

▶ ILO Brief

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Gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the garment sector

Key points

- ▶ This brief aims to raise awareness of the gendered reality of COVID-19 and to outline some of the ways in which the pandemic impacts women and men workers in the garment sector in the short, medium and long terms.
- ▶ Dedicated gender-responsive measures and policies should be designed and implemented based on the needs and realities of different groups of women, of men and of others.

Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on the global garment industry. As measures taken to slow the spread of the coronavirus have led to retail and factory closures, changes in supply and demand, layoffs and unpaid furloughs, and revenue losses, the livelihoods, health, and security of millions of women and men workers and employers throughout the garment sector have been put at risk (ILO 2020a).

Given that women account for approximately 80 per cent of the garment sector workforce (ILO 2019a), many of the sectoral impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect women. These impacts will be further exacerbated by the following factors:

- underlying practices of discrimination, violence and harassment;
- underrepresentation of women's voice, representation and leadership;
- wage gaps; and
- unevenly shared unpaid care and family obligations.

It is increasingly clear that business will not resume "as usual" after the pandemic recedes. Furthermore, without effective amelioratory actions, pre-existing inequalities are likely to widen (ILO 2019b) and previous important gains regarding poverty reduction and gender equality in the garment sector may be lost. This is particularly concerning as women's representation has been largely absent from COVID-19 response and policy discussions thus far (CARE International 2020).

This crisis re-emphasizes the importance of a world of work that supports sustainable economic, social and environmental development, as declared and adopted in the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (ILO 2019c). Indeed, by harnessing an inclusive and transformative agenda that centres a just and resilient industry, the COVID-19 pandemic could represent a step forward in achieving improved standards of work in the garment sector, including those regarding gender equality.

It is thus crucial that governments, businesses and other stakeholders understand the multi-dimensional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and men workers, and

design policies that will enable a smart, sustainable and gender-sensitive recovery.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic quickly became a global health and economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. Data released by the ILO estimates a loss of 17 per cent of working hours, equivalent to 495 million full-time jobs, in the second quarter of 2020 (ILO 2020b). Manufacturing, especially the garment industry in lower and middle income countries, is among the four sectors deemed at high risk of job losses and decreased working hours due to COVID-19 disruptions. These job losses, furthermore, are likely to disproportionately impact women, including women who are overrepresented in the garment sector. The low-skilled jobs lost by women throughout the garment supply chain, moreover, may well never return (ILO 2020c).

The COVID-19 crisis has hit the garment sector hard, and studies suggest that the industry will continue to feel its impacts in the months to come. Major changes in both supply and demand have disrupted production and cash flow, pushing many businesses to the edge of collapse. As buyers and suppliers struggled to mitigate the economic repercussions of the coronavirus, and orders worth billions of dollars were cancelled, millions of workers in countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti and more were retrenched or furloughed, some without payment of wages for already completed work or severance pay, as required by law (Mirdha 2020).

Previous crises, such as the 2008 global recession and other health outbreaks, have shown that men and women experience the impacts of a crisis differently. Women may experience disproportionately adverse impacts due to the nature of their workforce participation as well as because of social and familial expectations regarding women's obligations in the home (WHO 2007).

These factors impact women workers across many sectors, including the garment sector, where women account for most of the workforce and work under documented patterns of gender-based inequality. As a result, uncertainty over the future of the global economy and new realities faced by businesses, governments and workers alike will probably exacerbate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women.

Short-, medium- and long-term impacts

Workers from all backgrounds have been, and will continue to be, adversely affected by the pandemic. But key to responding in responsible, competitive, and sustainable ways to the changing realities of the workforce involves both understanding and acknowledging that the current crisis impacts women and men in different ways.

The following section briefly outlines some of the ways, in the short, medium, and long-term, in which the crisis could affect women workers in particular.

Short-term

Lack of access to basic necessities. As many factories have furloughed and retrenched workers, many women and men, some of whom are still owed wages for completed work (Al Javed and Narayangani 2020), have been unable to access basic necessities such as food, rent money or medical expenses for their households. The ILO estimates that 71 per cent of the world's population lack access to comprehensive social protection, and that one out of every two people do not have any social protection at all (ILO 2017). Women are over-represented among the unprotected. Without adequate social protection measures and safety nets in place, loss of wages means that millions of workers and their families are facing poverty and hunger.

Loss of wages more seriously impact workers who are a household's sole breadwinner or those who provide support to their families through remittances. Lack of comprehensive social protection measures leaves both women and men workers at risk of economic insecurity, but women garment workers' economic insecurity may be compounded by their unequal access to government and financial services.

Gender-based discrimination in hiring criteria. As some factories retrench (and later rehire) workers, women are more likely to be directly and indirectly discriminated against, based on gender-biased selection criteria. Common criteria of such retrenchment include contractual status, years of service, performance, qualifications and absence records, and these may perpetuate discriminatory practices, resulting in dismissals that disproportionately impact women workers (Better Work 2020). For instance, practices have been documented where women are offered short-

term contracts to defer access to maternity benefits (HRW 2015). In the case of dismissals due to COVID-19, this may lead to disproportionate dismissals of specific groups of women regardless of their actual skill level or years of service at a given factory. Such precarious contracting practices could contribute to a rise in women's share of employment in the informal economy, since informal work arrangements in low- and lower-middle income countries are more prevalent among women than among men (ILO 2020d).

Further, though the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183) prohibits termination during pregnancy or related absence (ILO), when deciding which workers will be let go during downsizing, workers who are on leave, including women on maternity leave, pregnant workers or workers who are currently on long-term leave due to medical conditions or family responsibilities are more likely to be selected (ILO 2012). These risk factors have been exacerbated by COVID-19 due to increases in care work, layoffs and furloughs, leading to heightened forms of direct and indirect discrimination against these types of workers.

Exposure risks inside and outside the workplace. A safe continuation and return to work is a concern for workers and employers, as both will be exposed to risks of infection within and beyond the physical workplace. Workers may face risks of infection within the workplace due to lack of implementation or observation of preventive measures such as physical distancing between workstations and cafeterias and contamination of shared spaces and objects. They are also at risk of infection during commutes to and from work through the use of company-provided or public transportation where it may not be possible to practice physical distancing (Sarkar 2020; Pradhan and Chaudhary 2020). Furthermore, women and men workers in both private and employer-provided homes and dorms may live together in crowded conditions (Better Work 2020; UNICEF 2015), potentially decreasing the effectiveness of physical distancing practices in the workplace.

Increased unpaid care work. Prior to the pandemic, women around the world did an average of **three times more care work** than men, and in Asia and the Pacific and in Arab States women did over four times more (ILO 2018). Looking after children at home due to school and nursery closures during the COVID-19 lockdown, as well as caring for family members who fall ill due to COVID-19, has increased the demands of unpaid care and household work for many women. This also risks delaying the return of

women workers to work, and could lead to them dropping out of the labour force altogether, thereby affecting the supply of women's labour. This is concerning, given that care work was already the largest factor keeping women out of the workforce prior to increases due to the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO 2018).

In some cases women may want to return to work, but disproportionate unpaid care and family obligations present challenges in doing so. This is particularly true in cases where crèches within factories or other childcare facilities remain closed (Nagaraj 2020). Further, women workers who do go back to work may face more difficulty than men in maintaining their paid employment, given the demands of their unpaid care work at home, and they may need temporary flexible working arrangements or leave time to support their family's needs (ILO 2009).

Increased risk of gender-based violence. Emerging data shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risks of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly for women (UN Women 2020). Although the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) recognizes that both women and men can be victims or perpetrators of violence, it is acknowledged that gender-based violence and harassment disproportionately affect women and girls (ILO 2019c). The crisis exacerbates GBV triggers, including the following:

- heightened tensions resulting from economic insecurity and limitations in mobility;
- male unemployment backlash; and
- a loss of bargaining power and status at home due to decreased earnings.

In addition, women who are confined in their homes, including migrant workers and those in employer-sponsored dorms, may be unable to escape their abusers, as they may also share or have access privileges to the same accommodation. Instances of violence may in turn impact employees' own mental and physical health as well as their attendance and performance in the workplace.

COVID-19 may also exacerbate existing forms of violence that could lead to economic harm. For example, unacceptable practices such as withholding information about actual pay and hours, not paying correctly for overtime, and threatening access to employment (Naved et al. 2017). Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been reports of factories withholding pay for hours worked and refusing to provide severance pay (Batha and Karim 2020; CCC 2020).

Pandemic-related community-based violence and harassment. Both women and men workers are at risk of community-based violence and harassment as result of COVID-19. The recent Zika and Ebola virus outbreaks led to harassment of and discrimination against both women and men in communities due to their health status and stigma regarding these illnesses (UNFPA 2020). Reports of community-based harassment are already surfacing in the current COVID-19 pandemic (Pandey 2020), some of it during garment-worker commutes to and from work.

Medium-term

Discriminatory and ineffective responses due to inadequate social dialogue. Inadequate social dialogue may lead to discriminatory and ineffective responses. Gender-inclusive social dialogue and tripartism are key components in designing and advancing policy responses in times of crisis that effectively improve economic and social resilience (ILO 2019d). In previous crises, such as the Great Recession of 2008–09, countries that had strong social dialogue institutions in place were more likely to generate rapid and effective responses to accelerate recovery (ILO 2020e). The ILO [Call to Action](#) (ILO 2020a), for example, describes concerted efforts to promote social dialogue. More measures are needed, however, to facilitate dialogue between parties and to ensure a full and fair recovery.

Existing representation gaps in policy- and decision-making forums will be exacerbated. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women leaders were underrepresented in trade unions, employers' organizations, factory management and other labour institutions. The same trend can be seen in COVID-19 response committees and decision-making spaces (CARE 2020). Where women cannot participate alongside men in discussions and decision-making, existing gender gaps within the sector may be perpetuated or even intensified. Existing barriers to women adopting more prominent leadership roles include gender norms and stereotypes, time constraints due to family responsibilities, and a lack of leadership and career path opportunities. These factors are further intensified by the social impacts of the coronavirus.

The benefits of bringing women's views, solutions and competencies to decision-making spaces are well established. For example, Better Work finds that where women are freely elected and fairly represented on worker-management committees, more significant improvements in working conditions ensue (Better Work 2018). In

addition, ILO data finds that workplaces with gender-inclusive cultures and equal-employment policies can enhance profits, productivity and innovation by over 60 per cent (ILO 2019e).

Limited financial inclusion limits access to some social assistance. Lack of financial inclusion may prevent workers, particularly women migrant workers from rural communities, from accessing some of the State-sponsored social assistance programmes. Some governments are trying to provide relief to affected workers due to COVID-19 through social protection schemes such as cash transfers, unemployment benefits, and no- or low-interest short-term loans (ILO 2020f). Depending on levels of financial inclusion, however, both women and men garment workers, but especially women, may not have access to bank accounts. This complicates access to such programmes (IFC 2019). Further, the extension of cash transfers to workers who have returned to their village or their country of origin through mobile banking has raised further challenge given limited mobile phone usage, particularly among women.

Unregulated working conditions and greater risk of rights violations. Workers, especially women workers, may be in more precarious or informal working conditions than before, with greater risk of labour rights violations. The recovery of the garment sector will vary across countries and according to the capabilities and business opportunities of individual suppliers. Some factories have continued operating, or resumed production at reduced levels, and during this time instances of labour violations may increase. For example, Better Work's experience finds that sexual harassment is more likely to occur in isolated factories with no nearby competitors (Truskinovksy, Rubin, and Brown 2014). Given that COVID-19 has closed many competing factories and minimized workers' abilities to seek other employment options, instances of harassment could increase.

Further, not all migrant workers who are temporarily suspended, on paid leave, or furloughed are likely to be hired back. This is especially concerning for garment workers close to or over the age of 35, as the sector typically employs younger women.

Riskier and lower-paid jobs. Women workers and young migrant workers are often more susceptible to informality

and riskier forms of employment, including sex work.¹ In the absence of garment sector work, which represents a considerable segment of women's paid work opportunities in Asia, women workers may turn to informal sectors with fewer labour protections.

Negative effects on health. Unemployment has harmful health effects on both women and men workers, and men are more susceptible to some forms of immediate ill-health. Previous disease outbreaks such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and H1N1 (swine flu), have shown that workers may experience feelings of isolation, failure and an inability to meet basic needs, which can lead to adverse mental health outcomes (Michniewicz, Vandello, and Bosson 2014). This may impact men differently due to cultural norms and values on masculinity and employment status. Unemployed men are more likely to be depressed and are at a higher risk of suicide (Gulliford et al. 2014). Men may also experience decreases in mental health and well-being due to shame and social stigma associated with accessing unemployment benefits. Men are also more likely than women to engage in such risky behaviours as consuming more alcohol, tobacco, and drugs (Gulliford et al. 2014).

Reduced access to health services contributing to problems among women. Women workers are susceptible to adverse health outcomes due to the reduced access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. During health emergencies, public and financial resources often shift away from non-epidemic health services (UNFPA 2020a). This could have a significant impact on maternal health for workers, most of whom are of child-rearing age, who may not be able to access pre-natal and neo-natal care. Maternal health may be even more adversely affected if workers move back to their villages, further reducing access to sexual and reproductive health services and potentially increasing the prevalence of unsafe abortions (UNFPA 2020b). This may also reduce access to reproductive health services and contraceptives, some of which are used to ensure safe sex.

Unsafe sex is likely to rise due to decreased investment in and availability of sexual health services and resources to inform and support safe sex as well as resources to prevent, identify and treat sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) (UNAIDS 2020). This may create additional longer-term

health crises. This also raises concerns regarding respect for women's right to maintain control over their bodies, which includes access to timely and comprehensive sexuality education and the ability to choose if, when, with whom and how often to engage in sex, particularly amid rising instances of GBV.

Long-term

Declining job numbers and quality. The sector may not provide the same number and level of opportunities as it did before, since trends of consolidation, technical upgrading and other forms of sector restructuring may accelerate (McKinsey and BOF 2020). Many countries depend on the sector to provide individuals, mainly women, with formal, paid work. But decreasing demand for these workers' labour could leave millions of people with increasingly informal job arrangements, both within and outside of the sector. This practice shifts the burden of uncertainty to workers and reverses progress made on decent work. This is particularly concerning, since women are more exposed to informal employment than men in almost 75 per cent of Latin American countries, 89 per cent of countries in Southern Asia and over 90 per cent of sub-Saharan African countries (ILO 2019c).

Skills mismatches and a lack of job opportunities deemed socially acceptable based on their gender (shaped by social norms and stereotypes of roles deemed acceptable or not) may mean women and men workers who cannot return to jobs within the garment sector may face difficulties finding roles in other sectors. Women in particular are represented in a smaller number of sectors and jobs than men, and receive lower wages for similar work. This is due to gender-based norms and attitudes and direct and indirect discrimination, which results in occupational segregation and clustering of women at the lowest tiers of the supply chain (ILO 2019c). Due to digitalization and technical advances throughout the sector, this also places women more at risk of redundancy in the future.

Diminished economic and social empowerment. Longer-term unemployment of women garment workers adversely affects their economic and social empowerment. In a study conducted on garment workers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Kenya, Lesotho and Viet Nam, Better Work found that waged employment helped advance women's empowerment in societies considered to be highly gender

¹ For instance, in the last financial crisis, women garment workers reported taking on sex work for income (ILO 2010; Forstater n.d.).

unequal (Pike and English 2020). While women's employment has not always gone hand-in-hand with empowerment, women's employment in Better Work factories has enabled them to improve their leverage and influence in household spending and decision-making, and has increased men's participation in unpaid care work (ibid). However, given the potential, and perhaps sustained, loss of employment due to the coronavirus, opportunities for women's continued empowerment may decrease as workers lose their financial independence and, in some cases, become dependent on their families.

This also has long-term effects on women's overall labour incomes, since women and men's employment life cycles are influenced by gender stereotyping of roles, responsibilities and duties in unpaid household and care work that often result in motherhood penalties and limited access to social security provisions and coverage (ILO 2019c). This translates into limited or reduced access to essential old-age benefits later in their lives.

Adverse effects on generations to come. Long-term unemployment for women garment workers may lead to adverse intergenerational impacts on health and education for children, particularly girls. As the ILO has observed in previous recessions, loss of women workers' incomes in lower-income households has a greater longer-term impact when compared to men because women tend to invest more of their income in their children's health services, education and nutrition. This may negatively impact the health and education of their children (ILO 2009), and lead to life-long deficits in their cognitive, emotional and physical development (WHO 2011). It is also likely that children, particularly girl children, will take on additional household duties or be pulled out of school, as sons are typically privileged over daughters (Stavropoulou and Jones 2013). This may also have broader repercussions on a country's ability to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly on ensuring inclusive and sustainable economies and decent work for all.

Conclusion: A strong recovery requires gender-responsive measures

Dedicated gender-responsive measures and policies should be designed and implemented based on the needs and realities of different groups of women, of men and of others. Otherwise, the COVID-19 crisis threatens to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities at the same time that

previous gains in poverty reduction and gender equality are lost. This could undermine women's empowerment and hamper the social and economic sustainability of the garment sector over the short, medium and long term.

Countries should move forward by identifying the unique risks the crisis presents to women and men garment workers and considering how they can address existing gender gaps prevalent throughout the sector. In addition to seeking guidance from [ILO Conventions and Recommendations](#) (ILO 2020g), which point to evidence-based and agreed solutions, countries should pursue the following measures:

Mitigate impacts on livelihoods in a gender-responsive and inclusive manner. To minimize the effects of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of women and men workers in the garment sector, it is essential that attention is paid to [retrenchment](#) and closure practices, promoting access to financial inclusion and creating and maintaining social protection and safety nets that are responsive to and accessible for both women and men. Another key to ensuring women's full participation in the workforce, particularly as factories resume business operations, is addressing women's disproportionate unpaid care obligations and identifying support measures for workers with family responsibilities, as these are among the most significant barriers for women in pursuing paid work.

Reduce negative impacts on health, including occupational safety and health (OSH). Ensuring the health and safety of women and men workers both inside and outside the workplace is essential to maintaining livelihoods and productivity. Efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic should account for the unique ways that women and men may encounter the effects of the coronavirus at work, at home and in their communities. These measures should also acknowledge the role that employment plays in providing access to sexual and reproductive health services and mental health.

Address and prevent violence and harassment, including gender-based offenses. COVID-19 has led to an increase in instances of violence and harassment. Accordingly, it is important to redouble efforts to protect and ensure the rights of all to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including policies and management systems, referral services, and training for managers following guidance under the Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and Recommendation (No. 206) 2019. Particular attention should be paid to how workplace systems and changes in production (such as

hours and transport) may present different safety risks to women and men.

Ensure women's voice, representation and leadership in dialogue and decision-making. Given that women are at the forefront of the COVID-19 response as caregivers and community mobilizers, it is imperative to engage their diverse perspectives in policy-making and decision-making around these responses. Efforts to meaningfully engage women alongside men in policy and decision-making forums at the worker, employer, buyer, government and intergovernmental levels should be sensitive to the ways that the impacts of COVID-19 may constrain women's participation, and should include gender-sensitive opportunities for women to participate.

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Gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the garment sector

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