

# ▶ Workers with Disabilities in Jordan's Garment Sector

## ▶ Introduction

The lives and livelihoods of people with disability (PwD) are often impacted perceptions and prejudices regarding their conditions, their abilities, their worth and, ultimately, their place in society. Such views are not typically favorable, instead compromising the social, economic and political integration of People with Disabilities, as well as their full enjoyment of their rights, economic participation and access to assistance and protection systems.

In Jordan, an abundance of programs, initiatives, and legal guarantees, such as hiring quotas, aiming at increasing the economic empowerment and societal inclusion of PwD has been introduced over the past two decades. However, progress has yet to translate on the ground in all its facets. PwDs in Jordan are still broadly regarded, as unfit to work, but sometimes even as social burden. In turn, such attitudes ultimately have a profound impact on the psychological well-being and self-perception of persons with disabilities and their socioeconomic empowerment. The reality in the labor market is both a reflection and a consequence of certain phenomena of exclusion present in the education system itself, as a limited access to education (compared to their non-disabled peers) further adds to the competitive disadvantage PwDs face in the Jordanian labor market.

Over the last twenty years, Jordan has established itself as an apparel exporting country. The apparel sector is now one of the Kingdom's leading export sectors and manufacturing employers. Better Work Jordan aims at improving working conditions, enhancing respect for labour rights, and boosting competitiveness of the sector. In line with its mission to improve the conditions of all workers, Better Work Jordan is committed to protecting the labour rights of people with disabilities (PwDs), including ensuring labour market access and adequate protections and accommodations for PwDs. Among other guarantees under the program and Jordanian labor law, a hiring quota for garment factories for workers with disabilities at 4% of the workforce – depending on factory size – has been introduced.

This study details the outcomes of research conducted by the Phenix Center for Better Work Jordan into labor market access and working conditions among people with disability (PwDs) in factories in the Jordanian garment sector. This research relies on a mixed-methods study methodology, consisting of desk review of available literature and existing data and the collection of qualitative data.

In order to collect primary data, three specific data collection exercises were implemented: observational data collection through site visits (12), focus group discussions hosted with workers with disabilities within the participating garment factories (12), and key informant interviews (12) with relevant stakeholders, such as relevant ministries, CSOs, the trade union, factory managements and other concerned parties. The focus group discussions and site visits were conducted among three industrial zones and factories in three industrial zones in Dleil, Sahab and Irbid.



## ▶ Key Findings

The main conclusion from this study is that, progressive legal developments and guarantees—including the ratification of numerous international conventions on the rights of workers and PwDs—have been crucial to the advancement of human rights in Jordan. In particular, Jordanian labor law, the Jordanian Constitution and the Collective Bargaining Agreement contain important provisions for the inclusion of PwD in the labor market in general and in the Jordanian garment sector in particular.

While most factories comply with legal quotas for hiring PwD at their factories, this study found that however legislation can only address a part of the issue: Improvements could be made with regards to the accommodation of PwD with regards to factory infrastructure.

The conveying of important information to workers who are PwD as well as the inclusion in important decisions on factory level could contribute to a bettering of the position of PwD in the sector. , a lack of systems in place to clearly convey key information on labor rights, contracts, complaints mechanisms and access to CSOs and the trade union to sensory impaired workers seemed to hinder a true inclusion of workers with disabilities in the sector.

Finally, the acknowledging of the abilities of PwD as valuable workers could be better addressed.

Accommodating infrastructure in particular is a decisive factor for people with different disabilities to make the entry into the labor market in the sector. In particular, accessible transportation to the factories for both people with motor disabilities and sensory disabilities was important to workers who are PwD. In factories where this kind of transportation was provided, workers with disabilities were actively enabled to join the work force at the respective factories, which would otherwise not have been possible.

Indeed, accessibility and mobility were among the main challenges pointed out by workers with disabilities in the course of the FGDs both within and outside of the factories.

## Access to Employment

Some of the most common constraint faced by people with disability working (or seeking to work) in the Jordanian garment sector include a lack of access to information, inadequate or discriminatory recruitment processes and practices, limited access to training, and low wages. As one expert stated<sup>1</sup>: "People with disability, and women in particular, struggle to secure employment."

The Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities plays an important role in providing PwDs with the necessary assistance and support to secure employment. However, workers in FGD would like the HCD to play a more active role in the sharing of information between job-seeking PwDs and recruiters. A concerned CSO member also advocated



*The first and most difficult part is finding people with disability to work. A year ago, we organized a one-day job fair for people with disability, in cooperation with the [local] Chamber of Industry, and hired 45-50 workers with disability.*

**Representative of Factory Management**



<sup>1</sup> In-depth interview with a CSO representative.

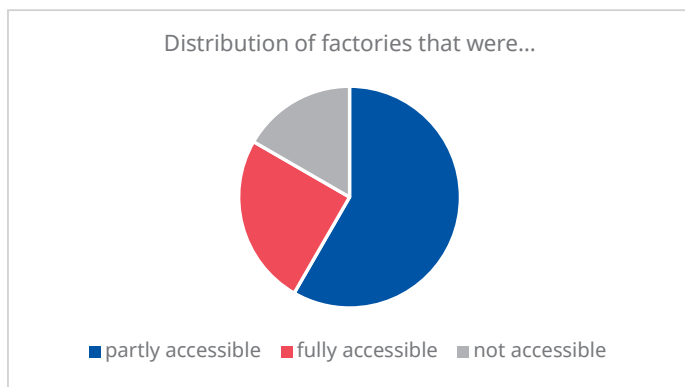


for better streamlining of efforts between the HCD, factories and other CSOS.<sup>2</sup> A representative of the HCD also underlined the importance of working with all stakeholders.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, factory managements also stated that it was at times difficult to hire workers with disabilities due to a lack of access to potential workers.

However, workers also recounted challenges and workers’ rights violations upon the signing of their contract. A high number of workers stated that they did not know the full contents of their employment contracts and labor rights due to sensory impairments. Blind and visually impaired workers noted that contracts were not provided in Braille and that contracts were not always read out to them completely.<sup>4</sup> A visually impaired worker remarked: “They said they would read the contract to me, but they never did.”<sup>5</sup>

**Accessible infrastructure as a pull factor for workers with disabilities in the garment sector**

▶ **Figure 2. Distribution of factories with different accessibilities.**

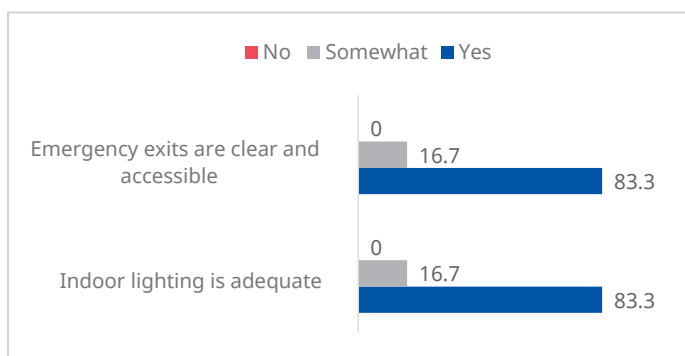


The existence of accessible infrastructure to ease the commute to and from work proved to be a major factor in providing PwD with the necessary means to join as a worker at garment factories. Site inspections revealed seven factories were only partly accessible to PwDs, while three were deemed both suitably located and accessible, and remaining two did not ensure suitable accessibility conditions for PwDs.

As one civil society representative pointed out, there is a pressing need to adapt the building interiors to the needs of people with disability, also in with regards to the safety of workers with disabilities who might not be able to assess an emergency or evacuate.<sup>6</sup> However, in most cases emergency exits were clearly marked and accessible

for people with motor disabilities, even though visually and hearing impaired workers were not necessarily included in design thinking for emergency cases.

▶ **Figure 4. Checklist results on factory floors.**



Safety of workers is interlinked with the setup of the factory floors. Half of all factories did not provide adequate signage and instructions for people with disability, including emergency numbers, while four factories provided only somewhat adequate signage and emergency information apart from marking emergency exits.

2 In-depth interview with a CSO representative.  
 3 In-depth interview with a representative of the HCD.  
 4 Respondent; FGD #4.  
 5 Respondent; FGD #4.  
 6 In-depth interview with a CSO representative.



Workers with motor disabilities reported challenges accessing cafeterias, especially in the larger factories. Most factory cafeterias were located on the upper floors which, in the absence of elevators, pushed workers with reduced mobility to order food from outside businesses at their own expense,<sup>7</sup> while others were not allowed to bring their food from home or could not refrigerate or reheat it at an accessible location.<sup>8</sup> As a result of these circumstances some workers opted to not take breaks or eat during their lunch breaks.<sup>9</sup>

### Lack of Accommodation for Certain Needs and a Lack of Support Systems

Other issues identified during site visits were inadequate chair heights, the non-adjustability of workstations and an absence of signs and warnings adequately legible to workers with sensory disabilities in a bit less than half of factories. In 66.7% of cases, signs did include symbols and colors to facilitate understanding of the symbols. However placement and lighting of these signs could be improved in nearly all factories. In general, access to information and in-house training for people with sensory disabilities proved difficult as the programs and workshops provided did not include sign language interpreters<sup>10</sup> or Braille translations of important documents or training material.<sup>11</sup> Only two of the factories had sign language interpreters present at meetings and conferences, while another factory had a sign language interpreter on site—however, this person was not a qualified interpreter, but rather a worker who had learned sign language to communicate with a hearing impaired relative.

Something that was often emphasized by the participant PwDs, the lack of support systems geared toward helping them overcome the limitations they face—notably regarding mobility, communication, and sensory perception—is often a powerful enough push factor to discourage certain PwDs from working altogether and on the other hand accessibility and accommodations for needs serve as a pull factor. Perhaps the most damaging consequence of the lack of autonomy enjoyed by PwDs in the workplace is that it contributes to perpetuating sociocultural perceptions. Anecdotes suggests some workers with disabilities are hired and paid but are not expected to work – out of an act of charity.

At the same time, good practices in some factories and an overachieving of the required number of PwD working at the factories are promising outcomes of the study. In fact, all stakeholders, from factory managements, the employers association, the Trade Union and civil society, ILO and the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and involved ministries, are invested in improving the situation of workers with disabilities in the garment sector. This valuable consensus is the best starting point for systematic implementation of the relevant workplace standards and stipulations, ensured through adequate evaluation and oversight mechanisms and regular dialogue between stakeholders.

7 Respondent; FGD #5.

8 Respondent; FGD #11.

9 Respondent; FGD #12.

10 Respondent; FGD #8.

11 Respondent; FGD #5.



## ▶ Good Practices

### Good Practices

One noteworthy factory in one of the industrial complexes has begun to proactively adapt their facilities to better meet the needs of PwDs. The process reportedly began with the installation of several bathrooms adapted to facilitate access and use by people with disability.

As one worker noted: "There is a total of forty-two bathrooms, three of which are adapted to people with disability." In addition, information is displayed on a large screen at the factory, and sign language interpreters are occasionally available, even though not always.

Workers with disability expressed satisfaction with the factory's flexible work policies for PwDs: "Everyone here is helpful; if a certain type of work is particularly taxing or difficult for us to perform [as PwDs], we're quickly transferred to a more appropriate station." Another worker added: "The [...] manager who works with me is great; I take many breaks, because I tire easily and there is no one to help me, so he makes it easier on me."

The impact of these steps has been overwhelmingly positive and has greatly contributed to the inclusion of people with disabilities in this factory. It has also led to a high degree of workers' satisfaction and retention. Most of the workers with disabilities in the FGD at this factory reported having worked for several years at the factory, with some of them even more than 12 years. Part of the reason this retention is that workers can progress in their careers at this factory and are tasked with jobs that suit their abilities and needs. Most of the workers reported feeling "comfortable" in their job, while being productive. However, also at this factory some things could still be improved with regards to the representation of PwD at the administration level and with regards to improving the communication with sensory impaired workers.

This example highlights the importance of a knowledge exchange between factories in order to improve the situation of workers with disabilities in the sector.



## ▶ Recommendations

In light of the above, and of the outcomes of the research carried out for the purpose of this study, a list of recommendations was developed for the garment sector, for the further advancement of situation of PwDs working in the garment sector, which is as follows:

- ▶ ***J-GATE in cooperation with the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*** should develop guidelines for employing people with disabilities in the garment sector. There are many initiatives to employ people with disabilities in the sector, however streamlining among programs and access to information on available applicants will help to make the recruitment of PwD in the sector. HCD should advise employers on best practices for improved infrastructure for different kinds of disabilities.
- ▶ ***Ministry of Labor as part of the national employment program, in cooperation with J-GATE and VTC*** should develop and implement vocational programs enabling PwD to join the workforce in the garment sector. Lack of education and training had often been cited in FGDs and KIIs as a hurdle to permanent employment and career development.
- ▶ ***Ministry of Labor, J-GATE and the Trade Union*** should deliver training to workers with disabilities, employers and trade union staff on the rights and responsibilities of workers and employers at the factory level. This training should make sure that all information is available in appropriate means of communication for all types of sensory impairments.
- ▶ ***Ministry of Labor*** should increase the training capacity of MoL to better detect violations relating to workers with disabilities at the factory level. This will not only help to point towards room for improvement, but also help to identify best practices in factories.
- ▶ ***The Trade Union and the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*** should continue to promote the employment of PwDs in the formal economy in the garment sector, address wage discrimination and work schedules by raising awareness at factory and public policy level.
- ▶ ***Factory Managements in cooperation with the Trade Union and J-GATE*** should redesign work environments in ways that facilitate the work, movement, and integration of PwDs. In particular, the construction of any new factory floors should take into account the infrastructure needs of PwDs to prevent the refitting of factories. Factory management should take into account the different needs of workers with different kinds of disabilities and make sure that supervisory staff is aware of the needs of workers with disabilities.
- ▶ ***The Trade Union and concerned CSOs and J-GATE*** should plan and implement broad awareness-raising and educational campaigns aimed at dispelling negative stereotypes and misguided attitudes toward PwDs in the sector.
- ▶ ***All stakeholders*** should streamline complaints mechanisms and raise awareness for these mechanisms in order to follow-up with illegal practices.
- ▶ ***Factory Managements, Trade Union and J-GATE*** should establish mechanisms to allow PwD to take part in development of factory policies, as well as in the union in order to be equally represented at all decision-making levels in the sector.
- ▶ ***All Stakeholders*** should encourage the exchange of best practices in the sector and engage in regular dialogue in order to work on the continuous improvement of the situation of workers with disabilities in the sector.