

## Locked-in - COVID 19 Impacts on Bangladeshi Migrant Garment Workers in Jordan

In response to the global COVID 19 pandemic, on March 17, 2020, Jordan's Prime Minister declared a state of emergency. On March 20, the government issued Defense Order No. 2, ordering a full lockdown, and effectively shutting down the country and most economic activity. The shutdown impacted 76,000 workers employed in the garment sector, a predominantly migrant and female workforce. Bangladeshi migrants account for an estimated 52% of the 55,000 migrant garment workers in Jordan. As the global COVID 19 pandemic brought manufacturing to a halt, Bangladeshi and other migrant garment workers—including from China, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—were locked out of employment, but continued to live in factory-provided dorms and housing.

In the last two decades, ready-made garments have become the leading export from Jordan, accounting for nearly 20% of the country's GDP. The garment industry in Jordan was spurred forward by the 1996 Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ) agreement between Jordan and the United States, allowing for duty free export of products from QIZs in Jordan to the United States. A 2010 free trade agreement between Jordan and the United States further facilitated access to American markets.

Despite protectionist policies aimed at addressing high levels of unemployment among Jordanian nationals (18.7% in 2018), the garment sector is dominated by migrant workers from South Asia, and particularly Bangladesh. Bangladeshi migrant workers who seek employment in the garment sector, for the most part, migrate through processes facilitated by the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL). Some Bangladeshi migrants have prior experience in the garment sector in Bangladesh, although this is not true across the board.

On March 17, 2020, the Government of Jordan suspended all flights to and from Jordan. On March 21, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) shut down all domestic and international flights within and to Bangladesh. Measures to contain the spread of COVID 19 left Bangladeshi migrant workers in Jordan stranded in factory dormitories.

In Jordan's QIZs, most migrant workers share factory dormitories with between eight and twelve workers. Spatial regulations pertaining to worker housing predating COVID 19 mandate a mere 3-foot distance between beds. These distance requirements are more commonly upheld in larger factories, while workers in smaller factories report conditions so cramped that they can barely walk between beds. Fifteen workers share a bathroom. They eat their meals in canteens, or cook in shared kitchens.

On March 26, 2020, Jordan's Prime Minister issued Defense Order No. 3, tightening curfew restrictions to quell the spread of the pandemic.

Just ten days later, by April 4, Jordan's apparel industry secured an exemption to resume production in QIZs—with a catch: only foreign workers were permitted to resume employment, and while permitted to report to work, they could not leave the industrial zones. The authorization to resume production was accompanied by guidelines from the National Committee for Epidemics and the Ministry of Labor. Factories in violation of these measures were to be fined or shut, but no schedule of penalties, plan for inspection, or other enforcement mechanisms accompanied the exemption. Leather and garment industry representative at the Jordan Chamber of Industry, Ihab Al-Qadri, explained the reasoning behind these parameters. "Not allowing people to enter or leave the development areas increases the preventive control and occupational safety within those areas," he explained. "This crisis must be taken as an

opportunity, instead of a challenge, especially since these factories export products abroad and specifically to the American market."

On April 8, the Jordanian Ministry of Defense issued Defense Order No. 6, permitting employers who have suspended operations at their factories to stop paying wages to workers who are not working, even if they remain in Jordan. Unable to return to Bangladesh or even leave the QIZs, migrant garment workers were either locked out of supply chain employment without; or locked into employment—reporting to the factory floor but not permitted to leave the industrial area.

By April 9, 34 out of the 86 garment factories in Jordan's QIZs and Aqaba city had resumed operation, and by May 6, all factories were permitted to resume work. As factories began to reopen, the Better Work Jordan Program, an International Labour Organization (ILO) and International Finance Corporation (IFC) initiative, conducted phone calls with 919 workers, including Bangladeshi (578), Indian (87), Nepali (80), and Sri Lankan (147) workers; and 157 non-workers with insight into living and working conditions in the QIZs. As of April 9, 515 workers contacted by the Better Work Jordan team had returned to work full time, and 137 had not yet returned to work.

Among workers contacted by the Better Work team, 80% reported being able to maintain social distance in dorms and factories. However, workers also raised specific health related concerns including insufficient access to drinking water and food and inability to cook in dorm kitchens, no provision of PPE and sanitizing materials at factories, inability to maintain social distancing during lunch breaks, and inability to access medical services. Extended working hours without enough break times—including reports that one factory required workers to work for 24 hours continuously in advance of a Friday full curfew—take a toll on the health of production line workers, compromising their health and immune systems amidst the COVID 19 pandemic.

On August 23, 2020, the Dhaka Tribute, citing Bangladesh Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment figures, reported that 70,427 migrant workers returned to Bangladesh from 23 countries between April and August. This includes 1,419 Bangladeshis who have returned home from Jordan, but since this data has yet to be further disaggregated by sector, it is unclear whether garment workers are included among returnee migrants. Regardless, the vast majority of the estimated 28,000 Bangladeshi migrants in Jordan's garment industry remain within the QIZs.

Due to widespread disruption of garment supply chains triggered by the COVID 19 pandemic and its economic aftermath, factories in Jordan's QIZ's are cutting costs and closing. Out of 230 workers who were asked about job security concerns by the Better Work Jordan team, 95 workers (41%) reported having job security concerns. Workers also reported being forced to resign from their jobs, sign new contracts to agree on half of their wage payments, and accept inconsistent criteria for layoffs. Some workers also reported that they had not received wages for either February or March, despite government orders that all wages owed for February and March be paid by April. Others reported being forced to work against their will in order to secure March wages they were already owed.

The unprecedented impacts of COVID-19 are deep and far-reaching, affecting the health and livelihoods of more than 150 million workers in global supply chains and 40 million workers in fast fashion supply chains—a workforce largely made up of women. Government and corporate responses to COVID-19 have exposed vast structural inequalities created by supply chain production models. Predating COVID-19, workers who produce garments on fast fashion production lines have lived from paycheck to paycheck, without access to healthcare and social protection systems. Lead firms have reaped financial benefits

from extracting labor from workers at the lowest possible cost. In short, lead firms on fast fashion supply chains have systematically created and benefited from the precarious conditions of supply chain workers. They are responsible for eroding individual and social safety nets, precipitating the humanitarian crisis facing millions of workers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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