



The Reality of Palestinian Working Women in the Labour Market during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Palestinian women and girls, in the formal and informal labour markets, suffered from various types of discrimination before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic. Their suffering exacerbated at the individual, economic and social levels after the government's declaration of the state of emergency on the 5th of March 2020, and the subsequent closures of businesses and commercial facilities, in addition to enforced home quarantine and work-from-home policies. The situation has further worsened with the increase of unpaid care work for women due to the conventional social norms about their roles inside the households, which would eventually limit their access to sustainable economic opportunities and to realize the well-being for women, families and the society at large.

In 2019, the number of women working in the informal sector was estimated at 32,000 comprising around 31% of the number of workers in Palestine. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) data for the fourth quarter of 2019, indicated that unemployment rates for females was about 38% compared to 21% for males during the same period. In comparison, it reached 41% for females and 23% for males during the second quarter of 2020. The females' participation rate in the labour force in the Gaza Strip was 19% compared to 17% in the West Bank, while it dropped from 17% to 15% respectively during the second quarter of 2020. Statistics also indicated that most economic activities witnessed a decrease in the number of male and female labourers, especially in the restaurants and hotel sectors.

Palestinian Working Women and COVID-19 Challenges

- The 2020 study on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls in Palestine, issued by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, indicated that 50% of women were afraid of losing their jobs. It also showed that 54% of the women were subjected to economic violence due to halted operations of businesses during the period of closures and the suspension of financial and purchasing activities in several economic sectors.
- A UN Women survey on the impact of COVID-19 on women-led small and medium-sized enterprises in Palestine, published in April 2020, showed that the most affected sectors by the pandemic, where women are operating are: food products 26% followed by embroidery, 20%, and nurseries, 11%. Also, 42% of the respondents indicated that they witnessed a decline in demand on their products, due to two reasons according to the same survey; 9% of women respondents said that mobility restrictions affected their sales, and 7% said that increased responsibilities in child-care prevented them from pursuing their businesses.
- During the first quarter of 2020, the Palestinian Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) documented about 39,000 complaints from women workers who lost their jobs and whose rights were violated by their employers. Around 35% of the complaints were reported by women with disabilities. Complaints of women employed in the informal sector amounted to 75% compared to 35% in the formal sector. Most of the complaints were concentrated in the textile, services, nurseries, tourism, health services, and pharmaceutical industry sectors.

Situation of Working Women in the Private Sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- The 2019 statistics by the PCBS indicated that the Palestinian private sector has 83,600 women labourers in the West Bank and 25,300 in the Gaza Strip working in the various economic sectors. Out of these, 35% are paid less than the minimum wage stated by the Palestinian Labour Market, which is 1,450 ILS under normal circumstances. Statistics also indicated that female labourers in the informal private sector were present mostly in the education, agriculture, and hospitality sectors; and they were the most affected as they are subjected to losing their income, and falling into more violations of their labour rights in light of the ongoing pandemic.
- On the other hand, statistics also indicated that the 1,000 working women inside the green line and settlements faced the risk of losing their jobs or contracts during the COVID-19 Pandemic, which would broaden the segment of affected women as a result of the state of emergency.

Poverty Levels in the Women-Headed Households during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Official statistics issued by the PCBS in 2019 indicated that 19% of the families headed by women in the West Bank suffer from poverty, while this percentage reaches 54% in the Gaza Strip. Thus, the economic consequences of the pandemic increase women's vulnerability to poverty due to their inability to access employment, or the loss of their jobs and therefore exacerbates women's inability to provide for their families.
- Statistics also indicate that poverty rates are steadily rising among families whose income depends on the private sector, which can be linked to the economic decline stemming from the precautionary measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, and ultimately threatens the sources of income of a large segment of women working in this sector.
- According to PCBS's data, only 23% of the households' main providers received their wages as usual, while 25% of them received their wages/salaries partially and 52% of them did not receive any wages/salaries at all during the March-May lockdown period (95% of them work in the private sector, 2% work in the government sector, and 3% work in other sectors).
- On the other hand, 42% of Palestinian families (40% of which are headed by women), indicated that their income dropped by no less than half and more during the closure, and only 31% of Palestinian families indicated that they had enough income to cover family expenses during the closure period, according to PCBS data in October 2020.

Palestinian Women with Disabilities at work during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Women with disabilities are the most affected by the Pandemic, both in the formal and informal sectors, due to the rising rate of unemployment, thus made it increasingly difficult for them to meet their basic needs. According to the survey held by the Stars of Hope in the second quarter of 2020, it revealed that around 39% of women with disabilities are facing financial difficulties in addition to physical difficulties as a result of the state of emergency.
- Moreover, the increased burden on women, who are the primary or the only providers of unpaid care work for family members, contributes to the neglect and marginalization of individuals with disabilities in the family. Hence, women with disabilities' economic hardships furtherly exacerbated by the absence of government social protection measures and policies and the increased discrimination against them.

Policies Pursued by the Government under the COVID-19 Pandemic

- The Council of Ministers allowed women with children under nine years to work from home.
- The Council of Ministers launched credit facilities and low interest loan Funds for small, medium, and micro businesses, including women-led businesses, by the Palestinian Monetary Authority provided through the banks and Microfinance Institutions.
- The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), through "Waqfet Izz" Fund and other mechanisms, provided financial and in-kind support to poor families with a focus on women-headed households. Also, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and the PGFTU, the MoSD provided financial assistance to a group of female and male workers, with focus on women workers in kindergartens.

Recommendations:

- Ensure the provision of disaggregated data according to sex and age, in the interventions and analysis relevant to the rights and demands of women workers.
- Monitor any emerging or potential threats against women's participation and retention in economic activities and mitigate them. In addition to focusing recovery efforts on programs that strengthen the economic agency of women to face any challenges that might arise in the future, with special focus on women-headed households and other vulnerable groups in the community.
- Strengthen women's participation and leadership in policy and decision-making processes in the economy, to reflect the rights of women and respond to their needs, including the most marginalized segments (women-headed households, poor women workers, and women with disabilities). This will contribute to recognizing women's leadership and equal participation in the recovery plans and efforts.
- Bridge the existing gap between the Palestinian policies for increasing women's participation in the labour market, and the reality of women's participation on the ground.
- Ensure collective actions to combat the prevalent stereotypical gender roles.

Disclaimer: This fact sheet was produced as part of the Action Plan of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) and the National Women's Coalition for the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Palestine. The fact sheet is based on a national report on violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic prepared by the GUPW and the CEDAW Coalition with support from UN Women.