# HOW DOES COVID-19 AFFECT WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS?

To be able to respond to and remedy the consequences of Covid-19 on women in global garment supply chains, we have to integrate gender analysis into our responses. A [gender analysis](https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/methods-tools/gender-analysis) identifies the social constructed roles and identifies that affect distribution of resources, opportunities, constraints and power during a crisis.

Global crises exacerbate [existing inequalities](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_619119/lang--en/index.htm). As seen in previous emergency situations, this pandemic [will affect people differently](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/) based on their race, social class, sex, gender, age, disability, legal status and other identities; marginalised groups are more negatively affected by Covid-19. Looking within the garment industry, we can see that Covid-19 and the measures adopted has a differential effect on women, with the consequence of limiting their work, economic opportunities, independence and health. Integrating a [gender analysis](https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/methods-tools/gender-analysis) to government, brand and supplier responses will help to identify the socially constructed roles and identifies that affect distribution of resources, opportunities, constraints and power during a crisis.

The garment industry in the developing economies of producing countries remains primarily a high-volume, low-cost production base where excessive overtime and low wages are the norm. This places workers in a very precarious position, of those women remain the most vulnerable. In addition, women shoulder the majority of care responsibilities in the home—including [child care, elderly care, and providing sick care](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/us/women-coronavirus-greater-risk.html)—responsibilities which have increased due to the crisis.

###### UNDERSTANDING THE RISKS

On average, eighty percent of those working in garment factories are women. The garment industry, as most industries, has a gender pay gap, [with women at the lower end of the wage ladder](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_466268.pdf). With the mass lay-offs due to Covid-19, many workers are without an income. A [survey of factory owners](https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf) in [Bangladesh Pennsylvania State University’s Center for Global Workers’ Rights and the Worker Rights Consortium found](https://ler.la.psu.edu/gwr/documents/AbandonedCGWRWRCReportMarch312020withaddendum.pdf) that one million garment workers were laid off, 72 percent without severance pay. In Myanmar, some factory owners abandoned factories, leaving workers jobless and without any savings. Some estimate that already [20,000 garment workers have already lost their jobs](https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/in-myanmar-hunger-overshadows-covid-19-for-yangons-poorest/).

##### Informal contracts and lack of social protection

Many women do not have access to social safety nets, as it depends on formal participation in the labour market. It is common for women to work without formal contracts, including in the garment industry. Because of this, they are not entitled to social protection systems, such as health care, paid sick and maternity leave, unemployment and pension benefits. In South Asia, for example, [over eighty percent of women](https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2319) in non-agricultural jobs are in informal employment; in sub-Saharan Africa, it is 74 percent.

##### Women and wages

This economic state has a particularly devastating effect on women garment workers and their communities. Already at the lowest paid, very few of these women earn enough to have accumulated a financial safety net. The impact of the loss of income goes beyond the worker themselves: women spend their income on their family and community. The ILO conducted independent research in Vietnam, where their Better Work Programme operates. They found that [women workers remit 24 percent more than men](https://betterwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Vietnam-Impact-Brief-Rnd5_LR.pdf). These communities depend on the financial support of women garment workers.

##### Temporary contracts

With a labour surplus, and the ability to move production locations with relative ease, garment workers often have to [settle for short-term contracts](https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2319). Women workers are [more likely to work under temporary contracts](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19_CommunityEngagement_130320.pdf). Others may work without any contract, particularly when factories rely heavily on subcontracting and homeworkers. Low-pay, low-power positions make negotiating contracts difficult for women workers. With Covid-19, it is the temporary workers who are the first to lose their jobs. With no contractual agreements to cover severance or paid leave, they have been left without anything.

##### Migrant status

Women make up the majority of migrant workers in the garment industry. Migrant workers face extra risks in the world of work; removed from their community, they often lack social support and an understanding of how to access help if their labour rights have been violated. In some countries they do not speak the regional language or dialect, which adds to their social isolation. Migrant workers are frequently given short-term contracts. During this pandemic, migrant workers are looked at as surplus labour. Millions of them have been laid off, as factories shut their doors. With many modes of transport shut down, many domestic migrant workers are fleeing the city, often on foot, to return to their native villages where they have family, accommodation, and social network. They are sometimes walking for days and there have been reports of deaths due fatigue and dehydration.

##### Gender-based violence

In stress circumstances, gender-based violence peaks. Workplace violence and harassment remains a risk in garment factories. Research has demonstrated that the combination of low wages and excessive overtime increases incidences of violence and harassment. Additionally, during pandemics, the stress workers face at home and in the factory, particularly when experiencing economic insecurity, leads to an increase in incidences of intimate partner violence.

##### Power imbalance

The power imbalances created by a situation where workers fear losing their jobs can create the potential for quid pro quo sexual harassment. Workers may feel unable to refuse unwanted sexual advances to protect their job or to ensure they are given hours/paid for the hours they worked.

Migrant workers travelling home, or mass layoffs of factory workers, can create an environment where workers are travelling long distances (in some cases by foot). In other crises, migrant women in particular, have [experienced an increase in sexual violence when on the move, as well as women [during transport to and from work](https://api.fairwear.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018_FWF_Breaking-the-silence.pdf).](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_Preparedness_and_Response_-_UNFPA_Interim_Technical_Briefs_Gender_Equality_and_GBV_23_March_2020_.pdf) Workers who lose their jobs suddenly and without pay, especially those who are a vulnerable population already, will be at-risk for extreme forms of exploitation including human trafficking, scam recruitment offers, and sexual exploitation.

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How we respond to this crisis is crucial and should be viewed not only with immediate relief measures but consideration for the long-term impact on workers and their rights. Measures that do not address gender inequalities during COVID-19 will disproportionately aggravate the situation of female garment workers. Unfortunately, women are underrepresented in social dialogue / union structures; therefore, responses to COVID-19 often do not include women’s voices, even though they are highest affected in the garment industry.

Along with our brand guidance, where we take particular concern to address the specific gender inequalities, Fair Wear is developing gender-specific lobbying efforts and echoes the work of trade unions and women’s NGOs, in calling for a gender response to COVID-19 that, **in the short-term:**

Supports the inclusion of women and other workers in vulnerable positions in negotiations on wages, benefits, and health and safety committees.

Recognises the need for financial support for the lowest paid members of the workforce. Payments should reach the most vulnerable workers, particularly those that are not included in government support schemes. This includes informal, temporary, and migrant workers. Brands must take responsibility, where possible, for vulnerable workers in their supply chain.

Acknowledge the increased risk of violence and harassment against women and other vulnerable groups in the world of work, as well as increased risk of exploitation. This is especially in relation to overtime, workplace stress and low wages. Include the transportation to and from work, as well as the migration between home villages and the factory as within the scope of ‘work’. Implement policies, procedures programmes that will mitigate these harms, such as ensuring that there is not a rush of orders post-COVID-19 shutdown that leads to excessive overtime, consistent payments for workers so they are not forced to take desperate measures to ensure survival, providing safe transport for workers who must return home or to the factory.

Considers the impact of intimate partner violence on workers. An alarming rise in domestic violence has been documented around the world. This will have an impact workers safety and productivity.

Accounts for the burden of social care, falling primarily on women, to provide care for children, the elderly, and sick family members. For garment workers in countries where social benefits are limited, this burden will be significantly increased. This community caregiving role that is socially attributed to women will have long-term effects on their ability to be financially independent.

Makes considerations for pregnant workers and workers who may have trouble accessing healthcare or maternity benefits due to factory closures and layoffs.

Supports the collection of gender disaggregated data on lay-offs, payments, and unemployment.

Promote safe and healthy workplaces when factories re-open, including psychological support for workers returning to the factory floor.

**In the long-term:**

Considers the impact of the coming economic recession will also increase precarity for women workers, who may be further pushed into temporary and informal forms of paid work, including an increase in sub-contracting and home-based work. Brands and suppliers should be conscious of safeguarding the rights of workers further down the supply chain.

Ensure that women’s voices are included in future negotiations through creating and promoting opportunities for women’s leadership in worker representation and unions.

Due to the social expectations that require women to take on more unpaid care work in the home, it will take women longer to re-enter the job market and previous crises have shown that women re-enter at the lower wage. Efforts to restart the garment sector should build women’s empowerment programmes in from the start and focus on schemes to help increase women’s economic opportunities. Moreover, consider providing and promoting family care leave to male workers, and encouraging more gender-balanced social norms so that men can share care responsibilities with women.