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ReFashion



Building Forward Worse

How COVID-19 has accelerated the race to the bottom in the global garment industry

Research findings report

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Royal Holloway, University of London and University of
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Foreword

Let's just get on with it, shall we?

Build Back Better' – the uplifting phrase was seen and quoted in multiple contexts and different locations a couple of years ago when the impact of COVID-19 was beginning to be recognised, and spirits were low.

Great aspiration, poor implementation. Very poor. In fact, even worse than that because the ambition behind the phrase simply wasn't then, and isn't now demonstrated at the highest levels of government and policy-makers, and the majority of businesses.

What the people at the centre of this report are experiencing isn't even a case of returning to 'normal', pre-pandemic levels of exploitation: some of the worst aspects of working in garment production have been both exacerbated and accelerated since the global pandemic.

So yes, COVID-19 is a damaging virus: it continues to reproduce itself, and to adapt to circumstances efficiently and with huge impact. But the virus didn't set lower wage levels; it didn't determine that the hundreds of thousands of women and men working in the fashion industry in Cambodia – or in any industry, anywhere else – should be trapped in poverty, and establish a cycle of inadequate educational opportunities that will have a negative impact for generations to come. And there's no validity either, in blaming this strangely shape-shifting concept of 'the market'.

As 80% of the workers in these factories are women, the ripples spread far and wide because they are the bedrock of their struggling families and communities. We're aware that in this sector, generally speaking women workers' incomes and working conditions have deteriorated significantly over the past two years, and other indicators – such as personal and family health, childcare and education responsibilities, caring for the vulnerable, etc – also demonstrate a worsening of their predicament.

Their sense of responsibility for future generations is acute and their concern a striking common feature of the compelling testimonies from the women involved in the study.

There is talk now of proposed EU legislation that will surpass the demands made on businesses of Section 54, Transparency in Supply Chains in our Modern Slavery Act 2015 (MSA TISC). Already some major players in the

business world have signed a letter, asking the government to support mandatory Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (mHREDD), alongside the EU. Many British businesses will have to comply in any case, if they want to continue to trade with the EU.

With mHREDD as with any new legislation concerning businesses, corporates and politicians complain about overly zealous, and unnecessary state interventions; 'anti-growth' NGOs, trade unions and campaigners; the 'burden' of regulation on companies on which our society depends for economic growth; etc, etc. These lobbyists stress that business is better off with self-regulation, and in any case it's all about the market, that's what determines prices, etc. Then there's the 'it's up to our customers to make us change' position.

When I hear these arguments put forward, my first thought is: Shame on them. Someone will have to explain to me how those kind of responses are anything other than a complete abdication of any responsibility, and contempt for the people affected.

The bald fact of the matter is that those who can least afford it are continuing to be punished financially by those seeking to regain lost profits; whole communities are bearing the brunt of these practices. We know that many of them, whether close to or distant from the garment factory, are dependent on those working there. If their money goes, then everyone connected suffers.

It's the decision-makers in companies that have wreaked this havoc, and they must embrace accountability, take responsibility for this intolerable situation, and where appropriate, remediate the communities concerned.

That we should even be discussing having to legislate for mandatory Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (mHREDD) represents a massive failure to acknowledge the rights and aspirations of all humans. Given the toxic practices of so many companies, the debate should not be about whether it's necessary or not, but what is needed to make it effective.

Baroness Lola Young



Executive summary

The plight of garment workers worldwide at the onset of the pandemic rallied commitments from industry stakeholders to “Build Back Better”. However, as we show in this report, the challenges faced by workers in Cambodia have deepened, as COVID-19’s own crises have intersected with and exacerbated existing social, economic, and health vulnerabilities.

Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe disruption throughout the global garment and footwear supply chain. From early 2020, manufacturing shutdowns and consumer lockdowns around the world led global brands and retailers to cancel orders with their suppliers, forcing frequent halts to production. The effects of this disruption were devastating for the workers who usually cut and stitch the world's supply of clothing and shoes, triggering global alerts of widespread unemployment, debt, hunger, desperation, and destitution¹. The plight of garment workers worldwide during these early phases of the pandemic was heralded as “a wake-up call”² for the fashion industry and rallied lofty commitments from stakeholders to “Build Back Better”³ in the wake of COVID-19, for equitable and resilient forms of Decent Work in sustainable global supply chains. In this report, we interrogate the progress made towards these commitments. More than two years into the pandemic, we find that these promises have yet to be realised. Instead, the challenges faced by workers have deepened, as COVID-19's own crises have intersected with and exacerbated routine social, economic, and health challenges faced by women working worldwide in garments and footwear production.

Drawing on original longitudinal research following 200 female garment workers over a period of 24 months from January 2020, we evidence these conclusions in the context of Cambodia, where the garment sector employs nearly 1 million people, 80% of whom are women. Tracing their efforts to navigate the financial repercussions of COVID-19 on home lives and livelihoods across different phases of the pandemic, we show how instead of building back better, the industry has built forward worse. We foreground two key findings:

Bearing the costs of the crisis at work

First, the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated an existing “race to the bottom” within the industry itself, as the behaviour of global brands has incentivised factory suppliers to leverage further marginal gains at the expense of women workers' economic security and resilience. This has exacerbated existing trends towards increased flexibilization and intensification of work as factory owners and managers seek to recoup lost profits by extracting higher output at lower cost, undermining existing employment conditions, rights, and protections. Work in the post-pandemic global garment industry is now more precarious, lower paid, and further pressured than before. As such, not only have women workers have overwhelmingly shouldered the costs of the COVID-19 crash but they are now being made to bear the burdens of economic recovery in the sector.

Wearing the costs of cutbacks at home

Second, the economic burdens of the COVID-19 crisis for garment workers have generated compounding, spillover impacts across women's home and family lives. As household assets and savings have been depleted amid declining incomes, women's coping strategies have included cutbacks in vital areas of family food and education budgets, compelling intergenerational transfer of disadvantage. The consequences of these compromises have manifest in overlapping physical and mental health crises, as women workers and their families wear the costs of these cutbacks in their day-to-day lives.



Summary findings

Supply chain reaction

Life in lockdown

A new normal



Overview

Order cancellations by global brands lead to widespread factory closures and unemployment.

Outbreaks of COVID-19 in the garment industry trigger a national lockdown followed by fluctuating public health restrictions.

A national vaccination campaign enables Cambodia to lift all public health restrictions as it to “learns to live with COVID-19”.



Work

By October 2020, 85% of the women in our study had been suspended from work on a temporary basis and 7% had had their contracts terminated by their employer.

With export factories subject to repeated closure, by May 2021, 10% of workers were employed in informal subcontracting facilities, working without legal rights, benefits or protections.

Working conditions deteriorate further as factories push to recoup pandemic losses through intensified production, leading to increased pressure and harassment of workers.



Money

Over first 10 months of the pandemic, the average worker lost 25% of their expected income and struggled to repay household loans worth an average \$4731 per worker.

Quarantine measures after factory cases were identified continued to disrupt work and earning, as testing and treatment regimes became feared more than the virus itself.

Annual minimum wage rises have been suppressed in the name of industrial recovery whilst inflation has soared to record highs, leaving workers to face a cost-of-living squeeze.



Support

An emergency wage subsidy scheme provided US\$70 per month to suspended workers but did not meet basic needs of workers and their families.

Formal support during lockdowns and periods of isolation was insufficient, leaving many workers to rely on the goodwill of colleagues and neighbours through mutual aid practices.

Trade union leaders were targeted for dismissal by employers, whilst public health legislation has been used to limit protest activity, constraining union capacity to protect workers' interests.



Health

To cope with income shortfalls, workers cut basic food expenditure by an average of 38% leading to food insecurity, with 20% of households experiencing episodes of hunger.

Upgraded to an “essential workforce”, many workers worried factory protections were inadequate to halt transmission and, as such, better-off workers quit to avoid infection risk.

Anxiety and depression emerged as an epidemic within the pandemic, as financial pressures triggered acute and chronic episodes of mental health problems among female workers.



Family

Workers' rural families, dependent on remitted earnings to meet basic needs and subsidise social protection, suffered a 32% drop in remittance receipts.

Lockdown isolated workers from rural families, often including their young children, and the loss of support networks combined with financial pressures led to increased intra-family violence.

The education of workers' children was disrupted by extended school closures in combination with financial pressures on households, leading to entrenched intergenerational disadvantage.

Lessons learned to Build Forward Better

1

International governments must hold businesses to account for how they treat suppliers and workers in their global supply chains

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across the global garment and footwear industry have underscored the limitations of voluntary governance regimes for global supply chains. Despite decades of corporate social responsibility promises in the fashion industry, clothing brands and retailers opted instinctively during the crisis to protect their own profits over the people in their supply chains. Yet suppliers and workers lacked capacity and confidence to challenge their egregious and often unlawful breaches of contract. Mandatory regulation and legislation is therefore needed from international governments to ensure oversight of supply chains and enable suppliers and workers to hold brands and retailers to account

2

Global brands and retailers must revise purchasing practices to ensure proper social and environmental sustainability

The potential for improvement to employment and working conditions for workers in the global garment and footwear industry is limited by unfair purchasing practices of global brands and retailers, who routinely demand faster production schedules, aggressive price discounting, and extended payment terms. Global brands and retailers must therefore uphold their own existing commitments to social and environmental sustainability by reforming their practices and, in doing so, creating an enabling environment for transformative change to workplace rights and benefits. This should include fair order timelines and payment terms, as well as responsible pricing models.

3

The Cambodian government and local stakeholders must cooperate to promote standards of Decent Work in the Cambodian garment industry

Low pay, limited protections, and poor workplace conditions are problems which predate the COVID-19 crisis in Cambodia's garment industry and have compounded its impacts by undermining workers' ability to build longer-term pathways to economic security and resilience. The Cambodian government and local stakeholders must uphold standards of Decent Work to guarantee workers a fair share in the benefits of industrial activity, by ensuring a living wage, income security and health insurance coverage in unemployment and old age, as well as rights to freedom for association for all workers, including those in non-export/subcontracting factories.



Accelerating the “race to the bottom”

Although the pandemic is an exceptional event, its catastrophic impacts on garment workers worldwide are rooted in exemplary rather than extraordinary circumstance: the consequences of an international system of clothing production rooted in the exploitation of “disposable women” in the global South.

Accelerating the ‘race to the bottom’

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe disruption throughout the global garment and footwear supply chain. Manufacturing shutdowns and consumer lockdowns around the world led global brands and retailers to cancel orders with their suppliers, forcing frequent halts to production. Eschewing decades of corporate social responsibility promises, these brands and retailers acted decisively to protect profits over the people in their supply chain, passing the costs and risks of the crisis on to the most vulnerable segment of the supply chain: their already highly precarious and largely female workforce.

The effects of this disruption have been predictably devastating for the workers who usually cut and stitch the world’s supply of clothing and shoes. In Cambodia, the garment sector employs nearly 1 million people, 80% of whom are women. By May 2020, already up to a third had been laid off or suspended from factories. Despite collaborative efforts to improve the quality of work in the garment sector, little formal support existed to help these women workers and their families cope through any short- or longer-term period of unemployment. Securing income and sustaining livelihoods became an urgent challenge for many.

The plight of garment workers worldwide during these early phases of the pandemic⁴ rallied commitments from industry stakeholders to “Build Back Better”, for equitable and resilient forms of Decent Work in sustainable global supply chains in the wake of COVID-19. Now more than two years into the pandemic, however, these promises have yet to be realised. Instead, as we show in this report, the challenges faced by workers in Cambodia have deepened, as COVID-19’s own crises have intersected with and exacerbated existing social, economic, and health vulnerabilities.

Throughout the pandemic, our international team of UK and Cambodian researchers has led original, longitudinal research, documenting the experiences of over 200 women garment workers in Cambodia, from January 2020 to December 2021. Here, we present lessons learned from workers and their efforts to navigate the financial repercussions of COVID-19 on home lives and livelihoods across different phases of the pandemic: from the immediate economic crunch; to the late unfolding of Cambodia's health emergency; and uncertain emergence into the "new normal" of the post-pandemic world.

Drawing on this rich and unique data, captured through repeat interviews with workers over 24 months, we show how instead of building back better, the industry has built forward worse. In a tightly competitive global marketplace where suppliers operate on already razor thin profit margins, the behaviour of global brands has incentivised factory suppliers to leverage marginal gains at the expense of women workers' economic security and resilience, as well as their physical and emotional wellbeing, accelerating an ongoing "the race to bottom" in global garments production.

"Brands are causing the problem really. And it's not just about how they've acted since the crisis happened, it's about everything that came before that as well. You can't profit off a business model that pushes risk down the supply chain for decades and then complain when people criticise you for it when a crisis hits."

International Non-Profit Organisation, January 2021



Above: Still from ReFashion film, *The Haul* (2022).

Chronicle of a crisis foretold

Although the pandemic is an exceptional event, its catastrophic impacts on garment workers worldwide are rooted in exemplary rather than extraordinary circumstance: the consequences of an international system of clothing production rooted in the exploitation of “disposable women”⁵ in the global South. Whilst the emergence and spread of a novel coronavirus pathogen itself was largely unpredictable, observers have long warned that garment workers are highly vulnerable to global economic shocks. If the pandemic was not foreseen, the impacts of its fallout were.

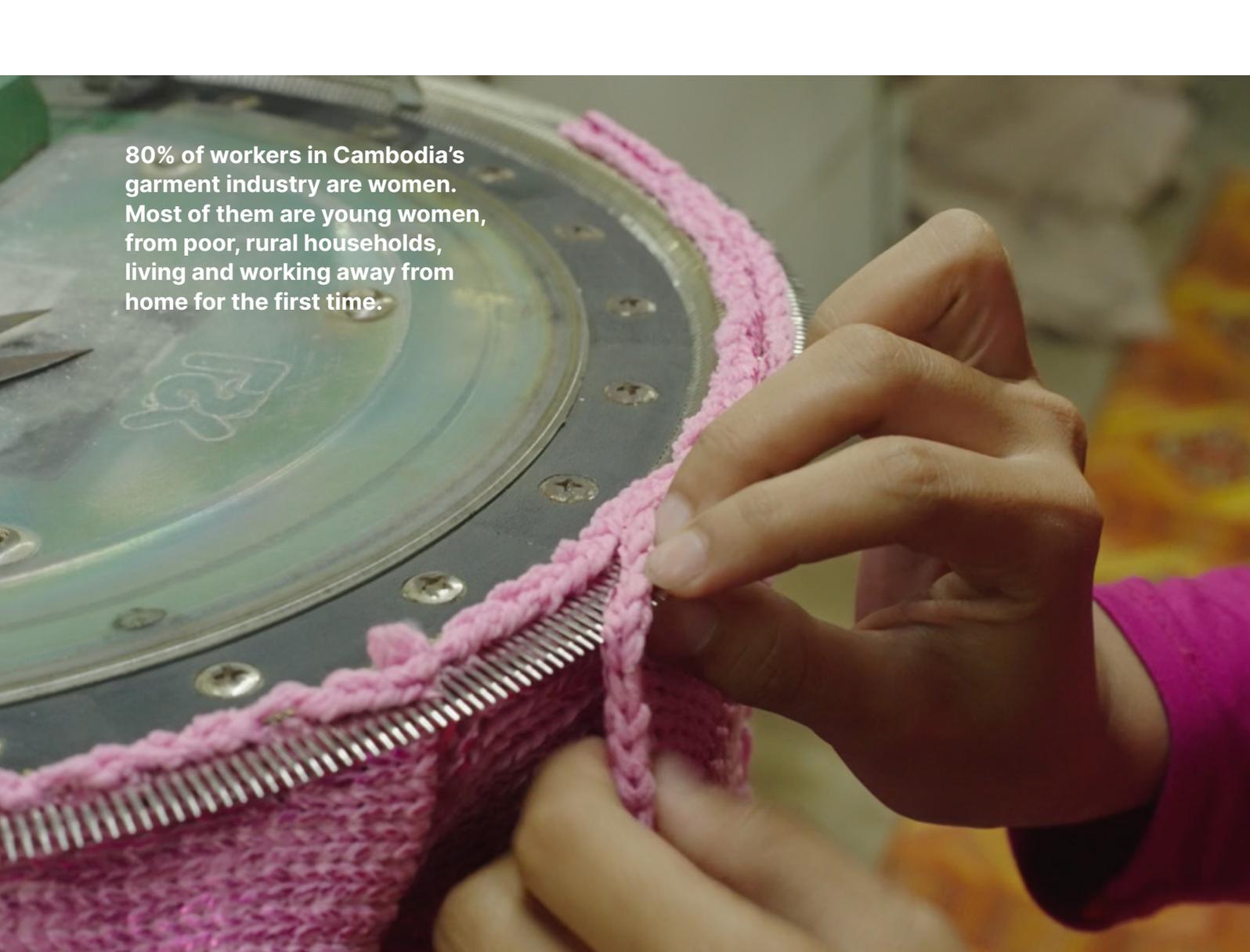
These impacts are rooted in highly uneven and unequal systems of global production. At the top end of the supply chain, global brands and retailers wield considerable economic power and accumulate vast profits through flexible systems of outsourcing. “Chasing the cheap needle around the planet”⁶, buyers search from country to country, looking to secure lowest prices for the manufacture of clothing and footwear. Where prices rise in one location, sourcing agents’ strategies pivot quickly to another. These profit-optimising imperatives ignite a global “race to the bottom” in garment producing countries and factories, who compete against each other for business by finding ways to lower production costs. Typically, this means undercutting in critical areas, like wages or safety.

At the other end of the supply chain, therefore, workers in countries like Cambodia “wear the costs”⁷ of these cuts. Cambodia’s national economy is highly dependent on its garment industry. With nearly 1 million workers in more than 800 factories, the garment industry contributes 75% of merchandise exports, 16% of Cambodia’s GDP, and 6% of employment⁸. To keep the country attractive as a destination for foreign investors, there is little regulation of the industry, including few labour protections for its workers. In 2020, the minimum wage was set at \$190 per month, far below the levels considered to represent a living wage – that is, the minimum income needed by a workers cover basic needs like food and rent for herself and her family, estimated at US\$588/month⁹. Incremental improvements to the National Social Security Fund have secured workers’ access to certain protections like basic health care and limited maternity and sickness leave. However, prior to the pandemic, there was no support available for those otherwise unable to work, whether through unemployment or old age.

80% of workers in Cambodia’s garment industry are women. Most of them are young women, from poor, rural households, living and working away from home for the first time. Early optimism that their employment might advance women’s empowerment in a country with otherwise strict, patriarchal gender norms and traditions has ceded to concern that recruitment practices target these vulnerabilities, where employers believe women are less likely to challenge exploitative practices at work. Defying these expectations, women have pushed back through trade unions, winning important gains in recent years, including driving up the minimum wage by more than 200% within a decade. Where growing trade union power threatens Cambodia’s ability to compete in the race to the bottom, however, the government has taken steps to curb their power, including through hostile legislation. Women workers have been left with few outlets to voice discontent or agitate for change. Precarious short-term contracts and pressurised workplace environments have become an industry norm.

“In the past, no one could foresee such a pandemic.”

Industry Representative, January 2022



80% of workers in Cambodia's garment industry are women. Most of them are young women, from poor, rural households, living and working away from home for the first time.

Above: Still from ReFashion film, *The Haul* (2022).

The conditions that exposed women garment workers in Cambodia to the gravest economic and health consequences of the pandemic therefore cast a long shadow before the first strains of Sars-Cov-2 were identified in humans. Where supplier factories lacked the influence to challenge the corporate irresponsibility of global brands and buyers, they instead set in motion a supply chain reaction, dispensing instead with a workforce long regarded as disposable. Subsisting for years on low pay with limited protections, few workers had the savings or support to help them cope through any crisis. Instead, as their desperation deepened, they were compelled to sacrifice living and working standards further to get by. The viral trigger that would set off the upheavals of the pandemic may have been beyond prediction but the crisis that evolved in its wake was laid out clearly in advance. Moreover, rather than transforming systems of global production, what transpired was an acceleration of processes already in motion: a withdrawal of obligations, a stripping back of security, and the impoverishment of livelihoods. Rather than building back better, the race to the bottom has intensified.

Methods

Worker survey

A quantitative survey beginning with over 200 female workers participating, capturing data on work and home life. The survey was repeated three times with the same cohort of workers: in Oct/Nov '20 (203 workers), Mar/Apr '21 (150 workers), & Nov/Dec '21 (100 workers). Our first survey round was conducted face-to-face but later rounds reverted to telephone interviewing to protect the safety of our research team and respondents. All names in the report are pseudonyms.

Worker interviews

Semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of 60 our original survey respondents. Interviews were again repeated three times with the same cohort of workers: in Dec '20/Jan '21 (61 workers), June/July '21 (45 workers), & Dec '21/Jan '22 (31 workers).

Stakeholder interviews

Workers own perspectives on and experiences of the pandemic are supplemented by more than 60 key informant interviews conducted between January 2021 and January 2022 with a broad spectrum of industry stakeholders across the UK and Cambodia, including clothing and footwear brands and retailers; supplier representatives; industry regulators and monitors; labour rights organisations; and local trade unions.

Refashion Radio

To connect with a wider demographic of workers, we collaborated with Women's Media Centre to broadcast a series of six radio call-in shows, focusing on experiences of six specific themes emerging in our expanding data set, from economic to mental health challenges for workers during COVID-19. The shows put women workers into direct conversation within studio guests including labour ministry advisors and trade union leaders.

Sites

The women in our study worked in factories making clothing and footwear from a spectrum of global and UK brands and retailers, from fast fashion protagonists to luxury brands, and sportswear and supermarket giants. Respondents were drawn from across three provinces in Cambodia to capture a spread of workers in urban and rural locations, from Phnom Penh, Kandal, and Kampong Speu.

In their own words

Sophea's story

Sophea is a widowed worker in her earlier thirties. From Kampong Cham province originally, since 2007 she had worked in the finishing section of a large clothing factory in Phnom Penh. Although she has two young children from her marriage, a son and a daughter both aged under 10 years old, she lives alone in a rented room near her factory. Her children live with their grandmother, Sophea's mother, in her home village in Kampong Cham.

"At my first entry to the factory, I was still underage... During that time, I applied to many factories but they didn't accept me because I was underage. So I was just chosen by a company who didn't have enough workers... I got selected to work in the packaging team. And I have never shifted to any other section. I've worked at my current factory for almost 10 years.

In my dream, I want to have my own street vendor business. For example, selling meatballs, steamed clams, or other such things... The difficulty is related to money. If I suddenly stop working from garment work, I need money to continue to generate income. If I don't sell something like in my dream, I will not have any money to support my family. The salary I receive each month is only enough to spend for daily living. I can't save.

My eldest child is 7 years old, and my youngest one is 5 years old... They go to school... I want them to study a high level and have knowledge, not be ignorant like me. But I don't think I can give them a high education. I might have no ability to give them more education. But they should not be ignorant like me."

"The difficulty is related to money. If I suddenly stop working from garment work, I need money to continue to generate income. The salary I receive each month is only enough to spend for daily living. I can't save."

In their own words

Chenda's story

From Prey Veng province, Chenda is in her late thirties. She had worked in the garment industry for more than twenty years, having joined the sewing section of her current Phnom Penh factory in 2007. She lives in the city nearby the factory, sharing a rented room with 3 other workers. Separated from her husband, she has two children, a daughter and son, then aged 15 and 7 years old. They live and study in their home town in Prey Veng, where they are cared for by Chenda's sister.

"For me, I have worked in the factories for almost 20 years. I have worked in the factories since 1999, and now it is 2021. But now, I do not want to work in the factories anymore. I want to open up my own business, but I still do not think it is possible yet. Also, as I am quite old too, I do not think I can work in the factories forever... When I am old, no factory would allow me to work for them.

When the time comes when no factory will allow me to work, I will think about it again. If I had money, when I get old and can no longer work in the factory, I would open up my own business. But for now, it is just an idea, I still cannot do anything about it... There is no one else who can earn any income in my family. My children are small, and my sister is old and cannot do anything too besides taking care of the house, my children, and taking them to school. Everything is difficult. Water cost, room rental cost as well as the electricity cost. It is arduous! When talking about this, I become speechless...

For my children themselves, they never want to work in the factory. They told me, "I see that you are very tired every day. Seeing you like this, I do not want to work in the factory. I want to have another job besides working in the factory." They want to have good jobs but it is just an idea; it is not possible to say whether or not these ideas would come true. They want to get good positions, I think, but it would be impossible. We do not have enough ability for it. But they said, "As long as it is not working the in the factory. Because I see that you are very tired every day. You get blamed and scolded. People at other workplaces also get scolded, but it is still better than the factory."

"For my children themselves, they never want to work in the factory. They told me, 'I see that you are very tired every day. Seeing you like this, I do not want to work in the factory. I want to have another job besides working in the factory.'"



Supply chain reaction

COVID-19 prompts an economic crisis in Cambodia's garment industry, as order cancellations by global brands lead to widespread factory closures and unemployment. Women workers and their families struggle with depleted incomes, mounting debt, and rising hunger.

Supply chain reaction



n December 31, 2019, the government of China alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) to a health emergency in Wuhan City in its central Hubei province. Three weeks later, the entire city was placed in lockdown to protect public health. Soon, other cities within Hubei and beyond followed suit. Despite taking place some 3000km away from

Cambodia's capital city and main clothing manufacturing hub, Phnom Penh, the emerging crisis began to have rapid impact on the garment sector's production schedules and output. Although Cambodia has had a booming garment industry since the 1990s, the country has no domestic cotton industry, leaving it reliant on raw material imports to feed its lockstitch machines and looms, and satiate manufacturing demand. As the world's leading cotton producer and Cambodia's top trading partner, it is China that supplies an estimated 80% of Cambodia's cotton fabric imports¹⁰. When "the world's manufacturing superpower"¹¹ ground to manufacturing shutdown, its exports abruptly slowed. In an era of tightly optimised supply chains, where "just-in-time" delivery minimises costs of storing raw material stock, the Cambodian garment sector could not absorb any slack. As early as February 2020, government, industry, and union leaders began to warn of factories' imminent need to scale down production¹².

The escalation of the crisis from here into a global health emergency is now well known. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. European countries, led first by Italy, then Denmark, Ireland, Spain, France, Germany, the UK and more, followed China's lead by issuing their own stay-at-home orders. The reverberations from this renewed crisis, now impacting the other end of the garment supply chain, engulfed Cambodia's clothing and footwear industry in a second wave of turmoil, as retail demand in its core consumer markets tumbled. In the UK alone, for example, the primary destination for 9% of Cambodia's clothing and footwear exports,¹³ retail sales fell by more than 25% in the year to January 2020: the largest year-on-year drop since records began¹⁴.

Global brands and retailers moved swiftly to stay ahead of the pandemic curve. From March 2020, anticipating this collapse of retail demand, they sought to break financial commitments with their factory suppliers, cancelling or renegotiating order contracts with the people who make their clothes and shoes in places like Cambodia. By June 2020, it is estimated that brands and retailers had terminated orders worldwide to a value of US\$40 billion¹⁵. In some cases, brands and retailers refused to pay manufacturers for goods already in production or goods already made, sat waiting to ship in freight containers at ports; at other times, they “leverag[ed] desperation”¹⁶ of suppliers by demanding retroactive discounts or delayed payment terms to honour contracts and accept delivery of goods.

Responding to the evolving global health emergency, the Cambodian government introduced its own measures to contain COVID-19. From March 2020, it began to restrict entry to foreign arrivals, averting the need for a country-wide lockdown through international border closures and quarantine procedures. With only 400 cases and 0 deaths recorded from COVID-19 in Cambodia in the first year of the pandemic, these measures were initially effective at preventing the spread of disease¹⁷. However, they could not protect Cambodia’s population from the economic fallout of the virus.

“We are facing a slate of order cancellations from buyers, as stores are closing throughout Europe... Buyers are cancelling orders left, right and centre. If the raw material isn’t here, they’re saying don’t start production. If the order is completed, buyers are saying to hold the shipping... How many factories will be left at the end of this across the world? Many are facing bankruptcy.”

Industry Representative, March 2022

Work

Faced with mounting financial pressures, factories in Cambodia responded by shutting down production lines and laying off workers now deemed surplus to requirements. By October 2020, 85% of the women in our study had been suspended from work on a temporary basis on at least one occasion and 7% had had their contracts terminated by their employer. As orders remained volatile throughout the period, some workers returned from temporary periods of inactivity only to find themselves suspended yet again. Over the same period, some 16% of workers in our study were suspended from employment more than once:

“I returned to work for one month and then they said you need do to one more month suspension. I begged them not to be suspended. I told them I already had the suspension, so please suspend others who had not gotten the suspension yet. I begged them for work because I had no money... They did not agree.” (Sina, 19 January 2021)

In reality, few women wish to be garment workers, given the sector’s reputation for low wages, long hours, and gruelling demands. Yet few options exist for women in Cambodia, particularly those of limited financial means and little formal education:

“There is nothing to like [about working in the factory]. But it is just that I have no choice. I cannot go to find other jobs, so I have to endure working here. If there were other jobs I could go to, I would have quit working at the factory a long time ago already. But there are no other jobs” (Darin, January 2021).

During periods of unemployment, therefore, most women struggled to find alternative work outside of the industry. The government reminded workers that they “still have farming in their blood”¹⁸ and repeatedly called on the unemployed to return to their hometowns to engage in agriculture. Whilst some did this, only 32% of the women in our study retained a household farm and of those that did the average holding at 0.6 hectares was far below subsistence requirements, making a return to the land impossible for the majority. Some considered engaging in small trade or services but lacked the capital and skills to establish their own ventures:

“I want to resign from work and do business but in reality I don’t have any resources so I am struggling. I have many kinds of illnesses. But I don’t have a choice... Without money, we cannot do anything” (Malis, February 2021).

By contrast, “for factory work, there are no resources required. I just use my labour, sweat, and blood” (Panha, February 2021).

85%
of the women in our study had been suspended from work on a temporary basis on at least one occasion.

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of workers in our study were suspended from employment more than once.

Money

As Leakhena testifies, the loss of factory work had a severe impact on many women's household finances. Yet net employment impacts tell only part of the story. Before the pandemic, many workers relied on overtime work to generate additional payments to top up their basic salaries of \$190 per month, where the minimum wage falls far short living wage levels. However, with orders remaining volatile through 2020, the availability of working hours was cut in many factories and overtime opportunities were curtailed. Rolling suspensions and reduced hours limited women's earning potential for much of the first 10 months of the pandemic, and even beyond. Over this period, the average worker lost 25% of their expected income.

Not only had few workers built savings to help them cope with this drastic shortfall in income, but many workers were also saddled with huge debts. Almost two-thirds of workers (63%) in the study reported outstanding loans borrowed before the pandemic. Far beyond the appellation of 'micro'-credit, the average loan portfolio of women in the sample totalled US\$4,731, more than double the basic yearly salary of a worker in the sector. As their income collapsed, they were under immense pressure to finance repayments that they could no longer afford. In response to the economic disruption posed by COVID-19, the National Bank of Cambodia [NBC] issued guidance in March 2020 to encourage lenders to assist clients "facing actual impacts" from the pandemic. However, its recommendations to lenders were voluntary rather than binding, and had to be agreed with borrowers on a case-by-case basis. As such, few workers benefitted:

"For the bank that I am in debt to, no matter how the Prime Minister announces, the bank will not follow the recommendation. They came to threaten us. To be honest, I became a psychopath, I was so anxious whenever I see their motorbikes, I was so scared because they came and asked us to pay the money. Some days, they even waited until 7pm and they came and told my children many things; they tried to threaten me with every aspect. Even though the government announced measures to reduce the burden of debt payment, the implementation was zero." (Kunthea, December 2021).

"If there is no factory, there is no money for us. The factory is like our pot of rice."

Leakhena, January 2022

Loan restructuring arrangements	Outstanding loans (%)
Repaying as usual	78%
Agreed to repay less than usual	7%
Agreed to temporarily suspend repayments	10%
Other	4%

Figure 1. Loan status of garment workers' outstanding loans by Nov/Dec 2020 (Source: ReFashion worker survey data Nov/Dec 2020, n=151 outstanding loans).

Average garment income Jan – Oct 2020 (US\$)

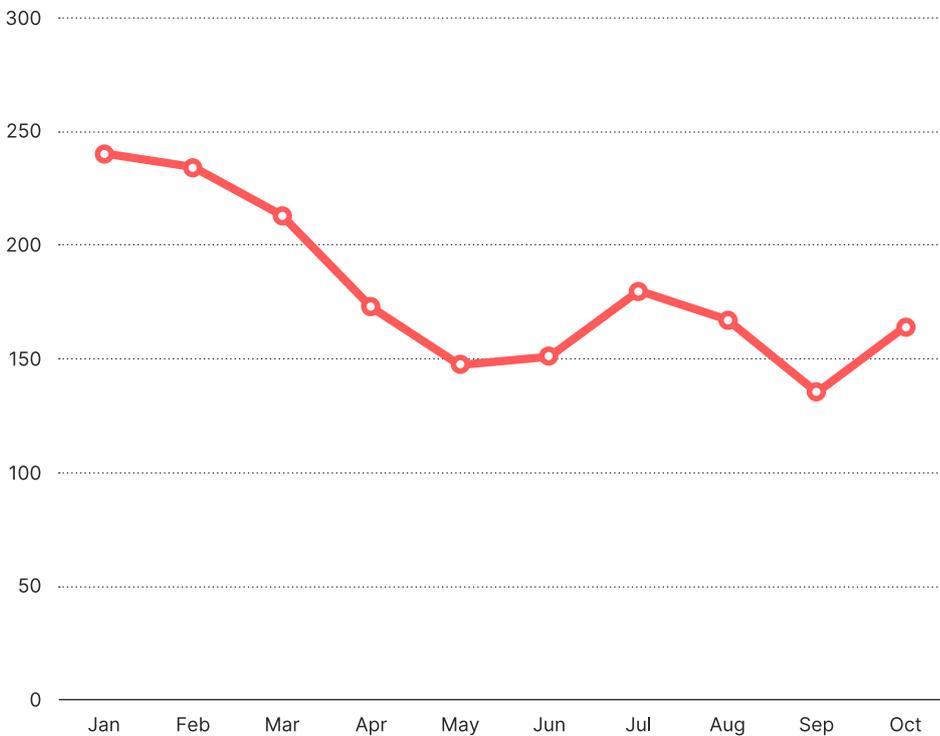


Figure 2. Average income earned from garment work January to October 2020. (Source: ReFashion worker survey data Nov/Dec 2020, n=190, all workers where full monthly data available).

Support

The sharp contraction of employment and income underlined the absence of robust social safety nets in Cambodia and the paucity of protections to help workers and their families cope through any period of crisis. Once the pandemic's early impacts on factory output became apparent, the Cambodian government responded proactively to protect the viability of enterprises. From February 2020, emergency regulations allowed factories to apply to temporarily suspend employment contracts. In the absence of existing support, a portion of workers' incomes were protected by an improvised wage subsidy scheme. Initially, set at 60% of the minimum wage, as the fuller extent of the crisis became clear this was reduced to US\$70 per month, equivalent to just 38% of the minimum wage.

“They only get US\$70 and what can they do to survive with that much money? No, they cannot.”

Vanny, January 2021

	From 28 February 2020	From 7 April 2020
Wage subsidy (US\$)	US\$114	US\$70
% of 2020 minimum wage	60%	37%

Figure 3. Emergency wage subsidy support to Cambodian garment workers during COVID-19.

However, the challenge of building this social infrastructure at the height of crisis allowed little scope for testing and refinements. Many workers fell through the gaps of this hastily improvised system, lacking the technology or digital fluency to receive grants, when they were largely used to receiving wage payments in cash at the factory:

“There were lots of problems with cash transfers because there's no digitised system here yet. Lots of workers didn't get the money that they should have gotten because they didn't have the right telephone number that they could digitally transfer money and all of these things” (Industry Monitor, February 2021).

Even those who could access this support observed that, though it was “better than nothing” (Sophal, January 2021), it was insufficient to cover even the barest of essentials and left workers struggling to meet the most basic of needs:

“This 70\$ is not enough for spending... Just for food, it costs me around US\$100 per month. There are also the rent and utility fees which are around US\$50-60. Luckily, my children allowed me to live with them, or else I would be a beggar. What can I do with US\$70?... If even for me, when I am by myself, but I could not rely on that, then how about those who have children?” (Vanny, January 2021).

Health

To meet ends meet in these circumscribed circumstances, workers scrimped and saved where they could. With indebtedness already overextended and few having substantive savings or assets to fall back on, for most this meant making sacrifices within the already fine margins of everyday expenditure:

“I go to work every day, I just eat rice and I can never desire any other snack because I cannot afford it [she is crying]... I could tell you one word to describe my situation is hardship. I have reduced my spending on food. Some days we only have eggs for meals...” (Lida, January 2021).

Between January and December 2021, workers' average household daily food expenditure had fallen by 38%. As a result, at the end of the first year of the pandemic, 55% of workers were in a state of acute food insecurity, eating less than they thought was healthy. More alarmingly, 20% reported episodes of hunger, where they did not eat because of a lack of money or other resources for food. These were not isolated episodes. Instead, 44% of those experiencing hunger reported that this was happening 'often'.

Those struggling reduced not only the quantity of food they were eating but also the quality, sacrificing nutrient-rich food like fish, meat, and vegetables that are typical dietary staples for simple meals of rice with soy or fish sauce. This lack of adequate nutrition took its toll on bodily and mental health:

“During these periods, I am not well because I have not enough food to eat. I have a stomach ache and digestive problem. I cannot eat well, so it causes me pain. When eating enough vegetables, it felt better, but when I don't eat properly, it causes pain” (Chanthou, January 2021).

Dizziness, tiredness, stomach and digestive problems, feeling weak, stress, anxiety, and insomnia were all commonly reported consequences. For those terminated rather than suspended from factory employment, the physical impacts of this bodily depletion were compounded by workers inability to access health care:

“I get sick. Now I have stomach and intestinal problems from the COVID period. During the two month suspension, we could use the National Social Security Fund. After that, we could not use it. When the factory closed, we could not use it. I use my own money, or borrow from other people. What else can I do?” (Pisey, February 2021).

55%

of workers were in a state of acute food insecurity, eating less than they thought was healthy.

20%

reported episodes of hunger, where they did not eat because of a lack of money or other resources for food.

Workers' rights to basic health treatment are covered only whilst in employment and for three months after. As Pisey elucidates, for those facing longer-term unemployment, a lack of income, mounting debt, and worn-out health became an increasingly vicious cycle.

Average household food expenditure (US\$)

January 2020, pre-pandemic	4.38
Nov/Dec 2020, post-pandemic	2.69

Figure 4. Average daily household food expenditure of garment workers in January 2020 and Nov/Dec 2020 (Source: ReFashion worker survey data Nov/Dec 2020, n = 105, where food expenditure had decreased).



Family

Women garment workers' income typically supports more than immediate kin, often extending a lifeline to extended families in rural areas, who rely on remitted income to sustain declining agricultural livelihoods. As such, a hidden impact of the pandemic's immediate ripple through global supply chains was the consequent, multiplier effects of this significant loss of employment and earning upon these remittance recipients. Prior to the pandemic, the 203 female workers in our study, for example, provided monetary support to a further 142 households through regular remittance payments. By September 2020, however, the volume of these payments had dropped by almost one third.

The demographics of recipient households render them acutely vulnerable to any contraction in remittance income, often comprising dependent family members otherwise unable to work, such as elderly parents or workers' own young children. Cambodia's social protection architecture does not yet extend to support old age pensions or even basic health care for such persons, reserved for those in the very poorest of households identified under the IDPoor scheme. As such, earnings remitted from the garment sector effectively privately subsidise this provision. When remittance income dried up, therefore, the sacrifices made by rural families extended beyond making cuts to daily living and food expenditure, but even essential health care and treatment for acute and longer-term conditions:

"My father has a chronic illness and he has needed to take medicines since he turned 50- or 60-years-old. He needs to use medicine since he has high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis, so he has to take medicine for the rest of his life. Normally, he would spend 180,000 Riel (US\$45) monthly... Before COVID-19, I had an income to send home. There were medicines for my parents and when my parents got sick they could go to get treatment faster, since I sent them US\$110-120 monthly, so they allocated some for spending and some for their savings. When I had no income, they had to reduce spending on things like buying medicine. They could only buy a little medicine, which is different to what they buy when I have remittance money to send them" (Mony, February 2021).

In other rural households, the severity of the situation compelled the elderly and infirm to exit retirement and find work, exacerbating existing conditions:

"[My father] has a kind of illness for the elderly. It is a chronic illness that is either bad or good on different days. I hoped he was better but now he is sick again... My two children stay with him. When I earn more, I send money to him but when my wage is low, I don't have any money to send to him. Now, I heard that he is working in construction to earn money. He could not wait for my remittance otherwise the four [family] members there would starve from hunger" (Chanthou, January 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, the 203 female workers in our study, provided monetary support to a further 142 households through regular remittance payments. By September 2020, however, the volume of these payments had dropped by almost one third.

The immediate impacts of the economic crisis on economic security and wellbeing were therefore felt beyond the garment industry’s workforce itself but transmitted to vulnerable and dependent household members through the sharp contraction in remittance funds.

Average worker remittance Jan 2020 – Sep 2021 (\$US)

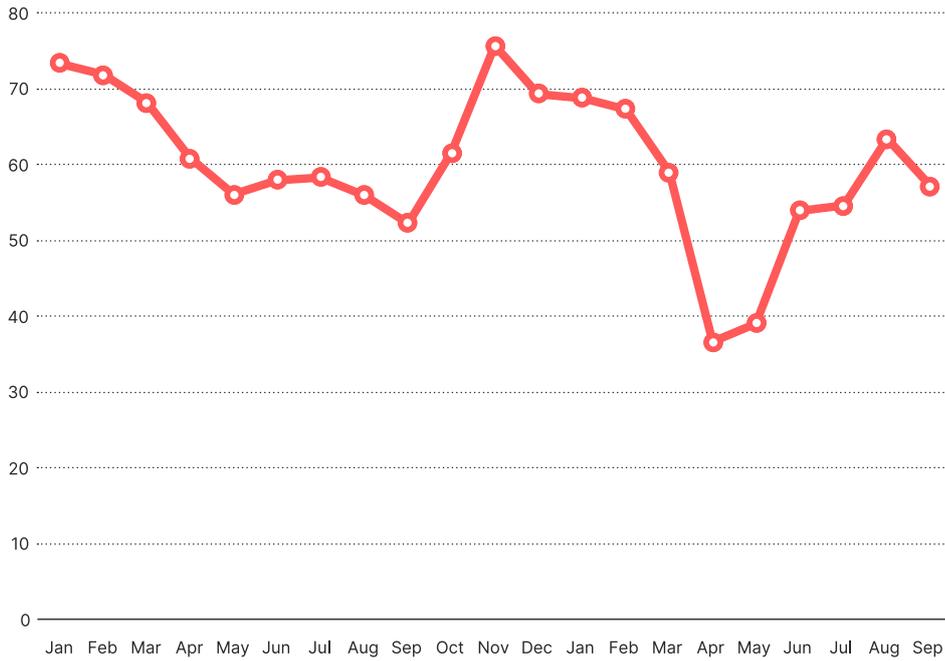


Figure 5. Average remittance expenditure among remittance-sending workers, January 2020 to September 2021. (Source: ReFashion worker survey data Nov/Dec 2020, n = 190, all workers where full monthly data available).

In their own words

Sophea's story, continued

During the first year of the pandemic, Sophea was suspended from her factory employment for a period of four months from April 2020. To help support her family, she found informal work on a construction site in Phnom Penh, earning US\$5 per day for manual labour like carrying bricks and cement. Later, she returned to work in the garment industry. However, employment conditions there had deteriorated significantly, which caused her further financial distress. She worried about the stability of her work and income, and how she would cope through the immediate future.

"I have resumed work since August but I don't work overtime like before... If [the factory] doesn't have many orders, they let us leave around 3:30pm, and we get the minimum wage... It has strongly affected our livelihood... I have my children and an old mother living in my hometown that I need to take care of... I need to spend on her medicines, my children's expenditures, and repay the bank.

During the suspension, the factory provided US\$30 each month and the Ministry gave us US\$40. I also got some money from construction work. If it was not enough, I would borrow from other people. The only solution is to borrow from others. The bank needs me to repay them regularly... The money from the factory and Ministry, I used it to pay the interest... Sometimes, I needed to borrow extra from a teammate to solve the problems back home...

In last 10 years, the situation of working at the factory has got much better... [But] it has completely changed now. Since COVID-19 started, my factory owner has started to be strict... The factory doesn't follow the labour law... There are difficulties because the factory does not pay us our full salary. They only give us half of the salary. Therefore, I sometimes pay the room rent late... When we protested, [the owner] threatened that he would suspend the workers for two to three more months. I feel worried and sad. I am afraid of another suspension and losing my job...

If there is another suspension, I don't know what will I do... It is really challenging especially since I have gone through the four-month suspension already. I still think about it because I am afraid it will happen again... I am starting thinking of finding some other skills to move on from the factory too because, as far as I can see, the factory situation will not get better. The salary is less and there is less work to do to. The factory owner doesn't provide any ongoing information on the working situation and also our salary. I have worked for almost 10 years, yet I don't get any retirement fund for my efforts. So, I am disappointed with that...

It's hard to find solutions. As I said, first, I don't have any capital. Second, I don't have any knowledge and I am illiterate. I don't know anyone to rely on... I want to find my own way to move on from the factory but I don't have any savings or skills to shift... I am stuck in garment work."

"Since COVID-19 started, my factory owner has started to be strict. The factory doesn't follow the labour law. There are difficulties because the factory does not pay us our full salary. They only give us half of the salary. When we protested, the owner threatened that he would suspend the workers for 2 – 3 more months."

In their own words

Chenda's story, continued

Chenda was suspended from her factory for a relatively short period of one month, across June and July 2020. During that time, she found a job in a subcontracting facility working for daily wages, but stopped work there after a few days as she found the working environment too difficult and degrading. When she returned to her original factory after the suspension, her working hours were cut and her salary reduced. Coping with a reduced salary was particularly challenging for Chenda, as she had an outstanding loan of US\$4000 and had to continue to make monthly repayments of US\$120, as she was not able to restructure her debt.

"[Now] we work as usual; only the salary has reduced because the work finishes at 4pm. It has affected [my family and my livelihood] significantly. My two children are both studying and I also have outstanding loans with the banks. I also have to think about daily expenditures, and I am the only income earner in my family too. I just do not have enough money to afford it.

I borrow from other people all the time. I use the borrowed money to repay other loans and use some for daily spending. When I get my salary, I use it to repay those loans again.

If I get to work overtime until 6 pm, I am so thankful, because I could earn a bit extra. I get worried when we have to leave at 4 pm. It is not only me, but other workers who are experiencing difficulties like me are fearful about the fact that we have to leave work at 4 pm. The salary is very little. This year, the minimum wage increased by only US\$2. The price of goods is also increasing. The rent for my room might increase as well; I do not know yet. If they increase it, how can I get the money [to pay]? What else can I do besides try my best in dealing with it until COVID-19 is gone?

I have sold my assets since COVID-19 first occurred and when I was suspended. I have sold them all. They suspended production during June to July 2020. It was only one month, but I still had to repay my loans from the bank. If I do not have any money, how can I repay them? I sold my assets so that I could repay them and also for daily spending. For now, I do not have anything left... Before, I had enough money, and although I did not have much savings, at least it was enough for spending. But now, I have to think very carefully when spending my money... I cannot earn a lot, so my salary is mainly for the bank repayment... Even for food, before we could eat a lot more food. But now... money and work are difficult to find. So, we can only eat based on what we earn, just to get by another day. If I want to eat good food, good meat, I have to spend around 20,000 Riel or 15,000 Riel per day [US\$5-US\$3.75] but now I have to reduce it to 7,000 Riel [US\$1.75] for four people in my family...

Once in a while, when we get really tired and want to eat good food, we might buy it. [It is around] once every week or two weeks. If there were no meat at all, we would not have much energy in order to work. I pity my children especially, since they are still small. If it was me alone, it would be okay. But since my children are still small, they might want to eat good food. What can I do since it is difficult? There is no one else who has difficulties like me".

"I borrow from other people all the time. I use the borrowed money to repay other loans and use some for daily spending. When I get my salary, I use it to repay those loans again."



Life in lockdown

Cambodia's economic crisis evolves into a health emergency, as outbreaks of COVID-19 in the garment industry trigger a national lockdown followed by fluctuating public health restrictions. Insufficient support leaves workers dependent on the goodwill of friends and neighbours. Amid continued constraints on formal industry, subcontracting flourishes.

Life in lockdown

From February 2021, COVID cases in Cambodia began to rise dramatically. As workers continued to cram into commuter trucks each morning and night, sharing cramped rooms in densely populated urban settlements, and spending 8- or 10-hour days at close quarters with thousands of colleagues in poorly ventilated factories, the garment sector quickly emerged as an epicentre of the unfolding epidemic. By late April 2021, outbreaks had occurred in more than 206 of Cambodia's 650/800 or so factories¹⁹.

Realising that the virus could no longer be locally contained, the Cambodian government enacted an abrupt change of strategy. On 6 April 2021 travel between provinces was banned overnight, cutting off thousands of those who moved to work in the city from their loved ones in rural areas. The next day, a curfew was implemented from 8pm and finally on 14 April, Phnom Penh and the surrounding province of Kandal were placed under a two-week blanket lockdown.

The suite of measures enacted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was extremely strict. Whether living in a private house or, as necessary for many workers, sharing several to one room, all inhabitants were prohibited from leaving their property with immediate effect, except in the event of a medical emergency. All shops and markets, even those providing food stuffs and other basic essentials were summarily shut down. In their place, the government established open-air stalls, run by soldiers in hazmat suits, offering a small range of extremely basic supplies: noodles, rice, tinned fish, soy sauce, and water. Residents were permitted to access supplies every three days, but goods were not provided free of charge. With many confined to their rented rooms, averaging under 10 square metres, in the hottest part of the year, workers faced a race between the end of the lockdown and the end of their funds.

Health

Emerging from this, authorities implemented a traffic light system to create a tiered system of lockdowns, each with varying degrees of severity. Many garment workers found themselves in the harshest level of restrictions: the Red Zone. Here, leaving the house for all barring medical emergency was prohibited, and work remained suspended. For those in Dark Yellow and Yellow zones, however, “essential work” was permitted. With the government desperate to kickstart a stalled economy after a year of stagnant production, garment workers only recently deemed surplus to requirements were now, like elsewhere, reclassified as an “essential” workforce. However, as Darin describes, despite their now-recognised importance to the nation, workers did not feel valued during this time.

Reflecting broader global trends, socio-economic inequalities in Cambodia emerged as key vectors of viral vulnerability. At national level, as schools remained shuttered and office workers withdrew to the relative safety of new work-from-home routines, the garment sector’s workforce served on the frontline of economic recovery efforts. Yet even within the garment industry itself, those with the means to do so retreated to the relative safety of rural hometowns to wait out the peaks of epidemic waves, whilst those without were compelled to bear elevated risk:

“Some workers are afraid. They don’t go to work and ask for leave to stay at home for a while. Those who are a bit well off, they resign. They don’t want to get involved and stay at home instead, as they want to have social distancing. They are willing to resign, and there are two or three people [in my factory] who did that already”.
(Bopha, July 2021)

“It seems like the workers are not being valued. They treat us badly. In cases like yesterday, when a COVID-19 ambulance arrived at the factory to test some of the suspected cases, it somehow affects the mentality and the mind of workers. Workers are afraid and they could not function well. In that sense, they do not care at all. They just blame us.”

Darin, July 2021

In the push to keep factories open, a package of measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace was implemented, including mandatory testing and, soon after, mandatory vaccination. Indeed, when Cambodia’s vaccination programme was initiated, the revalorised garment sector workforce was hurried to the front of the queue, designated as a “priority group” for initial doses alongside state officials²⁰. From a health perspective, garment workers were now among the most protected inhabitants of Cambodia. Yet many still did not feel safe to return to work, as they remained exposed to infection:

“I have resumed work although I’m working with fear” (Tevy, July 2021)

Perceptions of workplace safety, March – May 2021

How strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement	“I have no fear of contracting the virus from co-workers”
Strongly agree	6%
Agree	1%
Neither	14%
Disagree	25%
Strongly disagree	54%

Figure 6. (Source: Worker survey, Second round, Mar-May 2021, n=108, workers employed at time of survey)

Money

Workplace testing regimes installed in the garment sector ensured that rolling factory shutdowns continued through the first half of 2021. When positive cases were identified, the worker and her close contacts, typically including household members and section colleagues, were removed to state quarantine facilities for a minimum 14-day stay. Often, rather than dedicated hospitals or specialist facilities, these were large municipal spaces like sports halls and conference centres, converted to shelter hundreds of confirmed and suspected cases together under one roof, with rudimentary facilities such as camp beds. When many positive cases were identified in one factory, its entire workforce could be quarantined at once. Although garment workers feared contracting the virus, in many cases they feared the consequences of the regime set up to curb it more:

“They did the test, which showed I was positive for COVID-19. Later, I was taken to the treatment place accordingly. It was hard. At first, I really wanted to die. But then when I arrived there and saw many people experiencing the same situation as me, I decided not to. I was worried that if I got infected, then I do not want to live anymore. But once I was there, they treated me, gave me meals and medicine, then I no longer wanted to die” (Sothea, July 2021).

Once released from the quarantine facility, a further 14-day period of self-isolation at home was required. A handful of cases at a factory, therefore, could lead to the suspension of hundreds of workers for an entire month. The economic consequences for workers and their families were often ruinous:

“I had no income from the factory for two months... There is no work as there are risks to another closedown. I lost my income whilst there are still various expenditures everyday, such as food and rent. I still have to pay the full room rental fee. My livelihoods are very lacking. There is nearly nothing to eat. We, as garment workers, really rely on that work. Now there is no salary but we have to spend money on many things. It is very hard. I also cannot borrow money because it affects everyone. I could not describe how hard it is in words” (Malis, June 2021).

Where the systems intended to reduce the prevalence of COVID-19 were strict, the economic support to help workers cope through this extended period pushed between lockdown, shutdown, quarantine, and isolation was minimal. The government recommended that factories continue to pay workers at least 50% of their salaries during periods of enforced absence but the advice was not legally binding. As such, whilst some employers complied with the guidance, others refused. A survey by unions and labour rights campaigners estimated that workers in Cambodia incurred a combined total of \$109 million

“I am very afraid when waiting for the test ... Workers who test positive are asked to stay at the back whilst those who are not infected will receive a stamp. I am so worried and begin sweating. I am worried because if I am infected, I will be sent to hospital. I would spend my time there for about 10 days. After that, I would be quarantined for 14 days at home. I won’t have money, or anything to eat. That’s why I am worried. I am so happy when I am alright.”

Hong, July 2021

in lost wages over April and May 2021 alone²¹. The perils of avoiding COVID-19 soon outweighed the perils of infection:

“On Monday, the factory suspended us for 14 days. I was very happy at that time because that meant I wouldn’t have to do any tests. But after I stopped working for a while, I started falling short of money. I started to be scared about whether I have enough money to spend on food... When the factory reopened, we were less scared because we had the income to support ourselves, despite the risk of catching COVID-19. This is better than staying at home and having no income. If staying at home and having no income, we would die even before COVID-19 because we have no money. So, now, we are less scared of COVID-19” (Pich, June 2021).

Quarantine experiences

Have you had to undertake any mandatory period of quarantine or self-isolation?

Yes	57%
No	43%

Figure 8. (Source: Worker survey, Third round, Mar-May 2021, $n=104$)

If yes, where did you quarantine or isolate?

Temporary facility	57%
Home	14%
Hospital	10%

Figure 9. (Source: Worker survey, Third round, Mar-May 2021, $n=63$, workers who quarantined or isolated)

Work

The pressures of repeated shutdowns and suspensions exacted a severe toll on the conditions of work for those able to remain irregularly employed during this period. With order deadlines inflexible against the fluctuating production capacity of enterprises – variously limited by repeated lockdowns, shutdowns, and other shortages of personnel – factories ran aground and outsourced production to smaller, subcontracting facilities. “Part and parcel of the industry” before the advent of COVID-19, the growth of subcontractors has been accelerating as a way to cope with “the pressures of buyers’ fluctuating orders and unreasonable volumes and timelines”²². The mismatch between renewed demand and volatile output during the pandemic therefore ensured that work in subcontracting facilities proliferated through this period, capturing a 10% share of employment among our sample by November 2021. With many subcontracting factories remaining unnamed and unlicensed, they lurk under the radar of labour inspectors and auditors. As one European brand succinctly put it:

“We have no idea what is going on in there anymore” (European Brand, February 2021).

As such, labour conditions in these “shadow” facilities are significantly worse than those in export-tier factories:

“For the first few days, they did not pay us. I did not even get 100 *riel* [two cents]... We did not get paid anything since we left at 4pm. They said we have to work and do overtime until 6pm to get paid. This is exploitation... The line manager took our wage and exploited our labour. They said they would not pay us if we do not do overtime. We worked until we could no longer stand and they still forced us to do overtime. Usually, those kinds of small factories that give out daily wages are always like this, unlike the big factories. For big factories, at least they do not take the workers’ wages like that. For small factories, it is difficult” (Reasmey, January 2021).

Though subcontracting itself is not illegal, the employment practices of many of these subcontracting enterprises are, as Reasmey describes. Receiving a smaller share of profits after lead contractors have taken their own cut, subcontractors save costs by subverting entitlements guaranteed under labour law. Operating from homes, warehouses, or other improvised sites, those working within subcontracting facilities, like Reasmey, reported forced and unpaid overtime; withheld pay; and more frequent and severe experience of harassment and abuse by managers and supervisors. Work here is undertaken without employment contracts and paid according to fixed daily rates, set below the statutory minimum wage. Often, workers are denied access to workplace protections, including health insurance and maternity leave under the National Social Security Fund and, crucially during the pandemic, wage subsidy guarantees.

“For the first few days, they did not pay us. I did not even get two cents... We did not get paid anything since we left at 4pm. They said we have to work and do overtime until 6pm to get paid. This is exploitation...”

Reasmey, January 2021

The lack of contracts means employees struggle to form labour unions, as they can be dismissed at will by enterprises. Therefore, they lack the ability to hold employers to account over these abuses:

“My factory has had many challenges and negative aspects, but we cannot solve them because my factory is small and not under the authority of the Ministry. Based on my previous experience, working in big factories before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not hard [to solve problems] there because we had a garment workers’ union to help to address the issues. Moreover, the factory was under the authority of the government, so we could sue or complain to the government if the team leaders put pressure on or abuse the workers, and we could tell our garment workers’ union. They could raise the issues to the factory managers to deal with... Before the first COVID-19 outbreak in Cambodia, they suspended my job. When I found another job in a small factory, they provided a daily wage. It is not under the authority of the government; it has many challenges, but no one can help to deal with it” (Socheata, June 2021).

Hidden in plain sight, workers suggested that police and local authorities knowingly turn a blind eye to these illegal operations and practices. During the pandemic, this tacit acceptance of subcontractors’ routine breaches of law placed this group of workers at more acute risk, as they continued to work to normal routines and ignored public health measures introduced to protect the workforce:

“They don’t have hand sanitizers or temperature assessment devices. Even in the toilet, they don’t have all of that stuff. If we want to protect ourselves, it is up to us. The toilet is very dirty with no hygiene at all. There is no hygiene. We wash and clean by ourselves when we go to toilet. Working in a small factory, we fear COVID-19 spread” (Socheata, June 2021).

Workers’ experiences of COVID-19 were therefore marked not only by a significant shift in the quantity of work available but also the conditions of work itself, performed within more precarious and pressured environments.

Family

At home, too, the lockdown period exerted strenuous pressures on women's relationships. Extended separation from family members, particularly for those workers who had migrated to the city or elsewhere for work, leaving close kin behind in rural provinces. The announcement of Cambodia's inter-provincial travel ban came days before the country was about to celebrate its New Year festival.

Choul Chnam Thmey is Cambodia's most important public holiday, on which factories close for several days each year to allow workers time to travel home and reconnect with loved ones. Where the travel restrictions designed to prevent internal spread of the virus during this annual mass migration event, they also obstructed much desired family reunions:

"My mother stays at my hometown and since COVID-19 led to the lockdown, we lost touch, warmth, and mother-daughter relations. The most difficult thing was that I wanted to visit my mother who lived alone and I couldn't do it. That was the most difficult part... I couldn't be there at night if she is sick. Our relationship was disconnected. We were only able to talk on the phone" (Sorya, December 2021).

Children are often among those who stay behind when their parents move, where it is more practical to leave them under the ward of grandparents than find alternative care in the city. As the restrictions wore on, separations lengthened; in other cases, women absented themselves to mitigate risks of transmitting COVID-19 to family members. They shared stories of grief and guilt at their increased estrangement:

"I feel that I could not bring comfort to my children. I couldn't give them knowledge as I should do. I can only send money to provide for them. They only know their grandparents; they are not close to me. But it's because of poverty that leads to situation like this. If I were better off, I would never let my children live far from me" (Sophorn, January 2022).

Mental health professionals on our ReFashion Radio show warned that these experiences of separation likely have significant import on the psychological wellbeing of workers' children themselves too. Alarming, the severance of family and other support networks led to instances of more grievous harm, including domestic abuse. The financial pressure on exerted on workers, in combination with the particular stresses and anxieties of lockdown periods, was cited as a common trigger for episodes of violence, including instances of physical violence against children:

"For me, COVID-19 is like the Pol Pot regime. It made people suffer, anxious, and separated from their family."

Leakhena, January 2022

“My children always stay home... Their study is suspended [due to school closures]. When they stay at home, we spend more money on them than if they went to school... I am often frustrated and also hit them when I don't have money. When we don't have money and they want to get some money, we are stressed and anxious, so I sometimes commit violence towards them. Later on, I feel pity for them. I feel like we parents cannot find more money for them so I am disappointed with myself, because my children are the age to eat and grow but I cannot find money to support them... If the COVID-19 pandemic continues longer, my family will commit severe violence” (Socheata, January 2021).

In this way, the economic burdens of COVID-19, passed from wealthy global buyers to vulnerable female workers, travelled with them beyond the factory gates and into the intimate realms of home and family life.

“I feel that I could not bring comfort to my children. I couldn't give them knowledge as I should do. I can only send money to provide for them. They only know their grandparents; they are not close to me. But it's because of poverty that leads to situation like this. If I were better off, I would never let my children live far from me.”

Sophorn, January 2022



Support

Throughout this period, clothing brands and retailers posted strong profits, yet as Pich testifies, little of this vast wealth generated trickled down to workers. Where low salaries compel many to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence, those caught with the Red Zone, in particular, fiercely struggled, lacking any savings or stored provisions to cope for days and weeks whilst cut off not only from income but also supplies of food and other essentials, as shops, markets, and street sellers were prohibited from operating. State authorities attempted to provision makeshift support, delivering supplies of rice and canned fish. Yet the improvised nature of the schemes and reliance upon local authorities to deliver the support ensured that whilst some workers' households were reached, many others were neglected, as resources were diverted to personal relations and political allies:

“At that time, the local authorities and police were very strict... I had no choice but to tell them that in my house there are a lot of kids so they need to eat... [But] no, they didn't care. The distribution of food was biased and sporadic. Because the village chief only gives things to those that have connections with him. For instance, if any family in the village knows them, they would call the chief and eventually they would get some food support in return. While, we received nothing... Bringing this up again, I am so mad and furious with them because it was biased in terms of food distribution. The people living next door got a lot of stuff to eat while my family got nothing” (Phalla, Dec 2021).

During late April and early May, therefore, protests and demonstrations erupted across Red Zone districts²³, as many garment worker communities were driven to the brink of starvation. The government set up a dedicated Telegram channel, to enable households to circumvent local leaders and make direct appeals for assistance, but it was soon overwhelmed with requests²⁴, leaving them to fall on deaf ears. Labour rights organisations and trade unions tried desperately to plug the gap in assistance, but their limited resources could again only furnish basic security for a limited few.

In the absence of comprehensive support, therefore, workers turned to one another, embodying what one respondent described as Cambodia's “culture of sharing” (Sophorn, June 2021) by dividing what little food and money they could find in common with friends, colleagues, and neighbours:

“The only help I received was from myself.”

Pich, June 2021

“If I see those who have nothing and I have something, I share my stake with them. However, I don’t have much as well... As I’ve been poor, I understand what it feels like, so I share accordingly... I get a little bit of this, a little bit of that, and I buy fish or meat, make a meal with it, and then I share with the other rooms in my neighbourhood. If the others don’t have rice to eat, they could get it from my place” (Sophorn, June 2021).

In the absence of formal support and protection, it was through these small acts of sacrifice and care, extended by those with the least to give, that many workers managed to survive the height of the crisis.



In their own words

Sophea's story, continued

When Phnom Penh's lockdown was introduced in April 2021, Sophea was caught in one of the city's Red Zones and placed under the harshest level of restrictions. Isolated from her family remaining at her home village in Kampong Cham province, Sophea was unable to find work or income. With markets closed and food prices rising, she struggled to eat well, which affected her health. During the lockdown, however, she was unable to seek adequate medical advice or treatment for her worsening health problems.

"I am not happy because I have no job to do because the factory has been closed during the COVID-19 lockdown. I am very worried about it as I have been faced with many challenges, such as expenses and daily living. Now the COVID-19 outbreak is very serious, so it is very hard with the factory closure. Even if we look outside to try find new jobs, we can't find anything. Thus, I am very anxious because we don't have money for expenses because everywhere is in lockdown. I cannot find any income. It is hard to solve. First, I wanted to borrow some money from other people, but they won't give it to me because the economy is really crashed, so I am in a difficult situation. I can't find any solutions to solve it...

I hope that one day our country will be better and everything will work as before. When things are going well, we can meet with our families and relatives again. I hope that day will come to Cambodia. I only hope like this because I didn't have a chance to meet my children for one year already; even my mother, I didn't visit her. I only talk with her by phone. I don't dare to go to my hometown because I think about my children and mother's health...

The most difficult thing during the lockdown was food. It was tremendously difficult because there was no support during that period and there was not any guidance, so it was very hard. When they locked down immediately, we lacked everything, such as food and money... Every day, I ate fermented fish... I think it affected my health, too because when we eat fermented fish every day, it is a kind of food that is preserved and salty, so it affected our health... I was seriously sick. Honestly, during that lockdown, I didn't have money, only 20,000 Riel (US\$5) on me, and I went to the pharmacy near my rented room. Unfortunately, the area was in lockdown. The doctor said that they couldn't allow patients inside for treatment, we could only get the medicines without any tests...

I have faced many challenges because currently I am always sick... Every day, I pray to be healthy and not sick. Honestly, I don't want anything else now. I only want to be healthy. If I can survive, I can overcome my problems and continue to fight."

In their own words

Chenda's story, continued

During the lockdown, Chenda's factory was closed again. She managed to secure some donated supplies of food from government and NGO sources, which helped her get by during this period. When the lockdown ended, she returned to work but her finances remained constrained, and her family was required to make continued sacrifices, particularly in terms of food expenditure and the schooling of her youngest child.

"Since we have resumed our work, everything goes well and works normally . It is just that they tend to push for more hastened production... I would say it is more difficult than before, but they allow us to work as previously. That is, when they resumed operations, the amount of work for workers is still the same [as before COVID-19], which means there is no reduction or suspension of work... It is somehow better since we can work as usual for the whole month and get paid normally. It is just that we cannot do anything else, or travel... Within the lockdown period, we cannot do anything. During COVID-19, we can only go to work and then come home, going out somewhere is not possible.

Since then, our income is better. It is not quite huge but it is average... If factory still operates, it is okay. The worrisome thing is the uncertainty if the factory will close down again and hence it will be difficult as we cannot get enough money. But within this day, today, it is okay and we still can solve most of our issues. What we can do is scrimp and save to prioritize the other important matters...

[For example,] only one of my children is studying online now and another one is not. If they both studied online, I was afraid that I could not afford that, and I thought it was better to wait for the school to reopen and re-enrol them then. But for the older one, I thought she is in a higher grade and I was afraid that she could not keep track with other so I have her pursue her study via online methods. Well, it is still difficult to afford that, but I can try to scrimp and save.

Of course, I am very scared about getting infected from others. Everyone fears this, because once we get infected, we will be brought into quarantine and for treatment, during which time we could not work. Overall, it is very difficult if we catch COVID-19... I feel scared tremendously. As long as COVID-19 still remains around, we still cannot feel safe... Therefore, I am trying to protect myself every day. Every time I go to the market and my workplace, I always have alcohol spray and a mask with me the whole time. COVID-19 is very terrifying because for as long as one is infected, we cannot do anything else. Everything is made more more difficult since I am also the head of the household, so everything rests on me. I, alone, have to take care of four people."



A new normal

A national vaccination campaign enables Cambodia to lift all public health restrictions as it to “learns to live with COVID-19” but for women workers in the garment industry the “new normal” includes deteriorating workplace conditions, cost-of-living crises, and prolonged mental health challenges.

A new normal

On 20 December 2021, exactly 10 months after it began, Prime Minister Hun Sen announced the end of Cambodia's latest and largest coronavirus outbreak, as the country recorded zero COVID-19 deaths and identified just 7 new cases nationwide²⁵. Months earlier, cases had dropped 76% overnight as authorities scrapped Cambodia's rapid testing programme and continued to trend downward²⁶. As travel and quarantine requirements relaxed at the same time, this marked the start of a new directive aimed at, in the premier's words, "learning to live with COVID-19"²⁷. With 80% of the population now fully protected with two doses of the coronavirus vaccine²⁸, Cambodia began to rollback restrictions and reopen for business.

The loosening of restrictions gave Cambodia's economy a prompt boost. Initial forecasts and results looked strong, with Cambodia projected to see renewed economic growth in 2022, climbing to an increased rate of 4.5%²⁹. Here, the accelerated recovery of the manufacturing sector is driving Cambodia's otherwise "subdued"³⁰ economic outlook. During the first quarter of 2022, exports of garments and footwear hit US\$3.1 billion, marking a 25% year-on-year increase.

"Back to business as usual"³¹ is the headline verdict from observers. However, a return to "business as usual" is not what Cambodia's garment workers were promised at the outset of the pandemic. Instead, the initial harrowing impacts of COVID-19 upon workers across the global garment industry were acknowledged to have "exposed acute vulnerabilities"³² in supply chain organisation, highlighting the adverse impacts that sourcing decisions by global brands and retailers have on supplier factories and their workers. In the early phases of the pandemic, these impacts prompted the ILO to advance a Global to Call to Action³³ for a human-centred recovery to the pandemic. The call rallied stakeholders to commit to "build forward better" and promote equitable and resilient forms of Decent Work in sustainable supply chains in the aftermath of COVID-19. However, these advances have not appeared. Instead, as we show here, the industry has built forward worse, as pandemic has accelerated the race to the bottom in global manufacturing.

"There's much greater need for, not just dialogue but real critical action at much higher level... I think it really lost momentum, it really missed an opportunity."

International Non-Profit Organisation, March 2021

Work

Many workers held resolute to the firm optimism that lives and work in the garment industry would improve once the hardest periods of the pandemic had passed and the country reset to its new normal. Contrary to these hopes, however, working conditions in the factory have instead continued to deteriorate further:

“When working in the factory, I felt like I was a slave with no freedom.”

Chanthy, January 2022

“I thought that I faced difficulty due to COVID-19 and that things might get better after the COVID-19 outbreak was over. But that has not happened because the factory conditions have become stricter... [The management] always rush the work. They want it quick. They only care about speed and quantity to increase the percentage. I don't know whether the owner wants more profit or wants to export more products. I don't know. They say it's like that everywhere... They want to increase those percentages. For example, before we would sew 500-700 pieces per day... But now, they have increased the target. They have set the amount at 1,000 pieces... That's the problem that all workers are facing now” (Pheakdei, December 2021).

Factories routinely used increased production targets during the pandemic to offset their economic losses by squeezing higher output from a shrinking workforce. These pressures have continue to intensify, compelling workers to labour “like a deity with a thousand hands” (Bopha, July 2021). As they continue to struggle with the financial repercussions of the pandemic, workers have found it increasingly difficult to challenge these oppressive workplace regimes:

“[The factory] blames [the problems] on COVID-19, so everyone is afraid to make complaints. They are afraid. The upper rankings also threaten that if we are stubborn, they will close down the factory. Some people may think no one is going to close down the factory but some people are afraid, so they do not dare to complain... Before, my factory usually received a lot of complaints but since COVID-19, not really... Because people are afraid of losing their jobs or getting fired... Before, the factory was afraid of the workers but not now, the factory always has the upper hand” (Chenda, December 2021).

Their growing precarity has effectively ceded workers' bargaining power to employers. Where women remain acutely afraid of the calamitous impacts of further factory closures and job losses, employers have weaponised these fears, leveraging desperation through threats and pressure:

“The aspect of limiting the worker freedom has become stricter than before. I refer to when workers try to demand for the benefits we deserve and that the employer tries to constrain us from demanding... They intimidate workers a lot. Other than that, they are so aggressive that they always blame us. Since the beginning until now, I don't think it has gone anywhere, it is the same on this matter and I believe it also happens in other factories too... Because of this COVID-19, it forces employers to run out of the country and halt their operation significantly; moreover, it also allows room for the remaining factory employers to not fully comply with the labour rights law for workers and not respect their rights” (Malis, December 2021).

The loss of autonomy was a common thread in accounts, like Chanthy above, who compared her experiences in the post-pandemic factory as “like a slave with no freedom”.

“I thought that I faced difficulty due to COVID-19 and that things might get better after the COVID-19 outbreak was over. But that has not happened because the factory conditions have become stricter.”

Pheakdei, December 2021



Support

The adverse impacts of COVID-19 on trade union organising is a critical factor exacerbating the erosion of working conditions and cementing workers' reduced capacity for workplace bargaining. The attrition of employment across the garment sector during this period means that many unions have shed significant numbers of members. However, these challenges have been compounded by more severe, systematic efforts by government and employers to abuse COVID-19 protections to further repress union activity in the country.

Under the pretence of “downsizing” or “streamlining” production, factories routinely targeted union leaders and activists in layoffs and suspensions, releasing them from work as short-term contracts expired and not recalling them even as their colleagues returned to the factory:

“I am not sure [whether I will go back to work in the factory]. I will see what the future will bring... [I can't return] because I am a trade union representative, as there was union discrimination there. [The branch representatives] were stopped from working since April 2020 when our contract reached its due date... They discriminated against our trade union. They don't want us to come back... As this COVID-19 arrives and remains, they even put more pressure on workers... [Now] there is no one that helps to tackle that problem” (Neary, January 2022).

Where trade union leaders are employed on fixed-term contracts, usually of 3- or 6-months' duration, it is very hard for unions to evidence discrimination and challenge these dismissals through litigation. The prospects for seeking resolution of these and other grievances through direct action – such as strikes, protests, or demonstrations – has also shrunk further during the pandemic, as the government has used emergency COVID-19 legislation to further attack freedoms of assembly and expression. The Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 was passed in March 2020, despite opposition from human rights groups who warned that its “broad and vague”³⁴ provisions and lack of independent oversight left it open to abuse by state authorities. Since then more than 700 people have been subject to “arbitrary arrest”³⁵ under its provisions, with disproportionate penalties – up to 20 years imprisonment and \$5000 fines³⁶ – serving as an effective ban on protest:

“They use COVID-19 as an excuse to stop workers from making any demonstrations. After the COVID-19 crisis, everything is tough to handle. When we gather for a protest or demonstration, the Ministry of Health will stop us from doing it. Before COVID-19, our unions could help the workers sufficiently. But after COVID-19, the factory can do a lot to take advantage of the workers and the union can do nothing to help their members” (Independent Trade Union, February 2022).

“COVID-19 has brought unions very big challenges in terms of union power and organising. The setbacks have made workers scared and they don't want to talk. Before COVID-19, we spent nearly 15 years to bring them to understand their rights and collective power, so it's a significant impact to lose that momentum. It's not easy to organise so we usually add only a few branches each year, but in the past two years we have lost 20. It's set us back ten years.”

Independent Trade Union, February 2022

Money

As household finances sank to their lowest ebb during Cambodia's COVID-19 lockdowns, food prices and the cost of other essentials "skyrocketed" (Chanthou, December 2021). These inflationary pressures are another challenge that workers hoped would be consigned to the height of the pandemic past, easing alongside as the lockdown lifted. Instead, they have persisted. Driven by international energy and commodity price spikes, by May 2022 consumer inflation in Cambodia had reached 7.2% year-on-year: a 13-year high³⁷. These pressures are exerting a familiar cost-of-living squeeze on households, already struggling with depleted savings and deepening debt burdens.

This squeeze is exacerbated by two years in which the minimum wage for garment workers in Cambodia – set at US\$190/month in 2020 – has risen by just US\$2 a year; a minimal increase of less than 1%. Here, pay is another arena in which the collapse of workers' bargaining power during the pandemic has clearly manifest. The minimum wage, adjusted annually, has been a highly contentious issue in recent years, declining in real terms until 2013 when a national strike won unprecedented increase. Since, rises have kept ahead of inflation. Employers have long argued that these minimum wage levels are unsustainable as they make Cambodia's garment sector uncompetitive relative to regional neighbours. Nonetheless, sector's output volumes and value have continued to soar. During the pandemic, however, the government acquiesced to employers' demands that the minimum wage gains be tempered in the name of industrial recovery. For the first time in nearly a decade of hard-fought gains, workers have experienced a real terms fall in pay, creating a sustained collapse in their standards of living post-pandemic:

"The price of goods in the market and gasoline are significantly rising, and if you look at the workers, 99% of the workers in Cambodia are in debt. We only got a US\$2 raise in a year... If I can talk freely – and I am afraid that if I talk freely, I will be punished – but I want the government to reconsider... If this continues, and the government does not solve the prices in the market, then even 100 years later, we will not improve at all. We will still be in debt" (Kunthea, December 2021).

As of October/November 2021, before inflation climbed to these record highs, already 33% of workers were still eating less than they thought they should and 8% reported episodes within the last month where they could not eat due to a lack of money or other resources. This suggests that food insecurity and hunger will remain chronic challenges among the workforce for the foreseeable future.

"The food price has shocked me, making me afraid about spending on food because everything has become so expensive."

Malis, June 2021

Family

Many women endure the myriad pressures of work in the garment industry to give their children prospects of a better life than they have. Though many struggle to find a way to fulfil their own dreams, they have long harboured devout faith in the emancipatory potential of education to transform the futures of their children:

“I want them to study, and I told them not to have jobs at the factory because it is very difficult. I told them to try hard in studying so that they can get other jobs besides that. I said “Look at me and your dad, the construction work and factory work are very difficult to get money, and sometimes we do not even get that money. Some companies might pay us back and some do not. When they do not pay, we cannot make them do anything.” (Socheata, January 2021).

One of the starkest impacts of the pandemic, therefore, has been its deleterious impact on the education of these offspring. Schools in Cambodia were closed for face-to-face instruction for 250 days in total during 2020 and 2021, the equivalent of almost two-thirds of the two school years³⁸. Whilst schools were instructed to implement home-based learning during school closure, many women workers struggled to keep their children engaged in remote study over this period. Among the key barriers was the costs to households of this alternative provision. Remote learning required families to invest in mobile technology, such as laptops or smartphones, through which students could participate in lessons, at a time when household incomes had been slashed. For some workers, even the cost of phone cards, required to top-up account balances and maintain mobile internet, or electricity to charge devices was prohibitive. As such, they were increasingly compelled to make additional reluctant sacrifices to their children’s education:

“I want my children to study, and I told them not to have jobs at the factory because it is very difficult. I told them to try hard in studying so that they can get other jobs besides that.”

Socheata, January 2021



“No, [my children] do not study online. During COVID-19, they studied online for only a bit, but it was very costly because I had to pay for their school fees, as well as for phone cards. I only had them study online for about a month. Every two to three days, I had to top up US\$1 on my mobile account. I did not have enough money for it. So I asked them to stop studying online. I will just let them study again when they reopen the schools... My children actually want to study and I also want them to study. But if I cannot afford it anymore, I have to stop them stop studying. What can I do? Because I cannot afford it?” (Chenda, January 2021).

“No, my children do not study online. During COVID-19, they studied online for only a bit, but it was very costly because I had to pay for their school fees, as well as for phone cards. I only had them study online for about a month.”

Chenda, January 2021

Two years into the pandemic, the impacts on their children's learning and development are acutely observed by parents:

“I did not have a phone for [my children] to study... Now I don't know if my kids can catch up... They study poorly.... [The eldest] is around 11 years old, nearly 12. The youngest is 8 years old. But my kids are poor with their studies. I ask them to do the reading out loud and they cannot. I don't know what the future holds for them” (Sokha, December 2021).

In this way, the financial impacts of the pandemic have compelled intergenerational transfer of disadvantage.

Health

One of the enduring challenges throughout COVID-19 has been the enormous strain that its many, intersecting crises have placed on women's mental health and wellbeing. Stress, anxiety, and depression, linked to the pressures under which they have been working and living for more than two years, emerged paramount in women's experiences, characterised by frequent depictions of overwhelming fear and worry; insomnia and fatigue; a sense of dread or foreboding about the future; feelings of hopelessness or pessimism; and low, sad, and empty moods. In severe cases, this led to episodes of suicidal thoughts:

"I just want to live and think in the moment I have... I don't want to overthink because it really affects my mental health. Like when I had COVID-19, I overthought a lot, and if there was a pill in my hand, I would pass away.. I was not feeling well and kind of unstable when I had COVID-19... I was afraid that people would discriminate and be disgusted with me, and would not want to talk to me at all... We have to live one day and think one day. If we overthink, it will be hard for us" (Sothea, July 2021).

Where understanding of mental health issues remains limited in Cambodia, and support services are close to non-existent, mental health challenges were often described by women in this way as a form of "overthinking". Moreover, these pressures are acutely gendered, as many female workers carry double burdens as main breadwinners and primary caregivers for immediate and extended families:

"Women have to think more than men so it's harder for us. It has a major impact because of COVID-19. It's hard to describe but we women think a lot. We think about our children and family. Men are less affected because they don't think much like us" (Panha, July 2021).

"It is extremely hard. I cannot express it. I am fed up with everything. Sometimes, I sit and the tears fall. I walk with others for around one or two hours to shift my thinking. When I come back home, I am sad and think again. Why is being born as a human such misery?"

Lida, July 2022

Our ReFashion Radio shows placed urgent testimony from workers on the dire effects of the pandemic on mental wellbeing into dialogue with trained mental health professionals, who offered guidance to listeners who might be struggling, providing rare opportunity for the audience of workers to listen to advice from qualified support. One described:

“During the lockdown, when I was stuck in the room alone, I took all the pills that the doctor gave me for treatment but I took over 27 pills and thought it was the way to give me sleep. Actually, when I overthink, I always take this pill because it can let me sleep. If I don’t take it, I will think a lot, cannot sleep, and vomit. Then everyone thought I wanted to commit suicide but actually I was just wanting to sleep.” (ReFashion Radio, Episode 7, Mental Health).

Although women’s experiences of acute mental health episodes peaked during phases of lockdown, these too prevail as a chronic challenge for women in the post-pandemic era, as mental health emerged as an epidemic within and outlasting the pandemic.

“During the lockdown, when I was stuck in the room alone, I took all the pills that the doctor gave me for treatment but I took over 27. Everyone thought I wanted to commit suicide but actually I was just wanting to sleep.”

ReFashion Radio, Episode 7, Mental Health





Lessons learned to Build Forward Better

Our findings highlight an urgent need for industry stakeholders to work together to enhance the rights, wellbeing, and economic security of women workers and their families. We present 3 key lessons learned from our study to “Build Forward Better” for Decent Work in just and sustainable global supply chains in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Building Forward Better

Lesson 1

International governments must hold businesses to account for how they treat suppliers and workers in their global supply chains.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across the global garment and footwear industry have underscored the limitations of voluntary governance regimes for global supply chains. Despite decades of corporate social responsibility promises in the fashion industry, clothing brands and retailers opted instinctively during the crisis

to protect their own profits over the people in their supply chains. Yet suppliers and workers lacked capacity and confidence to challenge their egregious and often unlawful breaches of contract. Mandatory regulation and legislation is therefore needed to ensure oversight of supply chains and enable suppliers and workers to hold brands and retailers to account. In the UK, this should include the establishment of a Fashion Supply Chain Code and Adjudicator by the UK Parliament to enforce fair purchasing practices, with scope to both receive and investigate anonymous complaints and powers to impose sufficient fines on company turnover to eradicate the financial incentives of abusive malpractice.

“I hope that your organization will help publicise about the difficulties of garment workers to other organizations that understand... I just hope that, despite all of my difficulties, one day they could help me” (Vicchra, December 2021).

Building Forward Better

Lesson 2

Global brands and retailers must revise purchasing practices to ensure proper social and environmental sustainability.

The potential for improvement to employment and working conditions for workers in the global garment and footwear industry is limited by unfair purchasing practices of global brands and retailers, who routinely demand faster production schedules, aggressive price discounting, and extended payment terms. The COVID-19 crisis in the garment industry was facilitated by these practices, which push the risks and costs of production from brands to suppliers, who in turn pass these on to workers through low pay, limited protections, and poor workplace conditions. Global brands and retailers must therefore uphold their own existing commitments to social and environmental sustainability by reforming their practices and, in doing so, creating an enabling environment for transformative change to workplace rights and benefits. This should include fair order timelines and payment terms within contracts that allow for proper planning, longer lead times, timely payment, and respect for workers' rights. This should also include responsible pricing models that cover the costs of social compliance, including living wages, robust social security coverage, and healthy and safe workplace environments, etc.

"I want to request the buyers to comply with their own values and words of respecting human rights." (Malis, December 2021)

Building Forward Better

Lesson 3

The Cambodian government and local stakeholders must cooperate to promote standards of Decent Work in the Cambodian garment industry.

Low pay, limited protections, and poor workplace conditions are problems which predate the COVID-19 crisis in Cambodia's garment industry and have compounded its impacts by undermining workers' ability to build longer-term pathways to economic security and resilience. The Cambodian government and local stakeholders must

uphold standards of Decent Work to guarantee workers a fair share in the benefits of industrial activity. This should include guaranteeing economic security and resilience by ensuring that (i) the sectoral minimum wage is fixed at a living wage level sufficient to meet the basic needs of workers and their households and (ii) social security meets minimum standards established in the ILO Social Protection Floor Recommendation, including permanent schemes that offer adequate income protection during unemployment and old age, as well as basic health coverage outside of employment.

Further, specific action must also be taken to ensure that all workers in the garment and footwear industry in Cambodia have equal rights and protections at work, including those working in non-export/subcontracting facilities. This should include extending the mandate of Better Factories Cambodia to assess and report on non-export/subcontracting facilities. Finally, freedom of association, including the right to form and join trade unions, and the right to collective bargaining are fundamental to the achievement of Decent Work. Existing legislation should be reviewed so that any restrictions on these freedoms are absolutely necessary for public order and proportionate to the circumstances.

"The government should sympathize with workers because they are their children and they are considered as our mother and father...Please think about the workers and provide them a proper salary. Don't allow employers to oppress the workers" (Reasmey, January 2021).

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