



Better Work Haiti COVID-19 economic impact survey results

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The world of work is being profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the threat to public health, economic and social disruptions threaten the livelihoods and well-being of millions of workers and their families. These economic shocks can be especially acute for workers with jobs within disrupted global supply chains, particularly when they do not have access to formal social protection. In Haiti, where the garment industry has recently accounted for as many as 65,000 formal jobs and 90 per cent of national exports, political instability has also compounded the uncertainties for workers and their families. This brief provides insight into the key issues and concerns workers have expressed related to their livelihoods during a COVID-19 economic impact survey conducted in late 2020.

Better Work Haiti, a joint programme of the International Labour Organization and the International Finance Corporation, aims to improve working conditions and business competitiveness in the garment supply chain. The programme has been engaging with sector stakeholders, including the government of Haiti, to aid in the response to COVID-19's effects. It provides training and advisory services to participating factories to support social dialogue and continuous improvements in working conditions. These services have continued in a modified format – often virtually or in a virtual/in-person hybrid – during the pandemic. Better Work also plays a role in generating data and insight into working conditions in the sector through its regular compliance assessments, and twice-yearly

reporting of results. In addition, the programme has supported implementation of surveys among workers to generate insights for the industry. Better Work Haiti enlisted a survey firm to conduct face-to-face surveys among a large-scale sample of workers in the garment sector in Haiti. From November 12 to December 1, 2020, 3,330 workers were surveyed across 38 factories enrolled in the Better Work Haiti programme. Each interview took place on-site in workplaces, in areas removed from the production floor and oversight from management. Trained enumerators recorded responses to questions covering work and home life in light of COVID-19. Key findings from a synthesis of the responses touches upon three main themes: take-home pay, support networks, and safety and well-being.

Although take-home pay has recovered from employment disruptions in mid-2020, financial stress remains a primary concern among workers

Over two-thirds of workers say they have experienced some sort of work disruption, such as a temporary suspension, in the past 30 days. Such leave without pay can immediately affect the take-home pay of workers in the garment sector. Based on workers' responses, reported salaries appear to have recovered from reductions due to COVID-19 disruptions. Asked to recall prior salary payments, half of workers surveyed said they were paid the same in November 2020 compared to February 2020, 20 per cent reported a pay decrease, and 29 per cent reported a pay increase in the same time period. Workers reported median bi-weekly take-home pay of 6,000 gourdes (\$83) in February 2020; in November that year the median reported bi-weekly take-home pay was 6,455 gourdes (\$89).

Yet, over 60 per cent of respondents reported

“financial stress” as a concern. While this may indicate a general feeling of inadequacy of wages in the garment sector to support livelihoods even in normal times, it may also reflect reverberating effects of the pandemic as workers drew down savings throughout 2020. Eight in ten workers have spent down savings in the past two months to cover their living expenses, while one-third have borrowed money in past two months to pay for living expenses. Well-documented challenges in the country with inflation and rising food prices are also likely contributing to workers' financial stress. A significantly smaller portion – albeit still over 50 per cent – of workers anticipate spending down their savings in the next two months to cover living expenses, offering some encouragement.

Workers and their dependents are relying heavily on familial support networks

Many workers in the garment sector in Haiti must play a dual role as a wage earning and caretaker. Sixty-eight per cent of workers in the sector have children. Among these workers, roughly half have children under the age of five.

Half of workers regularly remit money to their families. Workers typically send an estimated 8 per cent of their income to family members. Moreover, money sent home is spent on essentials: nearly all

workers sending money home say it is used for food. Half report health care spending, as well as paying down debt. A quarter report remittances supporting education of family members. Yet monetary support goes both ways for garment workers in Haiti: one-third of workers report relying on support from family members in the past two months to pay living expenses.

Beyond stresses at the workplace, the external environment affects the safety and well-being of workers

A widespread concern among the survey sample was food insecurity. Since the onset of COVID-19 disruptions, 91 per cent of workers say that they have had to reduce the number of meals they eat or the amount of food at each meal. According to workers, this is both because of higher prices of food (87 per cent of workers say this) and because of a drop in household income (76 per cent). Asked about other concerns, nearly 80 per cent of workers cite personal safety concerns during their commute to work. Instability in the country was a common concern mentioned in the course of the survey interviews.

Such stressors on basic needs such as food and personal safety take a toll on the mental well-being of workers. Nearly two-thirds of workers cite concern over mental stress. Yet, standard measures of well-being included in the survey suggest resiliency, too. Positive areas of mental health were in feelings of optimism about the future and in the ability to make decisions.

When looking ahead to the future, only six per cent of workers would like to envision themselves working in their current factory three years from now, and fewer yet see themselves in another garment factory or industrial setting. Most report wanting to run their own business or to work and live abroad.

Conclusion

Results from this survey exercise in late 2020 has given insight into the typical background and perspective of workers in the Haitian garment sector. While the industry continues to provide critical jobs tens of thousands of workers in Haiti, the current survey suggests workers face challenges to meeting basic needs during the pandemic even as incomes for the sampled workers have largely recovered from reductions in 2020. Few workers wish to see themselves in the medium-term future in the sector, reflecting their broader aspirations for their working life while simultaneously suggesting there is room for improvement to ensure these jobs can support a viable livelihood. Better Work Haiti and its partners recommit to their mandate to ensure improved working conditions and competitiveness for firms in a sustainable sector.

Better Work Research Briefs present a summary of the programme's research findings on particular topics.

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