

March 23, 2020

AFWA Statement on Garment Workers' Demands in the face of COVID-19 Crisis

As the economic, human and labour rights impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic become global and pervasive, we are seeing garment workers in global supply chains getting exposed to greater and more profound risks, bearing the brunt of this crisis.

Apparel brands are seen cancelling or postponing orders and deferring payments to suppliers as the pandemic is turning into an economic and labour market shock. This has forced many suppliers to lay off or suspend workers in garment factories, without any social protection, or paid leave, pushing an already precarious group of workers to greater economic vulnerabilities. Equally disturbing are reports from some countries that workers are still forced to continue work in factories where employers are unwilling to ensure adequate precautions, leaving workers, their families and communities at risk of infection.

While international organisations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have called on member states to initiate institutional and policy reforms that strengthen demand-led recovery and build resilience through universal social protection systems, the efforts made across garment-producing states in Asia have been varied.

I. Responses of Global Supply Chain Production Countries to COVID-19 Crisis

Three trends can be identified with respect to the degree of institutional response on COVID-19 in the garment-producing countries in Asia.

1. Governments are taking stringent measures to reduce the direct health effects of Covid-19 while also providing economic support for workers.

For example, in Sri Lanka, factories in some regions, under government directives, have shut down, with workers entitled to paid leave. Factories that are still operational have to follow adequate health and safety measures due to stringent directives from the Sri Lankan government.

In India, till last week most factories continued to work without taking adequate steps to prevent occupational exposure to COVID-19. However, from today onwards, factories across most states in India have closed down till March 31st under strict directives from state governments. Additionally, the Indian government has also issued an order stating that workers must not be terminated nor face a reduction of wages due to this crisis. The order, most importantly also states that workers are entitled to fully paid leave till this crisis is mitigated.

2. Governments are issuing voluntary codes of conduct to factories to mitigate direct health effects while also promising some economic support for workers.

For example, in Cambodia and Myanmar, the shortage of raw materials from China has forced many factories to halt production, with thousands of workers suspended. In Cambodia, the government has issued guidelines for workplace health and safety to prevent the spread of

COVID-19. Also, factories that have suspended operations must pay 40 percent of the minimum wages to workers. An additional 20 percent of the wages will be provided by the Cambodian government for workers who have enrolled in soft skills training programs organized by the Cambodian Ministry of Labour.

In Myanmar, many workers who have been laid off have not been compensated, and the Myanmar Investment Commission (MIC) has announced that factories that refuse to pay workers' salaries will be banned from continuing operations.

3. Governments are issuing voluntary guidelines for factories to mitigate direct health effects of COVID-19 and ensuring no economic and employment policies to protect workers.

For example, in Indonesia, the government has only issued health and safety guidelines for factories that continue to operate and some factories seem to be adhering to these precautionary measures.

In general, the efforts to mitigate the income losses and reduced economic activity due to COVID-19, which is also an important incentive to disclose potential infections, has been limited across garment-producing countries in Asia.

II. Garment Workers' Charter of Demands

There needs to be concrete steps from governments, brands and suppliers to address these large income losses for the 60 million⁽¹⁾ garment workers. Without this, there is a severe risk of a vicious downward cycle of demand shocks, which could lead to a prolonged economic recession. In other words, the inability to provide employment and income support to garment workers affected by the COVID-19 crisis can not only worsen inequality and working poverty, but can translate into a significant reduction in consumption of goods and services, which will be detrimental to a speedy and equitable revival of the global economy.

Further due to downgrading of the public health system and reduction of public investment under the impact of austerity measures, most countries are facing public health crises. It is imperative that this is reversed immediately. Governments should impose policy directives, allocate public resources, and advance political will to rapidly expand the public health system as an emergency measure to address the coronavirus fallout.

(1) Demands to Governments

Governments in garment-producing countries should undertake the following measures to overcome the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 on workers:

- a) Ensure strict and compulsory implementation of measures to protect workers in the workplace from the direct health effects of COVID-19, as per WHO recommendations and guidance
- b) Provide universal healthcare access to both workers and their families, and in particular set up coronavirus testing facility and temporary hospitals in all industrial zones to address this situation

c) Implement active fiscal policies, in particular social protection measures like unemployment benefits, social assistance, and public employment programmes, for all categories of workers (including informal, casual, seasonal, migrant and home-based workers) who have been negatively impacted by the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19

(2) Demands to Brands and Suppliers

To the apparel brands and their suppliers who have been profiting from the labour of garment workers, we demand that the following steps be taken so that workers do not carry the industry's financial burden during this crisis:

a) Occupational Safety and Health of Workers

In order to mitigate the direct health effects of the COVID-19, suppliers, under the strict monitoring of brands, must ensure proper implementation of WHO recommendations and guidelines to prevent workplace exposures to COVID-19. These measures include, but are not limited to:

- Actively encouraging sick employees to remain at home and providing paid leave for any employee who has COVID-19 symptoms. Paid leave must be made available even if workers with COVID-19 symptoms are not able to procure a medical certificate for the same, as healthcare providers and medical facilities may be extremely busy and may not be able to provide such documentation in a timely way.
- Placing posters that encourage staying home when sick, cough and sneeze etiquette, and hand hygiene at the entrance to factories and in other workplace areas where they are likely to be seen by workers.
- Implementing temperature screening of all staff in factories.
- Providing adequate number of basins with soap, water and alcohol-based hand rubs in the workplace and ensuring that their adequate supplies are maintained. Instructing employees to clean their hands often with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60-95% alcohol, or wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Routinely cleaning all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace.
- Ensuring that workers who conduct cleaning tasks are protected from exposure to blood, body fluids, and other potentially infectious materials and from hazardous chemicals used in these tasks.

b) Supporting Workers Employment and Income

- Brands with their suppliers should ensure that no worker suffers any financial detriment through any reduction or loss of work, regardless of contract type or length of service, resulting from COVID-19, be it due to self-isolation, advised or voluntary or business closure or downturn.
- Brands must create a COVID-19 Workers' Fund to financially support workers during the outbreak. This will include paying workers in the supply chain who need to self-isolate for up to two weeks or have to take leave to care for sick relatives by maintaining their pay during this period and to financially support workers in high risk groups who need to isolate for longer periods.

- Brands and suppliers should consult unions and workers in advance of any proposed changes, including closures, reduction in workloads, or layoffs as a consequence of COVID-19.
- Suppliers must carry risk assessments with the involvement of unions and workers to determine what activities can be reduced, delayed or ceased entirely in factories in order to minimise the risk of contraction of COVID-19. This process must be monitored by brands.
- Brands and suppliers have to ensure that any worker who raises concerns about COVID-19 or refuses to undertake certain duties or outrightly refuses to work for risk of either contracting or transmitting COVID-19 will suffer no detriment or dismissal

We demand governments, brands and suppliers show solidarity and responsibility in these difficult times by implementing all the above-mentioned steps to mitigate the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on workers. Only through these pro-active and large-scale measures will we be able to overcome the far-reaching impacts of this pandemic.

In solidarity,

--The AFWA Team