risk to the community.


## AMADER KOTHA in the Time of COVID-19

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- 2. Non-Urgent: Leave** focused on government-mandated leave and employment-related policies,
- 3. Non-Urgent: Termination** focused on job security including reductions in hour or pay, temporary furloughs or permanent layoffs,
- 4. Compensation and Wages** relating to government wage payouts and other wage-related matters such as bonuses; and
- 5. General Inquiries for other COVID-19 related issues** not captured in the above categories.

The first COVID-related calls when the crisis started were mostly about leave, wages, and termination (Chart B, page 1), however as the crisis evolves the Helpline expect calls to vary with both immediate health risks and longer-term needs from workers.

### CASE STUDY

As major apparel brands and retailers are cancelling or postponing orders, many suppliers have few options but to lay off, furlough millions of factory workers, or defer wages owed to their workers. In March 2020, the Helpline received 15 calls from workers in one factory informing that they had not been paid for their work in February or March and had resorted to go on strike for two days. The Helpline operators collected further information on payments from factory management and followed-up directly with the international buyer to share this information and the impact on workers' livelihoods. After discussions with the brand and Helpline, the factory management agreed to disburse the owed salaries to workers in May 2020. The Helpline has contacted the callers and informed them about the situation. 

## Amader Kotha Helpline— Past, Present, and Future

The Helpline has been a consistent resource for garment workers since its inception nearly seven years ago. As a collaboration between three project partners—Clear Voice, a project of The Cahn Group; Phulki, a highly respected Bangladesh NGO; and ELEVATE, the parent company of Laborlink— we bring complementary skills that result in the awareness, accessibility, and accountability that are at the heart of the Helpline's success.

We began as a lifeline for workers concerned about building and fire safety after the Rana Plaza tragedy. We quickly learned that workers want us to help them resolve non-safety issues as well. In fact, more than half of the calls we have received are related to non-safety issues.

Today, the Helpline is providing urgent support for workers concerned about the impact of the coronavirus on the future of their employment, their health, and their ability to support themselves and their families.

In addition to safety and the coronavirus, we know there are other important issues facing workers every day. As an example, gender-based violence and sexual harassment are understood to be widespread, yet underreported. So while we will continue to support workers to report safety, COVID-19 related, and other issues, we know this is an opportunity for building on our strong foundation in ways that provide all stakeholders, but most importantly workers, with concrete support. We look forward to exploring ways to expand and deepen our impact in meaningful ways.

As always, we look forward to your questions and comments.

*—Doug Cahn, President, Clear Voice, a project of The Cahn Group*



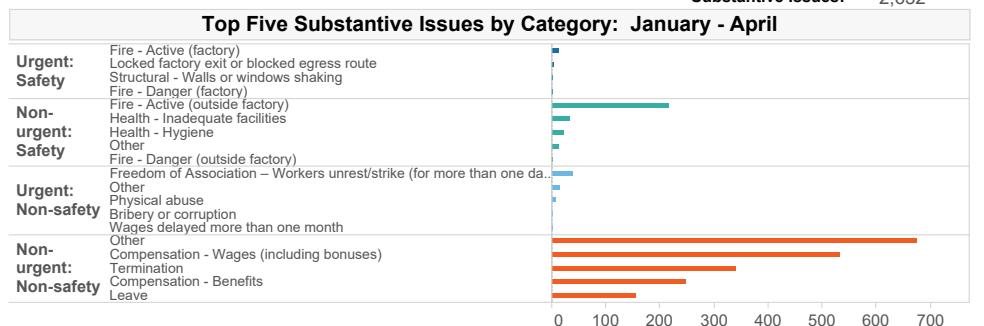
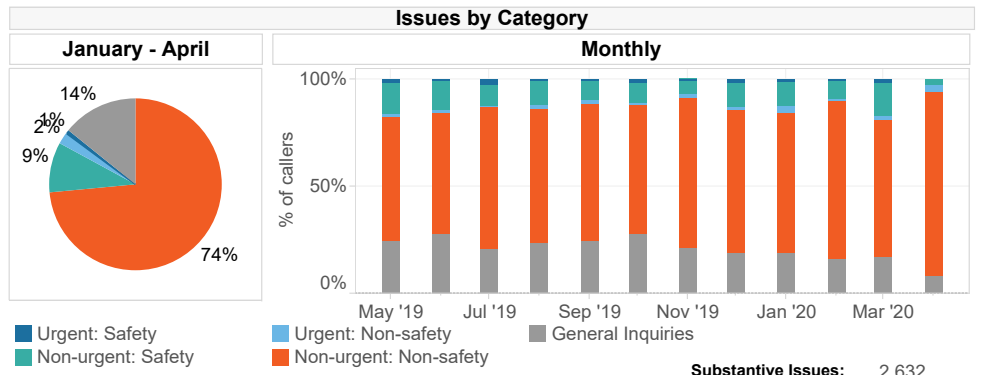
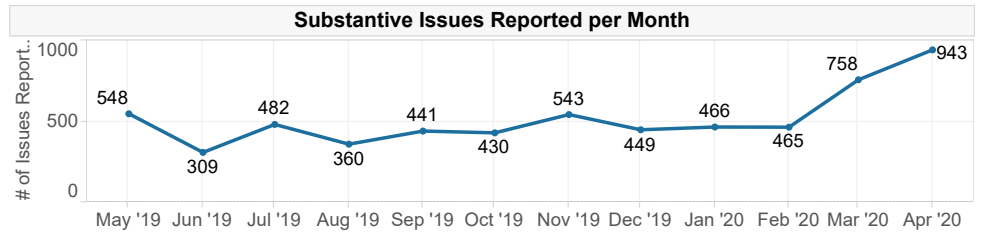
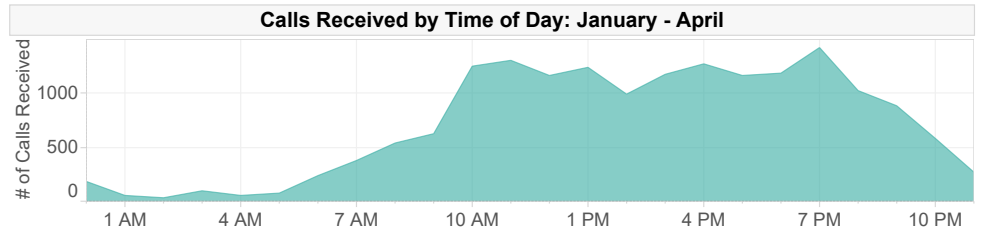
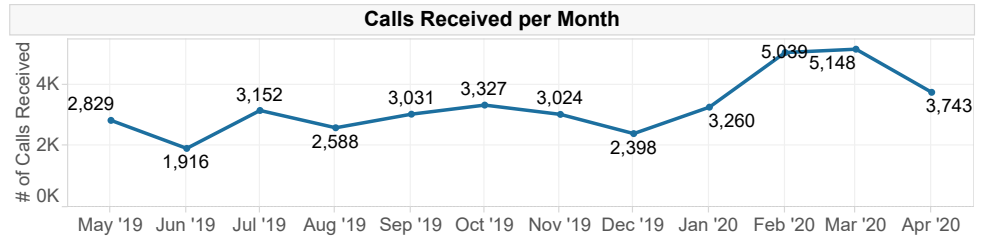
Photo: Sk Hasan Ali



# JANUARY-APRIL 2020 FINDINGS

## KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- **13,447 calls** were placed to Amader Kotha this quarter from January through March, including a record 5,148 calls in March due to a spike of COVID-19 related calls from workers.
- **Peak call times in this period were sustained at high levels from 10am to 7pm**, in part due to the increase in COVID-related concerns received from workers.
- **282 safety issues were reported to Amader Kotha from January through April**, of which 9 were urgent and 273 were non-urgent. Top safety issues reported by workers were fires outside factories, inadequate facilities, and hygiene, some of which related to COVID-19 health and hygiene.
- **General inquiries comprised 14% of issues this period**, disregarding missed or test calls. Many of these were requests for information related to COVID-19.
- **2,632 substantive issues were shared with the Helpline** from workers at Amader Kotha factories this quarter. **In April, 45% were COVID-related concerns** on wages, benefits, termination, and leave.



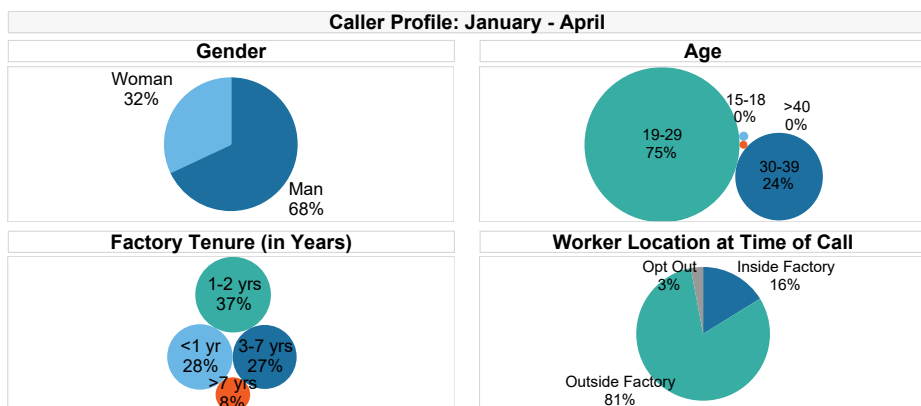
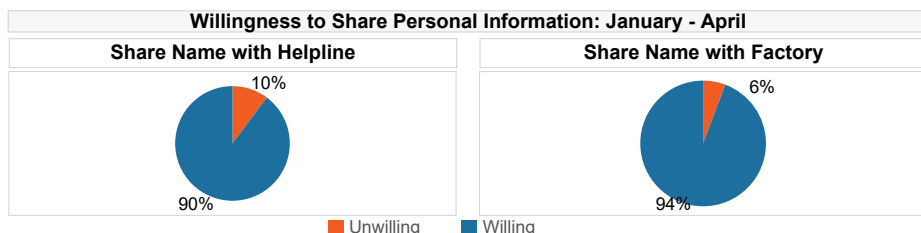
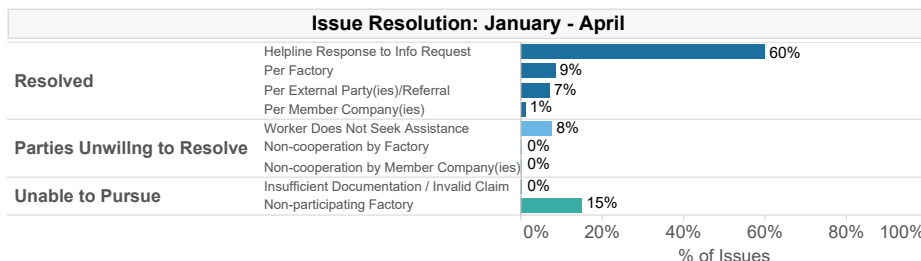
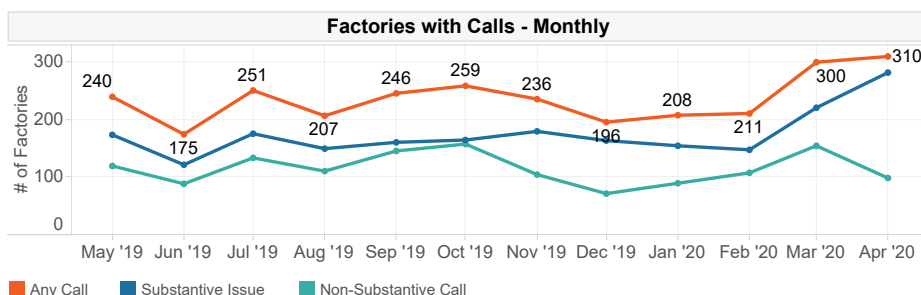


# JANUARY-APRIL 2020 FINDINGS

## KEY FINDINGS CONTINUED:

- 91% of substantive issues reported by workers this period were resolved.**  
 The remainder were from non-subscribing factories or where workers were not seeking assistance.
- 90% of workers who called to report a substantive issue this period were comfortable sharing their name with the Helpline, and, of that group, 94% would allow their name to be shared with the factory.**
- Of the 1,123 factories that have received training on the Helpline, workers from 310 factories placed calls to the Helpline in April 2020, a record high for the previous 12-month period, in part driven by COVID-related engagement.**
- 15% of substantive issues received in this period were from non-subscribing factories.**
- 8% of the safety issues reported this quarter from workers at subscribing factories were resolved and closed by the end of April.** All remaining open issues are in the process of being closed in accordance with Amader Kotha protocol.

**NOTE:**  
Detailed call data is provided to brands after factories have had the opportunity to verify and respond to information provided by workers.



Progress to Date (from July 2014 onward)		
Total Calls	Substantive Issues	Helpline Launched Factories
Inbound 306,757	31,586	Factories: 1,123
Outbound 230,904		Workers: > 1.5 million

**Notes:**  
 • Graphs do not include calls from "General Inquiry", "False", or "No category" issue categories, except graphs on calls received and calls by time of day and where otherwise stated.  
 • Calls have been received from non-participating factories. These calls are included in the call volume and call time and factories with calls graphs above, but not included in the issue or caller profile visualizations.  
 • Substantive issues per month graph may not match historical newsletters due to changes in issue categorization over time.

## Q1 2020 SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES REPORTED TO HELPLINE

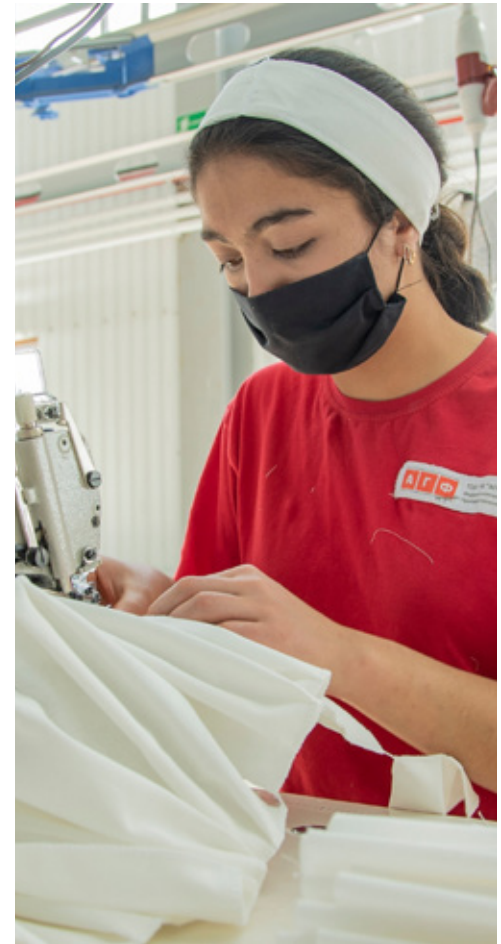
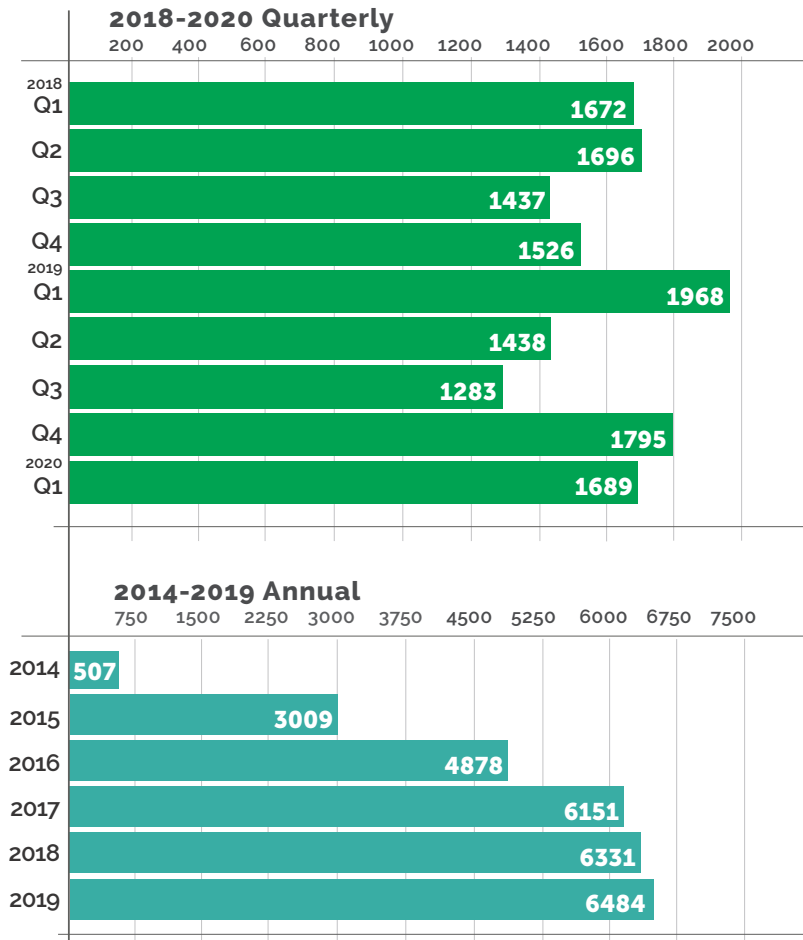


Photo: Sergey Breus

## WHO ARE WE?

Amader Kotha, or “Our Voice” in Bangla, is a unique collaboration among three project partners—Clear Voice, a project of The Cahn Group that operates hotlines and builds effective grievance mechanisms in supply chains; Phulki, a respected civil society organization working to improve the lives of workers and their families in Bangladesh; and ELEVATE, the parent company of Laborlink, a leading business risk and sustainability solutions provider. Each partner brings years of experience building innovative, best-in-class labor compliance programs in supply chains.



Information about Amader Kotha Shows Up in Factories