

“I can hardly sustain my family”

Understanding the human cost of the COVID-19 pandemic for workers in the supply chain



Executive Summary

The nationwide lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, designed to protect human health, contributed to the collapse in demand of certain consumer goods. This, in turn, delivered a devastating blow to global supply chains.

The financial, health and social implications of production shutdowns and job losses can only be fully understood by speaking to the workers impacted. HERproject interviewed over 1,000 workers, in garment factories in Bangladesh, China, Egypt, India, Kenya and Vietnam, and flower and tea farms in Kenya, to evaluate the true cost of the pandemic for these workers.

Women have been disproportionately impacted by the economic and social consequences of COVID-19. Globally, women have represented the majority of health workers on the front lines of the pandemic, and experienced challenges such as a rise in care-giving duties at home, greater risk of losing their income-earning opportunities relative to men, and an increase in gender-based violence.

Women play a critical role in the garment, fresh flower, and tea supply chains. In the garment industry, approximately 75 percent of garment workers are women.¹ Agriculture is also a big employer of women – for example 70 percent of the flower workforce and half of the tea workforce in Kenya are women.²

This report presents findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers, in the areas of physical and mental health, finances, and gender-based violence. It provides recommendations for companies and other stakeholders to act in the face of this crisis.

The report paints a troubling picture of the situation confronting workers in supply chains. Even for workers who have retained their jobs and are employed by some of the leading suppliers in the industry, the consequences of the pandemic on their well-being and long-term economic prospects are deeply concerning.

Some of the workers HERproject spoke to are cutting back on meals due to reduced working hours and income. Others are resorting to using savings or taking out loans to cover basic necessities such as food and rent. Finally, workers expressed a constant fear of contracting COVID-19 and fear for their family's health. This is adding stress to an already stressful working environment, and to lives that are already under pressure. The additional stress has resulted in increased levels of anxiety and strains on mental health, and an alarming rise in gender-based violence.

The situation is rapidly evolving. These surveys represent a snapshot in time for a limited number of workplaces and respondents. However, the evidence from the workers themselves shows the far-reaching impact of applying the brakes on the garment and agriculture supply chains, and for women in particular. The threat to livelihoods means workers are leaving their jobs, and the continuity of supply chains is at risk. This report outlines the emerging human consequences of a stop-start approach to global supply chains.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic may accelerate broader trends such as supply chain consolidation and automation, which will hasten the decline of traditional manufacturing jobs and even farm work. Although these trends are likely to generate new types of jobs, experts say those opportunities will be out of reach for most of today's low-income workers, without planning and intervention.

For vulnerable workers who face a high degree of precariousness in their lives, predictability in their working lives is critical. As companies review their sourcing strategies, they have an opportunity to give greater consideration to the workers in their supply chains. Choosing to make supportive and productive working environments a key component of their sourcing strategy will benefit both the workers and the resilience of the supply chain. While the immediate response may include emergency relief for the most pressing issues such as hunger, mental health and gender-based violence, building an ongoing practice of listening to the voices of workers – both male and female – will support a successful longer-term recovery.

Future plans for supply chain changes could include a risk assessment specifically looking at the different impacts on women and men workers. Companies may choose to collect and use gender-disaggregated data to increase understanding of the needs and challenges of women in their supply chains and come up with potential solutions. Investing in upskilling training for women workers, who may ultimately transition out of supply chain jobs, allows them to be better equipped for the future. Companies should also review their supply chain practices from a gender perspective in order to highlight opportunities to provide support for women.

Of course, companies cannot make improvements in isolation and therefore need to engage with other companies and stakeholders to support collective and co-ordinated responses to challenges for workers, especially women.

HERproject's mission to unlock the full potential of women working in global supply chains through workplace-based interventions on health, financial inclusion, and gender equality, has never been more relevant. Understanding women's needs is crucial in order to avoid a gender-blind response and recovery that would leave women behind.



Key takeaways from worker surveys in six countries

- 1 Workers are going hungry because of job losses or reduced income

- 2 Workers are taking loans to pay for food and rent

- 3 Workers are worried about their own and their family's health

- 4 Anxiety and strains on mental health have increased

- 5 Gender-based violence is on the rise

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and supply chains

Businesses have seen tremendous disruption and losses across their operations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Trade Organization estimates that world trade will fall by 32% in 2020. The International Labor Organization estimates that 400 million full-time jobs will be lost globally across industries, with women affected at greater rates than men.

Women holding jobs in global supply chains are being disproportionately impacted by the economic and social consequences of COVID-19.³ The pandemic has dramatically disrupted global supply chains, affecting the livelihoods of many women in developing countries. It is estimated that women make up about 40 to 50 percent of the hundreds of millions of workers employed in production across value chains.⁴

From 2000 to 2014, the total number of individuals employed in the garment sector significantly increased, from 20 million to 60 million, with three-quarters being female workers.⁵ The COVID-19 crisis is reversing this trend. Millions of garment workers have been laid-off or furloughed with limited or no income.⁶ In Bangladesh, one of the most affected countries, garment orders have been reduced by 45 percent from last year,⁷ leading to over a million garment workers dismissed or furloughed.⁸ With no safety net to tide them over, many workers have had to leave the capital Dhaka to return to their villages and are now relying on food handouts from local charities.⁹ In India, millions of internal migrants had to deal with loss of income and food shortages when they fled back to their hometowns as factories and workplaces shut down due to the lockdown.¹⁰ Now that workplaces are resuming production, they are in an even more vulnerable position as they are more likely to accept any type of work, so they and their families have a means of income.¹¹



The fresh flower supply chain, where women constitute most of the workforce, was also heavily impacted, given that flowers are not considered essential purchases. In Kenya, most flower suppliers reduced their permanent workforce by 50 percent or more, and laid off all their seasonal workers, which has disproportionately affected women.¹² The tea industry in Kenya was less affected as the impact on tea production itself has been limited. However, the sector experienced some disruptions in transportation and social distancing restrictions led to emergency responses from tea producers.¹³

Understanding the human cost of the pandemic

Experience of previous crises, such as the Ebola crisis,¹⁴ plus emerging data, indicates women may be particularly affected by the immediate and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the following ways:

- Increased unemployment and reduced income¹⁵
- Increased unpaid care and domestic work¹⁶
- Increase in violence against women during the pandemic¹⁷
- Risk of losing the empowerment they gained from employment

To better understand how women in supply chains have been impacted by COVID-19, HERproject conducted surveys in six countries, surveying over 1,000 female and male workers, as well as factory and farm managers.

The data collected in these surveys reveals the main challenges that women in supply chains are facing, as told directly by workers, and provides direction on what is needed for a recovery that puts workers' needs, especially women's, front and center.



Worker surveys in six countries

Timeframe: Surveys were gathered between August and October 2020.

Methodology: Phone surveys with workers (including smallholder farmers) and managers in six countries across multiple workplaces and regions. In each workplace one or two managers were surveyed. All workers and managers surveyed were still employed.

Total number of workers surveyed: 1,054

Total number of managers surveyed: 33

Source for COVID-19 cases: [Google News COVID-19 tracker](#) as at 27 October 2020

Bangladesh

523 garment workers surveyed
56% female and 44% male

Severity of COVID-19:

390,000 cases and 5,681 deaths.

Government response:

Lockdown declared throughout the country from March to May 2020.

US \$590 million bailout package for the export-oriented industries, and covered 65% of workers' April, May, and June salaries.

China

95 garment workers surveyed
65% female and 35% male

Severity of COVID-19:

90,604 cases and 4,739 deaths

Government response:

Strict lockdown in Hubei province, mass testing and effective contact tracing.

Egypt

136 garment workers surveyed
34% female and 66% male

Severity of COVID-19:

107,000 cases and 6,199 deaths.

The garment sector was impacted by many global brands cancelling or suspending orders.

Government response:

Curfews to reduce and contain the spread of COVID-19 in March 2020. Schools were closed, and employers could only have 50% staff utilization on premises.

India

100 garment workers surveyed
52% female and 48% male

Severity of COVID-19:

At least 7,597,000 cases and 115,197 people have died from COVID-19, making India the most affected country in Asia.

Government response:

Nationwide lockdown that was lifted in May 2020.

Kenya

85 garment, cut flowers and tea workers surveyed
58% female and 42% male

Severity of COVID-19:

45,076 cases and 839 deaths

Government response:

Curfews, school closures and limiting gatherings

Measures to buffer Kenyans against financial hardships.

Vietnam

115 garment workers surveyed
53% female and 47% male

Severity of COVID-19:

1,140 cases and 35 deaths

Government response:

Nationwide isolation of 15 days in April 2020, followed by a successful reopening with a \$2.6 billion financial support package for people in difficulty.

Suppliers are facing financial impacts in factories and on farms

The managers taking part in the surveys reported that their factories' and farms' finances have suffered a huge blow. While the factories and farms HERproject surveyed have managed to remain in business (even factories in India that had to shut down entirely during lockdown), these workplaces are still experiencing financial distress due to cancelled orders and delayed payments from their customers.

The workplaces that participated in the HERproject survey often represent strategic suppliers for brands, which means brands were more likely to maintain business relationships and future orders and payments. These suppliers were therefore better positioned to weather the pandemic than their peers. Most factories and farms that HERproject surveyed have managed to keep most of the workforce employed. However, they reported reduced working hours for staff, which resulted in a significant loss of income for workers, and worker resignations.

Looking ahead, managers are worried about the future of their factories or farms and their ability to stay in business. Five out of 12 managers surveyed in Vietnam and all managers from India reported worrying that their factory will experience severe financial hardship as a result of COVID-19.

The following section describes how this disruption for factories and farms has direct impacts on workers' well-being and livelihoods.

“As a result of cancelled or delayed orders, we do not have enough cash to pay a full salary for our workers. Some workers had to quit because their income was not enough for their living costs and had to find other jobs to feed their family. I am so worried that if the situation lasts longer, we will have to close the factory.”

MANAGER OF A GARMENT FACTORY, VIETNAM

“COVID-19 affected everyone, including the managers. Farmers have been affected the most because they had a good harvest, but we could not pay well because some countries closed borders, and this led to the loss of business. Globally there was a total of 221 million kilograms of tea unsold during the lockdown season.”

MANAGER OF A TEA FACTORY, KENYA

1

Workers are going hungry because of job losses or reduced income

Workers in some of the countries surveyed reported reducing or skipping meals because they didn't have enough money to pay for food, due to the decrease of their incomes. In Kenya, where the situation was the most dramatic, 70 percent of female and 78 percent of male respondents had to skip or cut the size of their meals. In Kenya, some workers saw a significant reduction in overtime hours, which they rely on to cover basic costs. Others were furloughed or had a spouse who had lost their income, and all were affected by an increase in food prices. In Bangladesh, 54 percent of men and 40 percent of women reported cutting down on their food expenses because their salaries had decreased, and they were uncertain about the future.

Due to the financial pressures on factories, female and male workers are receiving fewer working hours than before, through reductions in standard hours or overtime. This means that although workers might still be employed, they are not earning enough to buy essential items like food, or pay their rent. For this reason, some workers are choosing to leave their jobs and seek other work, such as agricultural work in their home villages, or take second jobs to cover basic expenses.

In China, 44 percent of female workers and 36 percent of male workers HERproject surveyed are working less than before the pandemic. This is consistent with the situation in India where 40 percent of female workers and 51 percent of male workers are working less than before the pandemic.

"I lost overtime pay because of a drop in factory orders which means I only get the basic salary, but it cannot support my daily life. I have to do odd jobs elsewhere after my shift in the factory."

Female worker, China



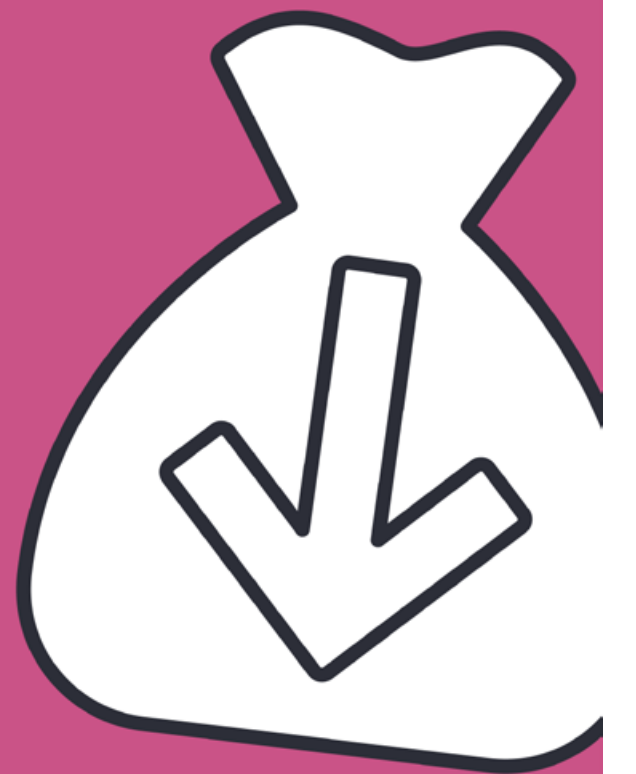
In Bangladesh, 54% of male workers and 40% female workers reported cutting down on food expenses.

In Bangladesh

54%
male workers

& 40%
female workers

reported cutting down on food expenses



2

Workers are taking loans to pay for food and rent

With reduced or no income, workers are relying on loans to make ends meet. Across countries, workers reported they use loans to cover basic needs such as paying rent or buying groceries. Kenya was the country with the highest increase in borrowing due to COVID-19, as before the crisis only 17 percent of women borrowed frequently and now 50 percent of women are borrowing frequently. The increase in borrowing was even higher for men, with only 8 percent borrowing frequently before the crisis, whereas now 49 percent do so. Low-income populations in Kenya were already heavily indebted as, even before the COVID-19 crisis, at least one out of every five borrowers struggled to repay their loan.¹⁸

In Bangladesh, the number of women taking out loans to cover basic expenses increased by 15 percent, while the percentage of men who borrowed nearly doubled. In Vietnam, the situation appears to be less dire, although the surveys still suggest an increase in workers taking out loans for basic provisions, with loans increasing by 4 percentage points among female workers and by 17 percentage points among male workers. Across countries, women were taking out fewer loans than men, which can be explained by the fact that in some of these countries, loans to women continue to be of lower value and shorter duration, with stricter terms, than loans to men.¹⁹

In other countries, workers are taking fewer loans to cover essential expenses but are instead relying on their savings. In Egypt, more than 80 percent of workers surveyed reported using their savings to cope with the pandemic. In India, 65 percent of workers reported using their savings during the crisis, in most cases to pay for food.

“COVID-19 has affected the economy negatively and sources of income have declined. Having children at home compounds the economic problem since they must be provided with food, especially for a parent like me with five children. This has led me to borrow more and sink into debt.”

Male smallholder tea farmer, Kenya

“I have two school-age children. Since we have no savings, when my income was reduced, I had to borrow some money from my friends to cover the living costs and pay for my children’s school fees. I hope our life can get back to normal soon.”

Male worker, Vietnam



↑ In Kenya, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 17 percent of female workers and 8 percent of male workers reported borrowing money frequently, and now 50 percent of female workers and 49 percent of male workers are borrowing money frequently.

3

Workers are worried about their own and their family's health

Workers are worried about health consequences of COVID-19. In China workers' top concern was the fear of getting COVID-19. Female workers were more worried about COVID-19 than male colleagues. Women were taking more preventive measures: 87 percent of women were washing their hands more often compared with only 59 percent of men.

Fear of getting COVID-19 was also workers' top concern in India, which is understandable given that the country is one of the most affected by coronavirus in terms of cases and fatalities. In India, 92 percent of female respondents reported being worried about COVID-19, whereas 81 percent of males reported the same. However, when asked about actions taken to prevent infections, a greater percentage of male respondents reported washing their hands with soap and water more often and avoiding crowded places compared with females, which suggests a better understanding of preventive measures.

In Kenya, over 90 percent of workers reported being worried about getting infected by COVID-19, with 100 percent of them reporting taking the necessary actions to prevent it, irrespective of gender.

In Vietnam, the fear of getting infected by COVID-19 was outweighed by the fear of losing one's job. With one of the lowest numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths worldwide, it is understandable that workers in Vietnam are more worried about their jobs than about getting infected.

Workers are also concerned about the health of their children and the consequences of the prevention measures taken by government that, in some cases, resulted in families being separated.

Almost all surveyed workers across all countries were increasingly concerned about their children's health. In India, almost 90 percent of respondents reported worrying about their children's health. The number of female workers who are more worried about their children's health than prior to the pandemic increased by 24 percentage points, and the number of males who reported being more worried increased by 28 percentage points.

"I feared COVID-19, especially of being taken to quarantine away from my children and leave them suffering since I am the bread winner."

Female farmer, Kenya

Fear of COVID-19 infection is

**No.1
concern**

for low-income workers
in India, China & Kenya



↑ Fear of COVID-19 infection is No. 1 concern for low-income workers in India, China & Kenya.

4

Anxiety and strains on mental health have increased

“Since COVID-19 started and children are out of school, work at home has tripled. Once you serve breakfast you have a mountain of dishes to wash, and by the time you are done, there is lunch to prepare. You go to work the whole day, and, in the evening, you are expected to serve with the same stamina. I believe men should help us sometimes.” **Female factory worker, Kenya**

COVID-19’s toll on mental health is already evident among low-income workers. Across the countries surveyed, the measures taken by the government resulted in families being separated, with many workers forced to quarantine away from their children. That, coupled with economic insecurity and even hunger, has brought about increased anxiety among workers.

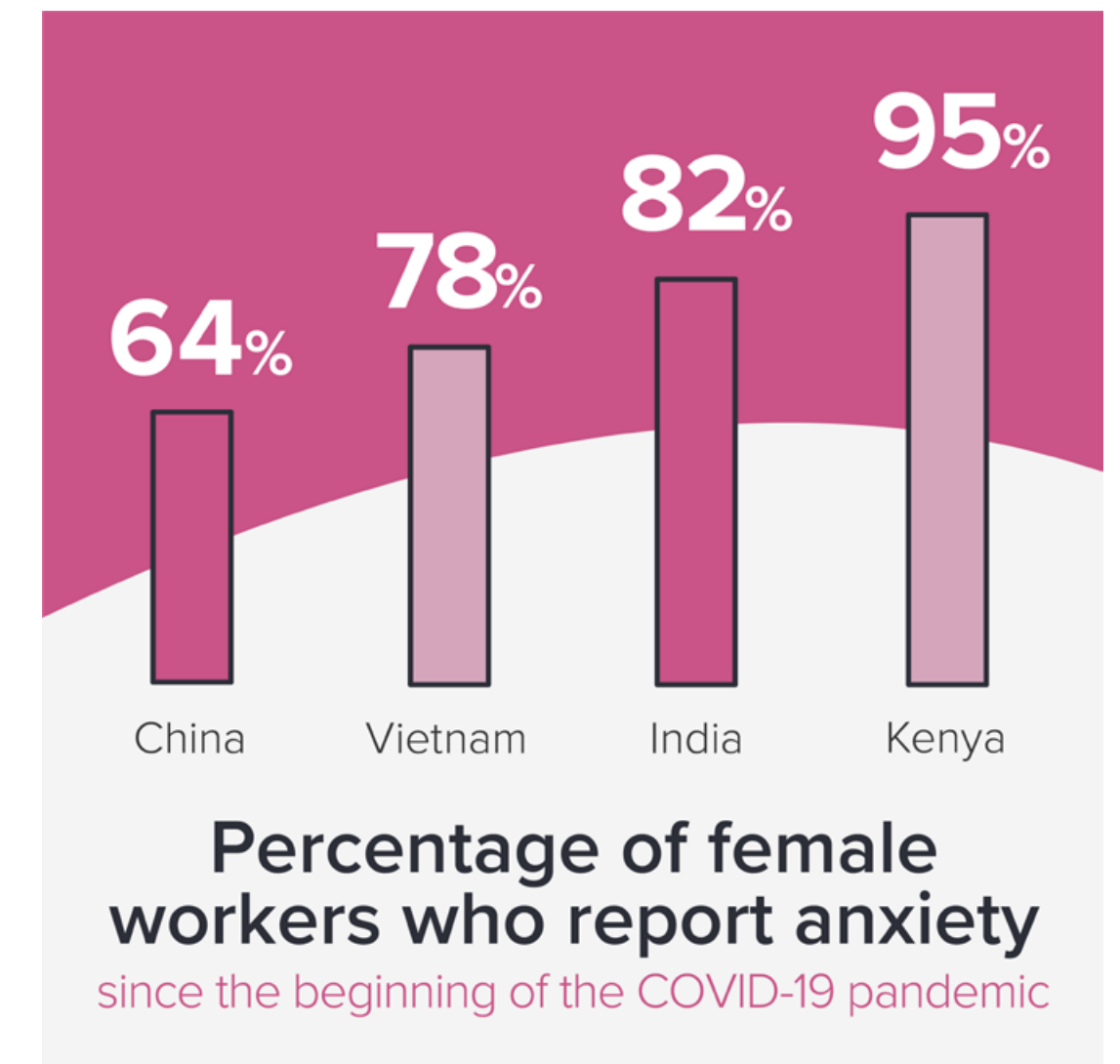
In China, 64 percent of female respondents and 51 percent of male respondents reported anxiety since the start of the lockdown. When asked if they require support to deal with mental or physical stress, 11 percent of females and 21 percent of males reported requiring support.

In India, 82 percent of female respondents and 90 percent of male respondents reported anxiety since the start of the lockdown. In Vietnam, 78 percent of female respondents and 87 percent of male respondents reported anxiety since the start of the social distancing measures. In Kenya, 95 percent of respondents from both genders reported anxiety since the start of the lockdown.

Worryingly, recent studies also point to a spike in cases of mental illness and an increase in the risk of suicide. The Indian Psychiatry Society stated that there has been a 20 percent rise in mental health illness cases, affecting at least one in five Indians,²⁰ and those in the lowest income brackets are at most risk of suicide.²¹ Across countries, experts believe COVID-19 will lead to an increase in chronic stress, anxiety, depression, alcohol dependence, and self-harm.²² Lockdowns and restrictions are also contributing to feelings of isolation and disconnection from family members.

Managers in all countries surveyed confirmed that anxiety has increased among workers and managers. Managers also reported workers are having difficulty balancing their household care duties and work, given that most countries have had school closures. For example, in India, a third of surveyed managers said that workers have issues combining their work with their household care duties since the beginning of the pandemic. However, given the additional pressure on health and safety, and the need to ensure social distancing, the proportion of factories offering childcare has dropped from 89 percent to 56 percent since the pandemic started.

“Because of COVID-19, I was sent on unpaid leave. Since I was not able to get another job, I got frustrated and started drinking. That led to quarrels with my wife, until one day I came home and found she had left with the children.” **Male Worker, Kenya**



↑ Percentage of female workers who reported anxiety since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic: China (64%), India (82%), Vietnam (78%) and Kenya (95%)

5

Gender-based violence is on the rise

Workers report that the economic and emotional strains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an increase in arguments at home, and an increase in gender-based violence, with varying reports across countries. Even if workers have maintained their jobs, their spouses may have lost their jobs. The stress caused by the uncertainty of the situation, and restriction of movement leading to families spending more time together in small accommodation, are all factors contributing to an increased risk of violence. Respondents were specifically asked if they have noticed an increase in violence against women in their communities.

In India, 17 percent of female respondents noticed an increase of violence against women. In Vietnam, 10 percent of female and 4 percent of male respondents reported noticing an increase in violence against women, and in China 8 percent of female and 6 percent of male respondents report an increase.

In Kenya, 54 percent of female and 49 percent of male respondents reported noticing an increase in incidents of violence against women around them. When asked if they know women who are victims of domestic violence, 57 percent of women and 49 percent of men reported knowing of one or more. The numbers may be higher in Kenya, given that the country has one of the highest rates of intimate partner violence, with a lifetime prevalence of 49.4 percent,²³ and the surveys were conducted in communities where violence against women is prevalent.

Gender-based violence remains a taboo topic and cases may be under-reported. Many reports are pointing at an increase in violence

against women during the pandemic, with surges of 25 percent being recorded in countries with reporting systems in place.²⁴

Workplace violence and harassment was not a focus of the surveys, but there is risk of this increasing as factories and farms undergo a period of high uncertainty and production pressure. One study in Bangladesh reported that over 30 percent of female workers said they were subjected to sexual harassment in workplaces during the pandemic.²⁵

“I am a worker at the factory and with my salary I can hardly sustain the family. My husband lost his job due to COVID-19 and this has affected the family both financially and emotionally. There have been increased arguments in the family.”

Female worker, Kenya

54%



of female workers
in Kenya noticed an

increase in violence against women

↑ 54% of female workers in Kenya noticed an increase in violence against women.

Recommendations

While the full human cost of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting crisis is not yet known, it is clear that male and female workers in supply chains are highly vulnerable and are already facing challenges to meeting their basic needs. Women are impacted differently from men: for example, they face a higher risk of gender-based violence, and are already emerging as the group most at risk from the economic impact of coronavirus.²⁶

What can industry actors – from global companies to suppliers to governments to civil society organizations to donors – do to ensure a gender inclusive recovery?

The HERproject surveys suggest workers, both women and men, urgently need support. Here are some ways companies can act to support an immediate response:

Find out how workers in your supply chain are impacted:

Hearing directly from workers about their situation and needs is essential to understanding the human toll of the pandemic. Companies should consider the unique needs of women workers and how women may be impacted differently from men. Several reports from workers' organizations, local organizations, and industry players are a good place to start.

Support urgent relief:

Companies should engage with other stakeholders to support emergency relief for the urgent issues faced by workers, such as hunger, mental health, and gender-based violence. While schemes take different forms across different countries, cash transfers and access to unemployment benefits or sickness leave offer critical lifelines for women and their families when income from work is reduced or uncertain. Local organizations are leading this work and are in need of additional resources.

Reinforce relationships with suppliers:

HERproject is seeing some signs of recovery from companies. Unfortunately, this does not always translate into better outcomes for workers who are struggling, and the risk of second and third waves of the pandemic is real. Companies can encourage and support suppliers to take gender-sensitive measures, including investing in women's empowerment programming. Companies should also support their suppliers by committing to paying on time for upcoming orders and ensure that the placement of orders is as predictable as possible.

Collaborate with others:

Engage with other companies as well as stakeholders such as the International Labor Organization, workers' representatives, industry associations, and others, to support collective and co-ordinated responses to challenges for workers, especially women, in the supply chain. Where appropriate, influence government actors to provide critical, gender-inclusive support. Worker well-being is a pre-competitive issue that requires co-operation.

Develop a gender-inclusive recovery:

Maintain or amplify public commitments to gender equality as part of a gender-inclusive recovery strategy. Use gender-disaggregated data in supply chain tools and workplace assessments to increase understanding of women's needs and potential solutions. Invest in upskilling training for women to better equip them for future jobs. Review supply chain practices, such as sourcing decisions and codes of conduct, from a gender perspective to identify opportunities to support women.

The way forward

Of course, companies cannot make improvements in isolation and need action from other actors to facilitate positive change. In the supply chain, companies will rely on suppliers to commit to, and implement, programs supporting women workers. Donors can play a vital role in filling the funding gap where companies struggle to have adequate resources to provide critical support. Outside the workplace, governments and civil society organizations have a role to play in ensuring women's full access to social protection schemes.

Listening to what workers have to say is crucial for leading recovery strategies informed by the real-life challenges that workers are facing. Women are the backbone of global supply chains; it is now more urgent than ever for companies to listen to female workers' voices to ensure a recovery that does not leave women behind. Future shocks on the horizon, such as automation and climate change, present additional threats to women in supply chains. By understanding workers' challenges, and by accounting for women's specific needs, companies can seize a unique opportunity to take concrete action to improve the lives of workers and build back long-term resilience.

Having seen the impact of this shock, companies now have a responsibility to ensure workers, especially women, are a fundamental part of their recovery plans, for the resilience of global supply chains and the well-being of millions of workers around the world.



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BSR’s HERproject™ is a collaborative initiative that strives to empower low-income women working in global supply chains. Bringing together global brands, their suppliers, and local NGOs, HERproject drives impact for women and business via workplace-based interventions on health, financial inclusion, and gender equality. Since its inception in 2007, HERproject™ has worked in more than 900 workplaces across 14 countries and has increased the well-being, confidence, and economic potential of more than 1 million women.

www.herproject.org

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Photo Credit: Nguyen Minh Duc and BSR.