



# BetterWork

Jordan

POLICY BRIEF

## Covid-19: Garment Worker Perspectives

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May 2020



International  
Labour  
Organization



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## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic and resulting government actions to stem the spread of the virus have severely changed the way people across the world work and live. For Jordan's garment sector, the national curfew and shutdown of business activity forced factories to suspend production. On March 17, the Government of Jordan (GoJ) ordered a full lockdown, effectively shutting the country and most economic activity down. This directly affected the 76,000 workers employed in the garment sector. Migrant workers, who make up roughly three-quarters of the workforce, continued to live in factory-provided dorms and housing. In these situations, social distancing is nearly impossible as on average eight workers share a room and meals are eaten in the factory canteen. It was paramount to keep workers in these conditions from being infected. Since the initial lockdown, the country has gradually reopened, and the government has provided further guidance and rules, particularly through Defense Order 6 and Defense Order 9 which ensured the payment of wages and prevented companies from firing workers. Additional information on these Defense Orders and other GoJ policies can be found on the Better Work Jordan (BWJ) website.

While Better Work Jordan's broad mission and goals remain as important as ever, not all of the same tools are available. In particular, Better Work Enterprise Advisors are not able to physically visit factories and deliver the three core services of the Better Work model: Assessment, Advisory Visits, and Training. Enterprise Advisors are in contact with the factories that they work with, and are able to advise and inform factory managers of government rules and decisions, including the major Defense Orders. However, there was no clear way to talk to workers because these engagements would typically happen in-person in the factory setting. In addition, the Trade Union closed their offices in the industrial zones and did not have a means for communicating with workers. Speaking to workers during this time was absolutely crucial, so Better Work assembled a five-person team of different language speakers (including Bangla, Sinhalese, Hindi and Nepalese) and began calling and reaching out to workers directly. The vast majority of the calls were completed by union representatives with guidance

from Better Work Jordan.

The original purpose of the calls was to get a sense of the issues facing workers, to see how they were coping with the lockdown situation and limited mobility, and to provide information to workers on issues ranging from updates on the latest labour laws to Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and how to cope with stress. Within a few weeks of making calls, a more robust data management system was put into place, and calls became slightly more formal, with a few key questions to touch on. So far, 1085 calls have been made, with 919 workers and 157 non-workers called. On the calls with workers, it was common for more than one worker to be present so the number of workers reached directly is significantly higher. These calls are not part of BWJ's compliance assessment, nor are they meant to be a representative sample of workers or an exhaustive summary of issues in the industry. For more background on the calls placed, see "Better Work Jordan Creates a Lifeline for Quarantined Migrant Workers" on the Better Work Jordan website.

## Key Events and Timeline

There were several key government decisions throughout the months of March and April that shaped work in the garment sector and the experiences of migrant workers. The first was the full shutdown of the country on 17 March. The second was a reassurance to workers in the form of Defense Order 6 on 8 April, which stipulated that employers must pay their employees the wages due for the months of March and April. The third was Defense Order 9 on 16 April which provided government support for individuals and companies. These two defense orders provided important protections for workers.

The nature and goals of the calls changed over time as the sector has gone through several phases of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These can be roughly classified into three phases:

1. **Country-wide shutdowns**, nearly all factories closed except for a few making PPE at limited capacity. Approximate dates: Mid-March to early April.
2. **Factories allowed to re-open**, first in industrial zones and then outside. Factories complete orders already placed. Approximate dates: April.
  - ◆ 6 April MOL gave exemption letter to garment sector to operate with OSH standard measures. JGATE and employers met MOL, plan to resume operation
  - ◆ 15 April MOL announced the permission for Ad Dulayl factories to let migrant workers living outside the QIZ to travel by bus to/return from work.

3. **Factories cut costs or close** to contend with reality of world-wide economic disruptions and low orders. Approximate dates: Early May – Ongoing.

- ◆ 6 May all businesses allowed to resume work. Some factories cannot bring back workers and this provides a sign of downsizing or closure.

The content and goals of the calls with workers changed over time in response to the rapidly changing conditions on the ground. In the first few weeks of calls, the primary focus was on understanding the conditions inside the dorms and what the workers did to pass the time. As factories began to re-open, workers were asked about the safety conditions in the workplace and if they knew when and how they would be paid. Recently, we have added explicit questions about job security concerns to monitor downsizing in the sector.

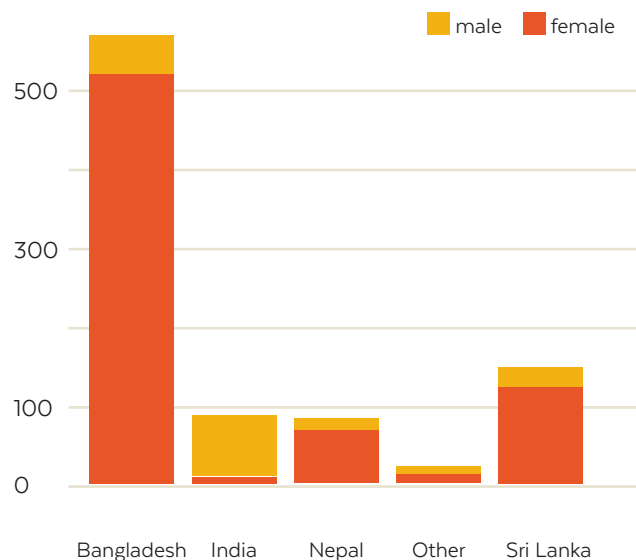
## Basic demographic information

The following includes basic demographic information gathered through course of calls from 19 March to 12 May. The surveyors filled out the same survey for production line workers (919) and non-workers, such as dorm leaders and supervisors (157). This report will focus on worker responses, although it should be noted that many non-workers face the same issues and have similar concerns as the majority of these are also migrants as well. The majority of workers interviewed are women, whereas the gender split for non-workers is roughly even. In total, 735 female workers were interviewed. This matches up roughly with the gender breakdown of the workforce.

In terms of nationality, the majority of workers interviewed are from Bangladesh (578), with substantial numbers from Sri Lanka (147), India (87) and Nepal (80). As the focus of the survey has shifted, more Jordanian workers (19) have also been interviewed although the number is not reflective of their share of workers in the industry (roughly 25 per cent). Contacting Jordanian workers has been more challenging as they live in the community as opposed to factory dorms and are reluctant to answer an unknown phone number.

The majority of the workers interviewed work in factories in the three main industrial zones. Starting on April 9th, we began asking workers if they had returned to work or not. Of the workers interviewed after that point, 515 had returned to work full time and 137 had not returned to work yet.

**NATIONALITY AND GENDER BREAKDOWN OF CALLS**



## Questions asked and concerns raised

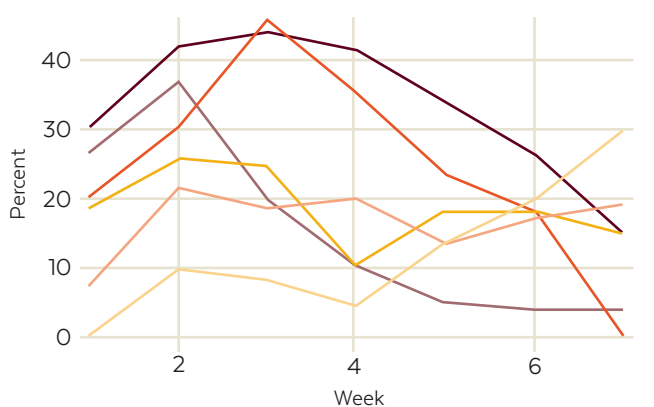
Workers expressed concerns about a variety of topics throughout the phone calls. One of the primary areas of concern was self-safety and family safety. Workers also expressed concerns about payments, contracts, and unpaid leaves, but some of these improved over time especially as workers returned to work. The single largest issue that workers expressed concerns about was family safety, with 291/825 (35.27%) asking questions and voicing concerns about family safety. In addition, workers were also worried about the length of the curfew and when they would be able to return to work 227/825 (27.52%).

Worker concerns changed over time as the situation in Jordan stabilized and workers adjusted to the restrictions on movement. The Defense Orders, particularly Defense Order 6, gave workers reassurance that they would be paid by their employers. In the last few weeks, worker concerns about potential termination have increased, as have concerns about work permits and contract extensions. The issues of personal health and mental stress have remained persistent concerns over time, while concerns about the length of the curfew and family safety, and the lack of overtime work have dropped. On the main concerns analyzed, the only statistically significant difference between women on men was on personal health concerns, with women reporting higher concern on this issue than men.

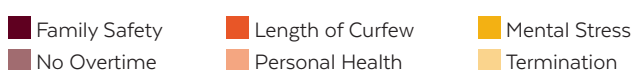
BWJ also began tracking specific job security concerns, however not many workers have answered these questions so the sample is quite small. When asked directly, 95/230 (41.30%) workers said that they had job security concerns. Of these, most workers were concerned with layoffs happening in their companies currently, or worried about potential layoffs in the future.

In addition to the quantitative data gathered about broad worker concerns, BWJ has also gathered specific concerns raised in factories across the country. The full breakdown of worker concerns, broken up by Better Work compliance cluster, can be found in the Appendix.

### KEY WORKER CONCERNS OVER TIME



variable



### NON-WORKER PHONE CALLS

Better Work Jordan also reached out to non-workers, such as dorm-leaders and supervisors, to get a sense of the issues facing them as they are often migrant workers themselves. These calls also gave BWJ a chance to get broader perspectives on issues facing workers from people who have contact with many workers on a daily basis. The majority of these calls happened in the first month. Overall, the concerns raised in these calls were very similar to those raised by production-line workers. The top concerns raised were issues of family safety (50/109 (45.87%)) and mental stress (32/109 (29.36%)).

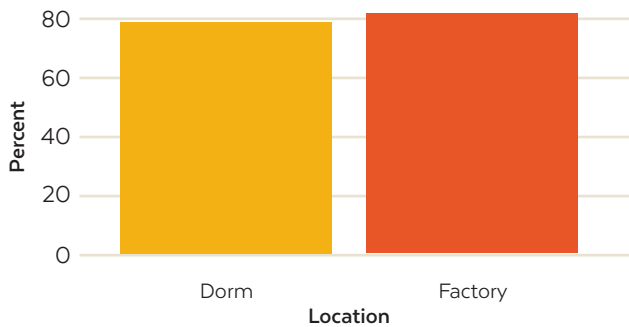
## Phase 2: Questions as Workers Return to Work

These questions were added on April 9 as factories began opening up. BWJ talked to workers about OSH and safety conditions in the factories and the dorms.

### SAFETY

Overall, workers report that their factories are obeying social distancing guidelines and providing the basic levels of PPE. The results are quite persuasive that workers are able to maintain proper social distance and have access to adequate PPE. BWJ will continue asking workers these questions to ensure that these safety measures remain in place.

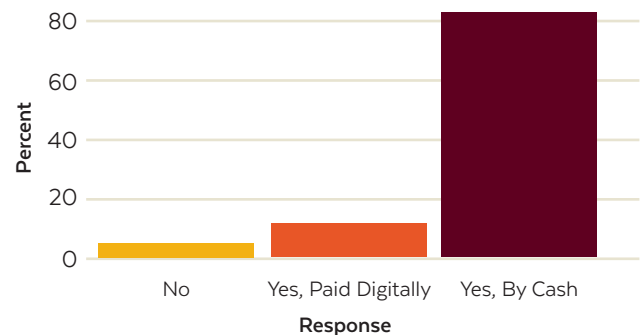
#### YES I CAN MAINTAIN SOCIAL DISTANCE



### PAYMENT: TIMELINES AND METHOD

BWJ also asked about payment timeliness and method of payment. Particularly at the beginning of the crisis, it was unclear if workers were going to be paid or how they would be paid. Because of the lockdown and because of health concerns associated with cash, some factories considered switching to digital payments. We asked workers if they knew how and when they were going to be paid. In addition, to gauge worker interest in digital payments, we asked if this method was convenient. The vast majority of workers said that digital payments would be inconvenient 487/554 (87.91%). Particularly during Covid-19, a key reason for this was because workers could not travel to banks and withdraw money.

#### DO YOU KNOW HOW YOU WILL BE PAID?



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## Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacted a major toll on businesses and workers across the world, and particularly to those working in the global apparel supply chain. Better Work Jordan has sought to reach out to the most vulnerable link in the chain by speaking to migrant workers remotely. These calls have provided the program and national stakeholders with key data, while also providing support to workers as they navigate this challenging new situation. BWJ has worked with the tripartite stakeholders to address issues raised by workers during the course of calls, but more remains to be done.

Looking forward, BWJ calls on the tripartite stakeholders to respect the dignity of all workers and to maintain decent work and living conditions. It is clear that the sector faces enormous pressure to downsize, but this must be done carefully and within the boundaries of national laws and international labour standards. In particular, it is crucial that this process is free of discrimination or coercion. Better Work Jordan will continue calls with new workers and engagement with workers already called to monitor the situation in

the factories. In particular, matters of discrimination and coercion are sensitive topics that workers are more willing to share and confide in once a relationship and trust has been built. Better Work Jordan will continue sharing these findings with the tripartite stakeholders in ways that protect the identity and privacy of individual workers. Engagement with the tripartite stakeholders is absolutely key, as is a global approach to the pandemic and to the governmental response.



## Appendix: Detailed Worker Concerns

In addition to the quantitative data shared in this report, Better Work Jordan also took note of the variety and severity of worker concerns. The following is an example of the concerns that were raised during phone calls with workers over the course of the last two months. These issues have been brought to the attention of the tri-partite stakeholders, and many of the most urgent issues have been addressed.

While this is a list of examples of concerns raised, it is not representative of the broad experiences of workers in the sector as there is not detailed information available on how many workers voiced each of these concerns. The quantitative data gives a sense of the frequency of worker concerns, although it is not as detailed.

### CLUSTERS

### RAISED ISSUES

#### Occupational Safety and Health

- ◆ Insufficient provision of drinking water and/or food (quantity and quality), some worse case to provide breads only at dorm
- ◆ No provision of PPE (mask and gloves) and sanitization at factory
- ◆ Not keeping social - distancing during lunch break
- ◆ Not available of medical services
- ◆ Not allow to cook at dorm kitchen for those who have shortage of food

#### Contract and Human Resources

- ◆ Forced resignation
- ◆ Sign new contract to agree on half of wage payment
- ◆ Layoff criteria is based on personal preferences

#### Compensation

- ◆ No payment of March wages (some even not receive February wages)
- ◆ Not full payment of March wages (e.g., 50% -75%)

#### Working Hours

- ◆ Not enough break time
- ◆ Forced to work long hours (one factory requested workers to work for 24 hours continuously before Friday full curfew)

#### Discrimination and Forced Labour

- ◆ Verbal and physical abuse
- ◆ Passport confiscation
- ◆ Threat of giving warning letters (to lead to termination)
- ◆ Forced to work in order to gain March wage



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