



# HUNGER IN THE APPAREL SUPPLY CHAIN

**Survey findings on workers' access  
to nutrition during Covid-19**



WORKER RIGHTS  
CONSORTIUM

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# Hunger in the Apparel Supply Chain: Survey findings on workers' access to nutrition during Covid-19

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## Credits:

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### ABOUT

This research report presents the findings of a survey of 396 garment workers across 158 factories in nine countries (see Table 1), undertaken between August and September 2020. It presents new data about how garment workers' food security—and linked dynamics of employment status and income—has deteriorated amidst the pandemic. Workers from our sample reported making clothes for over 100 apparel brands and retailers (see Figure 3); the brands and retailers that were identified by survey respondents with the most frequency were: adidas, Gap, H&M, Nike, The Children's Place, PVH, Gildan, Walmart, JCPenney, and Express. Our data reveal an alarming pattern: garment workers' declining incomes are leading to widespread hunger among workers and their families, as they are increasingly unable to obtain adequate food and nutrition. These dynamics are a direct result of apparel brands' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the long-term trend of low wages for garment workers in brands' supply chains, which has left workers unprotected.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

#### *Falling Income and Changing Employment Status amidst Covid-19*

- **Most garment workers' incomes had fallen** amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Many workers had permanently lost their jobs, often without receiving legally mandated severance pay that they urgently need.
- **38 percent of workers** in our survey reported that, due to either temporary suspension of employment (11 percent) or permanent dismissal (27 percent), they no longer had jobs, while 2 percent of workers had resigned their employment.
- **60 percent of the workers** in our survey had not experienced any change to their employment status and continued to work at the same factory as before the pandemic. However, while these workers reported an average *pre-pandemic* take-home pay of \$187 per month, their income had dropped to an average of \$147 per month. In other words, they experienced a 21 percent decrease in income between March and August 2020.



Photo credit: Riza Azhari / Shutterstock.com

- Of the workers who had been suspended, **30 percent** reported that they had received no pay at all during the suspension period, the remainder reported receiving varying percentages of their pre-pandemic pay.
- Of the workers who had been terminated by their employers (roughly 1/4 of our sample), **70 percent** reported that they had not received their full legally mandated severance pay and 40 percent reported they received none of the severance pay they were legally owed. Only 24 percent of the terminated workers reported receiving the full mandated amount.

### *Growing Hunger and Food Insecurity*

- As a direct result of falling incomes, and in some cases job loss or suspension, workers reported **growing hunger and food insecurity**.
- **77 percent of workers** reported that they or a member of their household had gone hungry since the beginning of the pandemic.
  - The frequency with which workers and members of their households went hungry varies: 20 percent of workers reported experiencing hunger on a daily basis since the beginning of the pandemic, while 34 percent experienced hunger at least once a week.
- **88 percent of workers** reported that diminished income had forced a reduction in the amount of food consumed each day by themselves and members of their household.
- Among the workers in the sample with dependent children, **80 percent** reported that they were forced to skip meals or reduce the amount or quality of food they ate in order to feed their children.
- **67 percent of workers** reported that they or members of their household had been forced to skip meals during the pandemic or reduce the quality of meals.
  - 22 percent of workers said they were forced to skip meals or reduce nutritional quality on a daily basis, while 31 percent indicated that they were doing so more than once a week.
- **66 percent of workers** reported that they now must forgo foods that they were able to purchase for themselves and their families before the pandemic. Most commonly, workers reported having to remove meat from their food basket, as well as other staples including vegetables and grains.
- **75 percent of workers** reported that they had borrowed money or accumulated debt in order to buy food since the beginning of the pandemic. Of these, 43 percent were working at the same factory that employed them before the pandemic, indicating that even workers who were still employed were taking on debt to cope with falling incomes. Given the well-documented risk that debts can lead to severe labor exploitation, including forced labor for low-wage workers, this is a worrying trend (see page 14).
- The widespread incidence of hunger revealed by the survey exists despite the fact that a majority of surveyed workers had received some degree of government assistance, indicating that resource-poor governments in apparel exporting countries were **not able to protect supply chain workers** from the economic ravages of the pandemic.
- **80 percent of the workers** in our sample anticipate that they will need to further reduce the amount of food they eat or purchase for their family if the situation does not improve.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Apparel companies carry responsibility for workers in their global supply chains. They should take stock of how their responses to the pandemic are impacting suppliers and workers and take immediate action to address ongoing harms. Their action should center around:
  - Ensuring that workers' income is sustained throughout the crisis via cash support, as unions and labor rights advocates around the world are urging and as apparel brands have so far failed to do;
  - Paying suppliers in full for any orders they placed before the crisis that remain unpaid, since retroactive cancellations of goods already in production have left the supply chain actors who can least afford to bear the cost of the pandemic (suppliers and workers) to do so;
  - Ensuring all legally mandated severance pay and other terminal compensation is delivered to workers who have been terminated; and
  - Ending irresponsible sourcing practices, such as using suppliers' increasing desperation for orders to extract major price concessions and impose increasingly onerous payment terms.
- In the medium and long term, there is a need for systemic change to address the inequalities of power and wealth within supply chains and the business models that have led to these outcomes, including: the chronic failure of brands to ensure living wages for supply chain workers; uneven value distribution along supply chains; and irresponsible sourcing practices, including the practice of sourcing goods below the costs of production, paying suppliers so little that they cannot adhere to labor laws and standards. These dynamics have left garment workers exceedingly vulnerable to the pandemic's economic shocks and will require targeted action from policymakers, investors, and apparel companies in close collaboration with unions, workers, and their advocates to address. As a first step, brands should make an enforceable commitment to pay a price premium on apparel orders to establish a global severance guarantee fund and broaden social protection for garment workers, per a proposal advocated by a broad coalition of unions and nongovernmental organizations (see Conclusion).

**Apparel companies  
carry responsibility  
for workers  
in their global  
supply chains.**

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## BACKGROUND

Long-standing inequities in global apparel supply chains—from one-sided contracts that allow brands to cancel clothing orders their suppliers have already produced, to chronically low wages in factories producing for the world's most lucrative apparel labels—have made garment workers exceedingly vulnerable to the pandemic's economic shocks.

When the spread of Covid-19 led to mandatory closures of retail stores in March 2020, crushing consumer demand for apparel, brands and retailers employed unfair cancellation clauses and dubious force majeure claims to push financial pain down the supply chain by refusing to pay suppliers for billions of garments the brands had ordered before the crisis.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, these were goods suppliers and workers had already produced or were in the process of sewing. On top of temporary, health-related factory shutdowns in some apparel exporting countries, brands' refusal to pay their bills caused supplier factories to temporarily suspend, permanently dismiss, or slash the hours and wages of millions of garment workers.<sup>2</sup>

Since March 2020, trade unions and labor rights advocates have had significant success in pressing leading apparel brands and retailers to reverse course and pay for the

apparel that was completed or in-process at the outset of the crisis.<sup>3</sup> Yet the success has been partial and much remains unpaid. Some of the world's leading brands and retailers have complied, restoring an estimated \$15 billion in previously canceled

**“Before the pandemic, I bought fruit for my child regularly. But after losing my job, I cannot buy even fish or meat. Egg is a luxurious food for us now.”**

– Bangladeshi worker who formerly produced apparel for Mango and Primark

orders,<sup>4</sup> but many—like Kohl's, Arcadia Group, T.J. Maxx, Bestseller, and The Children's Place—still refuse to pay suppliers in full. A recent analysis of government trade data for the US and European markets identified a \$16.2 billion shortfall in apparel imports, most of it the product of retroactive order cancellations.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jeff Vogt, Miriam Saage-Maaß, Ben Vanpeperstraete, and Ben Hensler, *Farce Majeure: How Global Apparel Brands Are Using the COVID-19 Pandemic to Stiff Suppliers and Abandon Workers*, European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, September 2020, [https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/ECCHR\\_PP\\_FARCE\\_MAJEURE.pdf](https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/ECCHR_PP_FARCE_MAJEURE.pdf); Scott Nova and Ineke Zeldenrust, *Who Will Bail Out the Workers That Make Our Clothes?*, Worker Rights Consortium, March 2020, <https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Who-Will-Bail-Out-the-Workers-March-2020.pdf>; Mark Anner and Worker Rights Consortium, *Abandoned? The Impact of Covid-19 on Workers and Businesses at the Bottom of Global Garment Supply Chains*, PennState Center for Global Workers' Rights, March 27, 2020, <https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Sofia Barradas, Anne Bienias, Mayisha Begum, Liana Foxvog, Bent Gehrt, Lucy Griffiths, Laura Gutierrez, David Hachfeld, Christie Miedema, Miriam Neale, and Johnson Yeung, *Un(der)paid in the Pandemic*, Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020, <https://cleanclothes.org/news/2020/garment-workers-on-poverty-pay-are-left-without-billions-of-their-wages-during-pandemic>.

<sup>3</sup> By the end of March 2020, six apparel companies had committed to pay for all orders in production or completed. See: Anner and Worker Rights Consortium, *Abandoned?* As of October 26, 2020, 15 more apparel companies have made the same commitment. See: “Covid-19 Tracker: Which Brands Are Acting Responsibly toward Suppliers and Workers?,” Worker Rights Consortium, accessed October 26, 2020, <https://www.workersrights.org/issues/covid-19/tracker/>.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Anner, Scott Nova, and Liana Foxvog, *Unpaid Billions: Trade Data Show Apparel Order Volume and Prices Plummeted through June, Driven by Brands' Refusal to Pay for Goods They Asked Suppliers to Make*, PennState Center for Global Workers' Rights, October 6, 2020, 2, [https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Unpaid-Billions\\_October-6-2020.pdf](https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Unpaid-Billions_October-6-2020.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Anner, Nova, and Foxvog, *Unpaid Billions*.



Making matters worse, research shows that as apparel brands place new orders for fall and winter, they are exploiting their suppliers' desperation for work amidst declining order volume in order to demand lower prices and slower payment schedules.<sup>6</sup> No doubt, this helps companies please their shareholders and ensure bonuses for executives, but the resulting financial stress on suppliers translates into downward pressure on wages and accelerated job losses.

Unfortunately, the flaws in the supply chain model that have rendered millions of workers vulnerable to income shocks, layoffs, and hunger are not unique to the unfolding Covid-19 crisis. In fact, brands and retailers were able to push the economic pain of the pandemic down the supply chain, onto the backs of suppliers and workers, because supply chains are currently regulated in ways that allow brands to limit their obligations to suppliers.<sup>7</sup> The severe power imbalance between buyers and suppliers allows brands and retailers to dictate how profits are made and distributed along the supply chain, concentrating value at the top and leaving an ever-smaller share available for workers' wages.

Due to chronically low wages across apparel brands' supply chains and weak social safety nets in the countries where they choose to produce their clothes, most garment workers entered the crisis with no margin of economic security. Wages in the industry—which range from \$25 a month (12 cents an hour) in Ethiopia and \$93 per month (50

cents an hour) in Bangladesh, to a few hundred dollars a month (\$1.00 to \$1.50 an hour) in higher wage countries like El Salvador and Indonesia—do not generate sufficient take-home pay for most workers to accumulate any savings. Indeed, chronic indebtedness is commonplace among garment workers. Meanwhile, most apparel exporting countries lack unemployment insurance and other social protections for workers who lose jobs or face reduced hours, and the protections that do exist, such as mandatory severance pay, are often poorly enforced. The absence of savings and of a government safety net, means that when garment workers suffer a sudden loss of income—as millions are, across the global supply chain—deprivation is a swift, oftentimes immediate, consequence. While several garment companies have committed to living wages for workers in their supply chains, a recent study found that implementation is virtually nil.<sup>8</sup>

To assess the impact of the crisis, and of apparel brands' role, on garment workers and their families, the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) carried out a multi-country gar-

**“When we [buy] food for one week, it needs to last for two weeks.”**

– Burmese worker employed at a factory that produces for Kiabi and Next

<sup>6</sup> Mark Anner and Worker Rights Consortium, *Leveraging Desperation: Apparel Brands' Purchasing Practices during Covid-19*, PennState Center for Global Workers' Rights, October 16, 2020, <https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Leveraging-Desperation.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Genevieve LeBaron, *Combating Modern Slavery: Why Labour Governance is Failing and What We Can Do About It*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2020); William Milberg and Deborah Winkler, *Outsourcing Economics: Global Value Chains in Capitalist Development*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Leonard Seabrooke and Duncan Wigan, "The Governance of Global Wealth Chains," *Review of International Political Economy*, 24, no. 1, (January 4, 2017): 1-29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2016.1268189>; Benjamin Selwyn, "Poverty Chains and Global Capitalism," *Competition & Change*, 23, no. 1, (February 1, 2019): 71-97, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1024529418809067>; A. Claire Cutler and David Lark, "The Hidden Costs of Law in the Governance of Global Supply Chains: The Turn to Arbitration," *Review of International Political Economy*, (September 16, 2020): <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2020.1821748>.

<sup>8</sup> Remi Edwards, Tom Hunt, and Genevieve LeBaron, *Corporate Commitments to Living Wages in the Garment Industry*, Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute at University of Sheffield, May 2019, <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Corporate-Commitments-to-Living-Wages-in-the-Garment-Industry-SPERI-report.pdf>.

**A Bangladeshi garment worker, who reports  
being terminated from her job at a factory that  
produces for Kmart, Target and Walmart,  
said that she and her family have been skipping  
breakfast every day for the past two months.**

ment worker survey focused on the critical issue of workers' food security,<sup>9</sup> which has been identified by previous research to be shrinking among low-wage workers amidst the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Interviews with nearly 400 garment workers, across nine countries, revealed that a shockingly high percentage of garment worker families had experienced hunger. Because our study found stable patterns across different types of brands,

who collectively shape the working conditions for vast swathes of the global garment supply chain, and because it included different types of garment producing countries, there are grounds for concern that growing hunger and food insecurity levels are emerging as an endemic pattern across the global garment supply chain. It is a crisis that most workers expect will grow worse in the months ahead.

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<sup>9</sup> Both international human rights conventions and the national constitutions of many of the major garment-exporting countries covered by this study establish the right to nutrition—in the form of a right to adequate food and food security—as a fundamental human right. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights has defined the right to food, under international conventions, as the “right to all nutritional elements that a person needs to live a healthy and active life, and to the means to access them.” See: United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, *The Right to Adequate Food*, Factsheet No. 34, April 2010, 2, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet34en.pdf>; see also, UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *General Comment No. 12: The Right to Adequate Food (Art. 11 of the Covenant)*, May 12, 1999, 3, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4538838c11.html>. This document states that the right to adequate food is realized when everyone “has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement” and is able to live and feed themselves in dignity.

<sup>10</sup> Recent research on food insecurity trends affecting low-wage workers globally, including research on garment workers in Bangladesh, that has emerged as a result of the pandemic cite loss of income and widening inequality due to layoffs and lockdowns as key drivers of food insecurity and declining nutrition levels. See: High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, *Impacts of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition: Developing Effective Policy Responses to Address the Hunger and Malnutrition Pandemic*, September 2020, <http://www.fao.org/3/cb1000en/cb1000en.pdf>; Food Fortification Initiative, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, Helen Keller International, Iodine Global Network, Nutrition International, the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement, UNICEF, and the World Food Programme, *COVID-19 Is Making It Harder for Vulnerable People to Access Healthy Food*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.gainhealth.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/covid-19-is-making-it-harder-for-vulnerable-people-to-access-healthy-food.pdf>; Atonu Rabbani, Sanchita Banerjee Saxena, and Md Faizul Islam, *The Impacts of Covid-19 on the Lives of Workers in the Garment Industry in the Bangladesh Garment Industry*, BRAC University's Centre for Entrepreneurship Development, September 2020, [https://chowdhurycenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/shared/docs/CC-BRAC\\_Covid.pdf](https://chowdhurycenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/shared/docs/CC-BRAC_Covid.pdf).

## METHODOLOGY

This research report presents the findings of a multi-country survey of garment workers focused on how their food security—and linked dynamics of employment status and income—had deteriorated amidst the pandemic. The WRC carried out a survey of 396 garment workers, from 158 factories, across nine countries (see Table 1). The WRC recruited interview participants and administered the survey during August and September of 2020. Professor Genevieve LeBaron advised the WRC on research design and methodology.

In the selection of countries, we sought to achieve diversity with respect to garment industry size and supply chain characteristics, levels of national government social support, and demographic composition of the garment workforce. While we could have included additional countries, our decision to limit the sample to these nine countries was guided by public health considerations. Namely, we selected countries where the WRC had a local presence, so that international travel was not required. As described below, we sought to include as many factories as possible in our sample to ensure breadth across different types of worksites and employers.

We recruited survey respondents through a snowball sampling technique. Experienced WRC in-country staff began conducting the survey with garment workers from their existing contact lists. Initial respondents were asked to recommend additional survey participants among their coworkers and acquaintances who,

in turn, continued to refer additional survey respondents. In each country, surveys were conducted in the workers' first language. All were done by phone, in order to minimize travel and respect pandemic-related public health and safety guidelines. Geo-referenced data were collected using KoBo Toolbox, an

open-source tool for mobile data collection launched by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative in collaboration with the United Nations.

Our research was comprised of two phases. We first deployed a pilot survey in order to test our survey questionnaire with a smaller number of respondents. The pilot survey was undertaken between August 15 and 19, 2020. After analyzing the results from our pilot survey, we worked with the WRC's in-country staff to refine the questionnaire. We then launched the second phase of our research, which consisted of a larger-scale survey conducted between August 30 and September 24, 2020.<sup>11</sup>

Country	Number of garment workers interviewed
Bangladesh	25
Cambodia	30
El Salvador	31
Ethiopia	38
Haiti	25
India	37
Indonesia	98
Lesotho	55
Myanmar	57
<b>Total</b>	<b>396</b>

**Table 1. Sample Breakdown by Country**

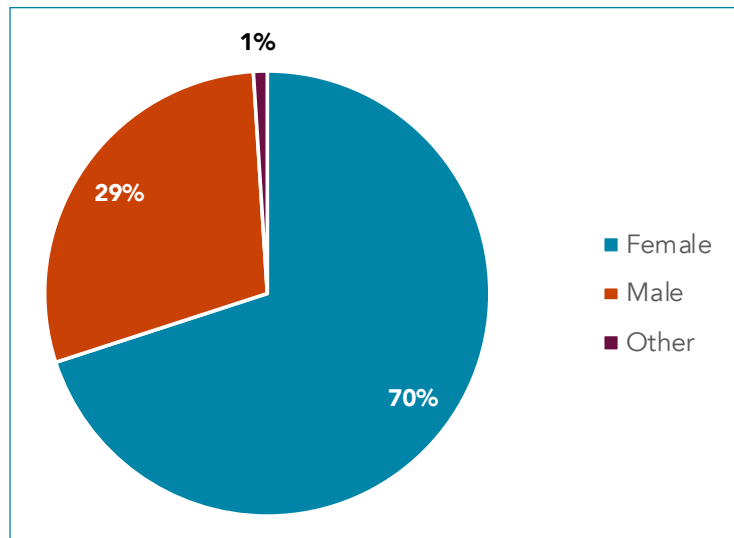
<sup>11</sup> There are some minor differences between our pilot survey and larger-scale survey questionnaire and data, since we adapted our questionnaire to better capture information that surfaced as important during the first round of interviews. We have added footnotes throughout the report to indicate where the data presented include only the 385 respondents in the larger-scale survey and not the 11 respondents from our pilot.

## SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

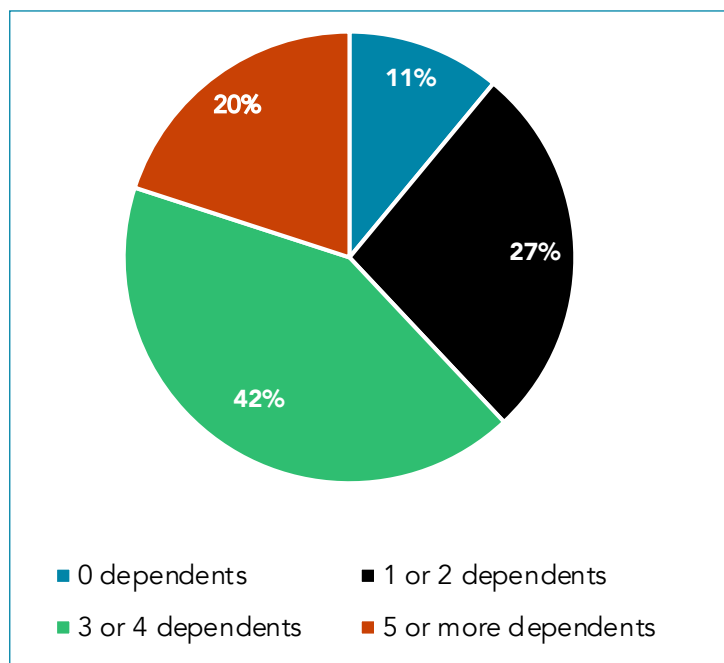
Our sample of 396 respondents consisted of 278 women garment workers (70 percent of the total) and 115 men garment workers (29 percent) (see Figure 1).<sup>12</sup> This gender ratio is consistent with the demographics of the global garment workforce, in which women represent a substantial majority.

Survey respondents aged 18–25 comprised 27 percent of our sample, those aged 26–35 comprised 35 percent, those aged 36–45 comprised 26 percent, and those over 45 comprised 11 percent. As with gender, the age breakdown of the sample is consistent with broader industry demographics.

We asked the workers in our sample how many people depend on them financially (not including themselves). Eleven percent reported no dependents, 27 percent reported one or two dependents, 42 percent reported three or four dependents, and 20 percent reported five or more dependents (see Figure 2). In response to a question specifically about minor dependents, 68 percent of the survey respondents stated that they have children who depend on them financially.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 1. Sample Breakdown by Gender**



**Figure 2. Sample Breakdown by Financial Dependents**

<sup>12</sup> The remaining workers in our sample (1%) did not provide information regarding their gender identity.

<sup>13</sup> These figures do not include data from our pilot study, since we added a specific question about children who depend on workers financially to the second phase of research.

## APPAREL COMPANIES REPRESENTED IN SAMPLE

We asked workers to identify any apparel brands whose clothing they had recently sewn (garment factories typically produce for a substantial number of different brands, so it is common for workers to sew the clothes of multiple brands over a period of months). In total, workers reported making clothes for more than 100 different brands. The word cloud (see Figure 3) represents the frequency with which each

brand was identified by the survey respondents. This provided an indication of which brands' supply chains employ the workers who participated in the survey, as well as the frequency with which they were mentioned.<sup>14</sup> The brands and retailers that were reported by workers in our sample with the most frequency were: adidas, Gap, H&M, Nike, The Children's Place, PVH, Gildan, Walmart, JCPenney, and Express.



Figure 3. Apparel Companies Represented in Sample

<sup>14</sup> Where one company owns two or more brands identified by workers, all mentions of that company's various labels are grouped under its corporate name.

## FINDINGS

Our data revealed alarming patterns: for most garment workers surveyed, lost income translated into an inability to access adequate food for themselves and their families. Hunger is becoming an acute and growing problem for workers employed within, and recently laid off from, garment supply chains. In this section, we present an overview of these findings.

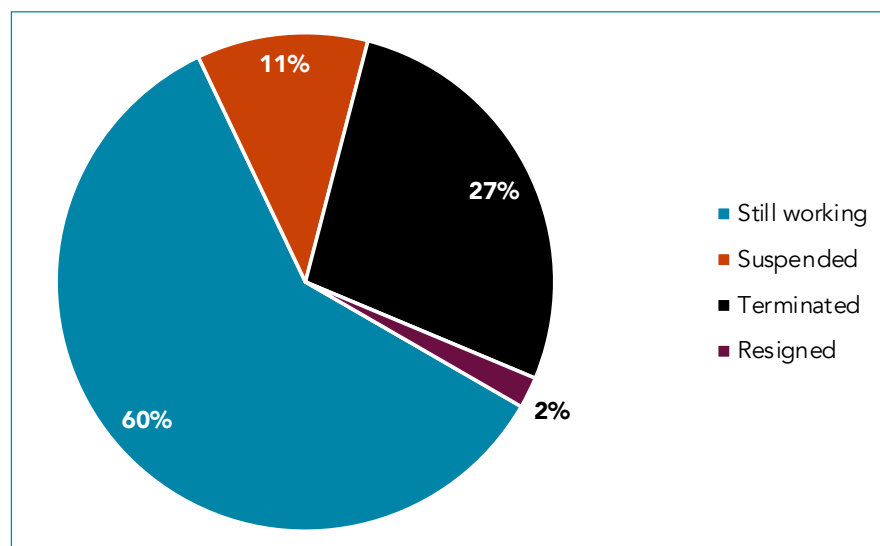
### EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND INCOME

We asked workers whether and how their employment status and income had changed during the pandemic. All workers in the sample were working in garment factories at the outset of the crisis. Thirty-eight percent reported that they were no longer working, as a result either of temporary suspension of employment (11 percent) or permanent dismissal (27 percent). An additional 2 percent of workers had resigned their employment. The remainder of the sample, 60 percent, re-

ported that their employment status had not changed (see Figure 4).<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that in most, though not all, garment exporting countries, workers who are temporarily suspended are entitled to some portion of their normal pay, usually paid by the employer. The rate of compensation varies across countries and enforcement is often weak. Among the 11 percent of workers in the sample who were on temporary suspension, three in ten reported that they had received no pay during the suspension period. The remainder reported receiving varying percentages of their pre-pandemic income.

In the case of workers who reported that they had been terminated by their employers (27 percent of our sample), we asked whether they received severance pay from their employer (a legally required benefit in virtually all apparel exporting countries).



**Figure 4. Current Employment Status of Surveyed Workers**

<sup>15</sup> These percentages exclude data from one of the survey respondents, who did not provide information related to changes in their employment status.

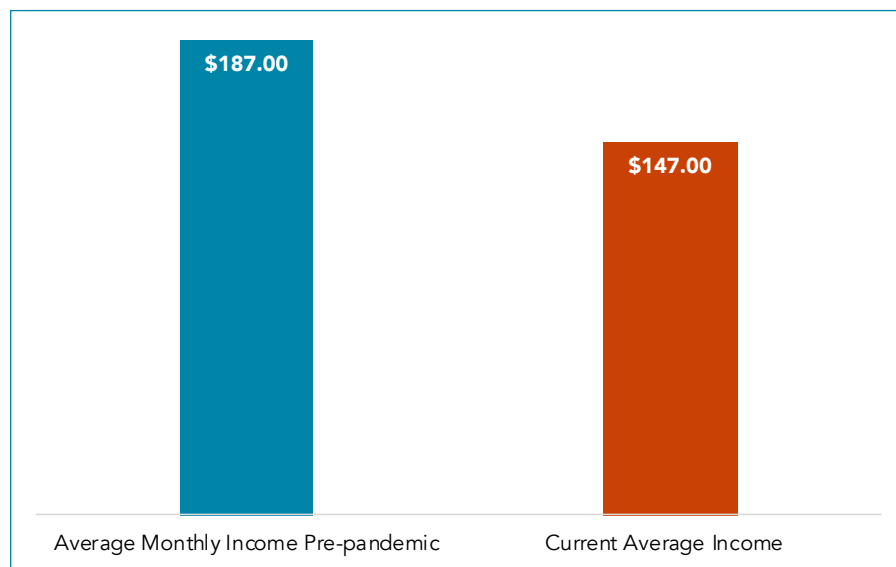


**“Potato is the only vegetable we can afford now; this is the cheapest to buy.”**

– Bangladeshi worker employed at a factory producing for Orsay

Seventy percent of respondents say they did not receive their full legally mandated terminal pay, with 30 percent reporting partial payment and 40 percent saying they received none of the money they were legally owed. Only 24 percent of the terminated workers reported receiving the full mandated amount.<sup>16</sup> Virtually all brands maintain labor rights codes of conduct that require payment of legally mandated benefits and commit the brand to enforce this through factory monitoring. The nonpayment of severance that workers reported represents a failure by brands to enforce their own standards, with severe consequences for affected workers and their families.

Importantly, in addition to loss of income during temporary factory closures and due to unemployment, the survey results showed that income had dropped substantially for the population of workers *still employed*—as a result of reduced hours and/or rates of pay. Survey respondents reported average *pre-pandemic* take-home pay of \$185 per month. Among the subset of respondents that are still employed, pre-pandemic average pay was slightly higher: \$187 per month. Current pay for this group of workers had dropped during the pandemic to an average of \$147 per month. These workers lost an average of 21 percent of their income, despite keeping their jobs (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Decrease in Average Monthly Income among Workers Still Employed (USD)**

<sup>16</sup> The failure of apparel factories to pay workers their legally owed severance benefits upon termination is a pervasive problem in apparel brands' supply chains that long predates Covid-19. Severance is a vital resource for workers who lose their jobs, given that most countries provide no or limited unemployment benefits. The incidence of nonpayment of severance will likely be elevated under the present conditions of crisis, as these survey results indicate. Nonpayment is especially damaging to workers in current circumstances, because, with many factories closing or reducing their workforce, near-term prospects for re-employment are thin.

## HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY

Most workers in the survey sample reported that the changes in income and employment described above had negatively impacted their families' food security, food quality, and access to nutritious food.

Importantly, workers experienced growing hunger *despite* the fact that over 50 percent had received public assistance and 75 percent had borrowed money to buy food.

Overall, 88 percent of surveyed workers reported that diminished income had forced a reduction in the amount of food consumed per day by members of their household. Seventy-seven percent of workers in our sample reported that they or a member of their household had gone hungry since the beginning of the pandemic. The frequency with which workers and members of their households were going hungry varies: 20 percent of the workers in our sample had experienced hunger on a daily basis since the beginning of the pandemic, 34 percent experienced hunger at least once a week, and the remainder less frequently.

Sixty-seven percent of all garment workers surveyed reported that they or members of their household had been forced to skip meals during the pandemic or reduce

**80%** of workers  
with children reported  
skipping meals or reducing  
their own food intake in  
order to feed their families.

the quality of meals. Twenty-two percent of workers said that they resorted to this practice on a daily basis, while 31 percent indicated that they were skipping meals or sacrificing meal quality more than once a week, with the remainder reporting less frequently missed meals.

Among the workers in the sample with dependent children, 80 percent reported that they were forced to skip meals themselves or reduce the amount or quality of food they ate, in order to feed their children.

These figures capture workers across all three employment statuses (unemployed, temporarily suspended, and still employed). In other words, even most workers who remain employed reported the need to decrease the amount of food and/or the number of times they eat per day due to reductions in income.

In addition to reducing the amount of food and frequency of eating, many garment workers surveyed also reported reductions in the *variety* of foods they eat. Sixty-six percent of workers reported that they must forgo foods that they were able to purchase for themselves and their families before the pandemic. Most commonly, workers reported having to remove meat from their food basket, but many also reported foregoing

**75%** of workers  
reported that they have  
accumulated debt in order  
to buy food since the start  
of the pandemic.

## One worker from Indonesia who sews clothes for Nike said she was forced to choose between going hungry and going deeper into debt.

other staples, including certain vegetables and grains.

Seventy-five percent of workers surveyed reported that they had borrowed money or accumulated debt in order to buy food since the beginning of the pandemic. Of these, 43 percent are currently working at the same factory that employed them before the pandemic. Most workers who had borrowed money to purchase food reported being unable to pay back the debts accrued. Many workers now face high levels of interest with little prospect of earning enough to repay loans, a worry-

ing dynamic in light of the well-documented links between debt, high-interest rates, and vulnerability to severe forms of labor exploitation.<sup>17</sup>

When we asked the workers in our sample whether they anticipate that they will need to reduce the amount of food they eat or purchase for their family if the situation does not improve, 80 percent responded affirmatively. This figure is sobering. It means that workers, most of whom had *already* experienced various forms of hunger, expect their families' food insecurity not to abate, but to deepen, if current trends are not altered.

**80%** of workers  
anticipate they will need  
to further reduce their  
food intake if the situation  
does not improve.

<sup>17</sup> See: Genevieve LeBaron, *The Global Business of Forced Labour: Report of Findings*, Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute at University of Sheffield, 2018, <http://globalbusinessofforcedlabour.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Report-of-Findings-Global-Business-of-Forced-Labour.pdf>.

## CONCLUSION

Leading apparel firms continue to turn sizable profits. Even amidst the pandemic, they are expected to take in more than a trillion dollars in revenue globally.<sup>18</sup> They have access to substantial bailout funds and corporate aid packages from their home governments, as well as credit. A number of leading apparel corporations are privately held by individuals or families that are among the planet's most prominent multibillionaires.<sup>19</sup> Yet, it is not an exaggeration to say that the workers producing the clothing they sell are being left to starve during the pandemic.

The survey results outlined in this report revealed a wave of hunger sweeping across garment supply chains led by apparel brands and retailers. The volume of apparel production, and therefore the demand for apparel workers' labor, is expected to continue to lag in the coming months. Apparel companies are reportedly using suppliers' desperation for orders as leverage to squeeze them on prices and payment terms.<sup>20</sup> Unless interventions are made, the wave of garment worker hunger and malnutrition will only grow, with life-long impacts on their health and employment prospects.

We recommend that apparel companies, and the governments of the countries in which they are headquartered, immediately take stock of how companies' responses to the pandemic are impacting suppliers and workers. Both governments

and companies should take immediate action to address the dynamics leading to hunger and reduced nutrition. Their short-term action should center around:

- Ensuring that workers' income is sustained through the crisis through cash support, as unions and labor rights advocates around the world are calling on them to do;<sup>21</sup>
- Paying suppliers in full for any orders they placed before the crisis that remain unpaid, since retroactive cancellations of goods already in production have left the supply chain actors who can least afford to bear the costs of the pandemic (suppliers and workers) to do so;
- Making an enforceable commitment to pay a price premium on apparel orders

**A garment worker  
from Myanmar reported  
that she is planning to  
eat rice soup for all meals  
in order to be able to  
afford her rent.**

<sup>18</sup> In February 2019, Common Objective reported that the value of the total fashion retail market, including footwear but excluding jewelry, is \$1.78 trillion, a jump of 14% since the previous year. Apparel alone had a global retail value of \$1.4 trillion. See: "The Size of the Global Fashion Retail Market," Common Objective, February 2019, <https://www.commonobjective.co/article/the-size-of-the-global-fashion-retail-market>. Statista reported that global retail sales of apparel and footwear reached \$1.9 trillion in 2019. See: "U.S. Apparel Market - Statistics & Facts," Statista, September 2, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/topics/965/apparel-market-in-the-us/>. Based on the Office of Textiles and Apparel and Eurostats apparel imports data, we anticipate the apparel industry market size will remain over \$1 trillion in 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Notable examples include: Inditex (co-founder and majority owner Amancio Ortega is number 6 on Forbes's Billionaires 2020 list), Bestseller (sole owner Anders Holch Povlsen's net worth is \$11 billion), C&A (run by the Brenninkmeijers—the richest family in the Netherlands), and Arcadia Group (owned by Philip and Cristina Green).

<sup>20</sup> Anner and Worker Rights Consortium, *Leveraging Desperation*.

<sup>21</sup> "COVID-19 wage assurance," Clean Clothes Campaign, accessed October 26, 2020, <https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/pay-your-workers/covid-19-wage-assurance>.

## “We could not take a single piece of chicken for the last two months.”

– Bangladeshi worker who makes clothes for C&A, H&M and Zara

to establish a global severance guarantee fund and broaden social protections for garment workers, per a proposal advocated by a broad coalition of unions and nongovernmental organizations;<sup>22</sup> and

- Ending irresponsible sourcing practices, such as using suppliers’ increasing desperation for orders to extract major price concessions and impose increasingly onerous payment terms.

Some brands<sup>23</sup> have cited their participation in a garment sector initiative known as the “Call to Action”<sup>24</sup> as evidence of their commitment to help workers during the crisis. This initiative, which includes labor union participation, has generated modest sums of public money to assist workers in several exporting countries. However, the amounts involved represent a small fraction of what will be needed to sustain garment workers’ incomes through the crisis, and little money has been distributed to workers.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the participating brands have made no commitment to any specific level of financial support. A recently announced “Memorandum of Understanding,”<sup>26</sup> involving a number of US apparel brands and retailers, lacks even

the limited promise of the “Call to Action”; it is vaguely worded, involves no participation from worker organizations, is focused on only four countries, and, like the “Call to Action”, is nonbinding.

In addition to meeting urgent short-term needs, systemic change is required to address the inequities of power and wealth within supply chains and the business models that have led to these outcomes, including: the chronic failure of brands to ensure living wages for supply chain workers; uneven value distribution along supply chains; and irresponsible sourcing practices, including the practice of sourcing goods below the costs of production and paying suppliers so little that they cannot afford to adhere to labor laws and standards.

Decades of dangerously low wages, anchored in business models dictated by prevailing dynamics of value distribution and sourcing practices in supply chains, have left garment workers exceedingly vulnerable to the pandemic’s economic shocks. Addressing these will require targeted action from policymakers, investors, and apparel companies in close collaboration with unions, workers, and their advocates. ■■

<sup>22</sup> “COVID-19 wage assurance,” Clean Clothes Campaign.

<sup>23</sup> “C&A Backs Action Plan to Support Garment Workers,” C&A, April 23, 2020, <https://www.c-and-a.com/uk/en/corporate/company/newsroom/press-releases/2020/ca-backs-action-plan-to-support-garment-workers/>; “How Under Armour Is Working through Covid-19,” Under Armour, last modified July 15, 2020, <https://about.underarmour.com/news/2020/03/under-armour-coronavirus-responses-and-actions>.

<sup>24</sup> “COVID-19: Action in the Global Garment Industry,” International Labour Organization, accessed November 19, 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/sectoral/WCMS\\_742343/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/sectoral/WCMS_742343/lang-en/index.htm).

<sup>25</sup> “Call to Action Progresses at the National Level (October 2020),” International Labour Organization, October 21, 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/global/docs/WCMS\\_758610/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/docs/WCMS_758610/lang-en/index.htm).

<sup>26</sup> “USAID and U.S. Retail, Apparel, and Footwear Companies Announce Memorandum of Understanding to Help Hard-Hit Supply-Chain Workers in Asia,” US Embassy in Bangladesh, October 28, 2020, <https://bd.usembassy.gov/usaaid-and-u-s-retail-apparel-and-footwear-companies-announce-memorandum-of-understanding-to-help-hard-hit-supply-chain-workers-in-asia/>.



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