



Labor market indicators in Palestine

May, 2020

Number of workers:

In 2019, the number of workers in Palestine was 1,010,400 distributed as follows: 209,500 in the government sector, 667,600 in the private sector and 133,3000 who work in Israel and the settlements. Private sector workers included 501,700 in the West Bank and 165,900 in the Gaza Strip, comprising 66% of the overall number of workers in Palestine. Laborers in Israel and the settlements comprised 13.2% while workers in the government sector 20.7%.

The number of workers in the local market (which includes those in the public and private sectors) was approximately 877,111 in 2019, including 616,000 in the West Bank and 261,000 in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, the number of remunerated workers in the private sector amounted to approximately 360,000 with 255,300 in the West Bank and 105,400 in the Gaza Strip, with a distribution of 297,900 male and 62,800 female. The number of those working inside Israel was 110,400 and 22,900 in settlements; 300 Palestinian women worked in settlements and 600 inside Israel. The number of workers with Israeli-issued work permits amounted to 71% of the overall number of workers while 20% comprised those without permits. The remaining 9% was comprised of workers with Israeli ID cards or foreign passports.

Distribution of male and female workers:

Those working in the private sector among the 61,000 workers categorized as “owners” (that is, those who work in a facility they either fully or partially own and have at least one remunerated worker) including 52,000 in the West Bank and 8,000 in the Gaza Strip. Another 177,000 fall under the category of ‘self-employed” (that is, they work in an institution they either fully or partially own and have no employees), including 140,000 in the West Bank and 115,000 in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, there were around 39,000 workers who work as unpaid family members, including 34,000 in the West Bank and around 5,000 in the Gaza Strip.

As for the number of women working in Palestine according to sector, data shows there are 50,400 women in the government sector, or 31% of the overall number of working women in Palestine. Another 108,900 women work in the private sector, at 68%, and 1,000 women working in Israel and the settlements or 0.6% of the overall number of women in the labor force.

The number of workers in the informal sector included 320,000 workers, including 288,000 males and 32,200 females, comprising around 32.7% of the overall labor force in Palestine. It should be noted that the rate of informal labor in Palestine (workers in the informal sector in addition to remunerated workers who do not have any rights in the labor market including end of service bonuses/ retirement/ paid annual leave or paid sick leave) comprised 57% of the overall number of laborers, including 61% males and 38% females, distributed as follows: 59% in the West Bank and 51% in the Gaza Strip.

Remunerated Workers:

The average daily wage in Israeli shekels [ILS] for remunerated workers in Palestine was ILS129; ILS111 in the government sector, ILS97 in the private sector. It should be noted that there is a clear discrepancy between the average wage for remunerated workers in the private sector according to region. While the average daily wage in the West Bank was ILS118 this rate drops to ILS44 in the Gaza Strip and in Israel and the settlements it was ILS254 (or ILS 33.4 overall, close to \$10 million a day). There are another 188,000 uncontracted remunerated workers in the private sector while there are only around 67,000 workers in the private sector with permanent contracts.

Around 29% of remunerated workers in the private sector receive contributions from retirement funding/end of service gratuity – 33% in the West Bank and 18% in the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, less than half of female remunerated workers in the private sector (48%) received paid maternity leave in 2019.

Remunerated workers in the private sector who make lower than minimum wage:

The number of remunerated workers in the private sector who make lower than minimum wage (ILS1, 450) are around 109,000 workers – 24,300 in the West Bank (who represent approximately 10% of the overall remunerated workers in the private sector in the West Bank) who receive an average monthly salary of ILS1,038, and 84,400 remunerated workers in the Gaza Strip (who represent around 80% of the overall remunerated workers in the private sector in Gaza) who receive an average monthly salary not exceeding ILS700. Hence, the number of remunerated workers who make less than ILS2,000 a month comprise approximately 40% of the overall number of these workers – 23% in the West Bank (at around 59,000 workers) and 83.9% in the Gaza Strip (at around 88,000 remunerated workers in the private sector).

Laborers and the Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic:

Based on the aforementioned data provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, it is expected that several sectors of laborers will be directly impacted in Palestine from the Covid-19 pandemic, namely workers in the informal workforce. The number of facilities operating in the private and civil society sector in Jerusalem totals 4,668.¹ These facilities employ 19,182 workers, according to a comprehensive survey on Jerusalem facilities conducted in 2016. Furthermore, the overall number of facilities working amid the Cabinet's decision to halt several economic activities was 37,336 of a total 142,400 facilities operating in Palestine, representing 26.2% of these facilities. Under normal circumstances, these facilities employ 105,345 workers, from the overall 424,904 workers in private and civil society facilities in Palestine.

¹ Jerusalem here refers to the sector of the city Israel unilaterally annexed following its occupation of the West Bank in 1967

² http://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=3414

³ http://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=gDxqkJa27715999113agDxqkj

Distribution of these facilities according to geographic area is as follows: those working in the West Bank according to the Cabinet's decision amount to 24,233 facilities, or 25.4% of the total number of West Bank facilities and which employ 71.-43 workers, or 24.5% of the overall number of workers in the private and civil sector in the West Bank. In the Gaza Strip, the number of facilities in operation is 13,103, or 28% of the total number of facilities in the Gaza Strip, which employ 34,302 workers, representing 25.6% of the total number of workers.

Violations against Palestinian workers inside Israel and the settlements before and during the pandemic:

Palestinian laborers who work inside the Green Line and in settlements have been subjected to all forms of oppression, discrimination and violation of rights even prior to the pandemic, rights enshrined in international agreements and treaties. Israel even violates these workers' rights stipulated in their own laws and agreements, including bilateral agreements with the Palestinians. Eleven checkpoints have become a torturous daily trip for the workers, most of whom leave their homes before 3:00 a.m. and do not come home before 7:00 p.m. They are forced to queue in long and crowded lines before and while inside the checkpoint before being subjected to humiliating inspections. They must empty their bags, their tools are sometimes confiscated and police dogs are used to search their belongings including their food. They have to stand for hours in the scorching heat or in the bitter cold and take dangerous side roads. Sometimes, they are forced to return home because their employer does not show up or the car that takes them to their workplace fails to arrive.

Furthermore, over 60% of Palestinian laborers work in dangerous sectors such as construction, without the minimum safety requirements on the job. At the same workplace and the same job, Israeli workers are provided with personal protective gear. What's more, workers are not given training on the job, which puts them at a higher risk of injury, including death.²

Statistics from the Palestinian Labor Ministry and the Palestinian Labor Union Federation in addition to other organizations dealing in workers' affairs, point to an increase in the number of victims among Palestinian workers in the Israeli labor market. They say the number of casualties in 2019 was 46 workers, citing the illegal circumstances and lack of proper protection for these workers.³ There are no guarantees against injuries on the job, end-of-service rights or compensation during closures. What's more, their average salaries are far lower than their Israeli counterparts and they are constantly being exploited by their employers. The workers are also forced to pay mandatory contribution fees to the Labor Union fund in Israel, the "Histadrut" without benefiting from health or social insurance like other members of the fund who hold Israeli citizenship.

During the Coronavirus pandemic, on March 18, the Israeli government allowed a large number of laborers to stay over inside the Green Line, upon preconditions and in coordination with the PA, which demanded that the workers are provided with shelter and protection. It also demanded health care for any worker who contracts Covid-19. However, Israel instead closed all checkpoints separating it from the West Bank and in less than a week, it became apparent that Israeli authorities were not abiding by their agreement with the PA. Laborers had nowhere to

stay and were forced to sleep on the ground, in parks and greenhouses. Within that first week, two Palestinian laborers were thrown at the side of the road at the Beit Sira checkpoint after they were suspected of having contracted the virus. This was followed by scores of workers who were forced to return to their homes in the West Bank after their employers canceled the work permits when they could not get back to their workplaces. Once the checkpoints were closed, they were forced to sneak across the Green Line in openings in the separation wall to find work.

Israeli army forces actually turned a blind eye to this, even cutting holes in the security fence for workers to sneak through. Then on April 10, Israeli forces opened water channels and ducts near Qalqilya and four gates in the area between Qalqilya and the village of Habla so that workers could easily cross through. The Ministry of Health later said the number of infected workers had risen to 108, or 31.4% of all infections, adding that another 120 contacts had also become infected, or 34.9% of the total number of Covid-19 cases in Palestine.

In regards to settlements, it should be reiterated that all settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are illegal and illegitimate according to international law and are considered a war crime according to Article 8 of the ICC's Rome Statute. Israel has established hundreds of illegal settlements in the Palestinian territories and dozens of industrial zones on the border with the Palestinian territories where thousands of Palestinian laborers are forced to work and are subjected to a multitude of violations and risks. Most importantly, they are exploited in terms of pay by their contractors and employers who force them to work long hours and only record the minimum number of work days for them. These workers are constantly exposed to dangers such as poisonous insecticides and other chemicals and are not paid for days taken off for injuries. When they are laid off, their Israeli employers evade granting them workers' rights even if they were injured on the job. Even children and women are forced to work at dangerous jobs in substandard conditions.

Anyone following the course of the Coronavirus epidemic in Palestine will note the vast difference in numbers of Palestinian laborers working inside the Green Line or in settlements before and after the outbreak began. This points to Israel's failure to provide sound preventative measures and standards for them. On the contrary, Israeli authorities pay these laborers' little if any attention in regards to their health. If one of them is suspected to have contracted Covid-19, they are not provided with even the minimum level of medical care and thrown back over the checkpoint to the West Bank.

There is no doubt that Israel's policies towards Palestinian laborers whether before the pandemic or during, are policies that contravene with international law and conventions, which guarantee equality and non-discrimination in rights between laborers, even foreign laborers. Laws necessitate that all workers are treated with dignity, that they are provided with the necessary health insurance if they fall sick and that they work under safe conditions. Israel's actions towards workers do not meet the minimum ceiling of international standards in this regard.

International law has enshrined workers' rights within several international agreements and treaties including the International Declaration of Human Rights, the Fourth Geneva Convention and International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers

and Members of Their Families in 1990. According to Article 2 of this convention, a migrant worker is: “a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national.”

During the state of emergency declared in Israel, especially after the rising number of Covid-19 cases among its population, Palestinian workers found themselves before two options: either to stay home and therefore stay safe or maintain their source of income and livelihood for their families by venturing inside Israel where the virus has taken hold. Thousands of workers found themselves between a rock and a hard place after Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayeh gave them three days to enter Israel for work if they chose so, before the borders would be closed and they would be prevented from crossing over.

The geographic movement of Palestinian labor from their national region to areas inside the Green Line necessitates the application of the special reference of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, passed in the UN General Assembly on December 18, 1990. This is a treaty that cannot be read in isolation of other international treaties including all UN treaties pertaining to human rights such as the International Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, in addition to the Fourth Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians.

These references take into consideration the basic characteristics that distinguish laborers moving from one district to another and who have rights based on the principle of equality between them and what the governments of each respective region offers its own laborers. They also recommended that positive arrangements be made for this sector and their family members given the repercussions of migration -- forced crossing; that is the escalated impacts during emergencies such as natural disasters or epidemics. Based on these references and in light of the state of emergency declared inside the Green Line and the spread of Covid-19, the parties involved in the labor market, including official authorities and employers should abide by the application of these references and recommendations without exception. These are the minimum requirements and measures that must be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the state of emergency and epidemic should not be an excuse for these parties to infringe on the labor rights of migrant Palestinian workers, whether in terms of pay, working hours, vacation days, personal safety restrictions or insurances.

Should this situation impose exceptional restrictions on these rights, according to law, these restrictions must be only as much as they do not infringe on workers' human dignity and are no less than the measures applied to Israel's nationals, which must also take into consideration the guarantees in the Fourth Geneva Convention regarding the protection of civilians – migrant workers from an occupied district . This means the need for necessary measures to be taken to protect their physical and psychological safety in light of the direct and indirect impacts that could accompany the state of emergency and the spread of the epidemic, whether by authorities, individuals or official organizations. This is especially relevant since the laborers are being forced to remain in substandard living conditions. Israeli authorities are thus

required to provide an appropriate living environment that preserves their human dignity and respects their rights in accordance with the appropriate response to the pandemic.

In this context, the general recommendations of the International Labor Organization on the situation of the labor force during the Covid-19 pandemic should be pointed to. The recommendations called on all countries to adopt three policies that support the personal health of workers, especially migrant workers, and guarantee their full rights. They also obligate countries to balance between the competing interests of the workers and employers.

It is clear that Israeli occupation authorities have not respected any of their responsibilities as an occupying power towards Palestinians working in settlements, based on the aforementioned and according to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 pertaining to the protection of civilians under occupation, stipulated in Article 39. This includes the stipulation that, “Protected persons who, as a result of the war, have lost their gainful employment, shall be granted the opportunity to find paid employment. That opportunity shall, subject to security considerations and to the provisions of Article 40, be equal to that enjoyed by the nationals of the Power in whose territory they are.” Article 40 of the same convention says that, “Protected persons may be compelled to work only to the same extent as nationals of the Party to the conflict in whose territory they are.”

Furthermore, Israeli occupation authorities have not honored their international responsibilities towards Palestinian laborers working inside the Green Line. International human rights treaties guarantee overall protection of these workers’ right to equality, non-discrimination and to be treated with dignity and humanity. This is in addition to the application of international treaties, namely those pertaining to the rights of migrant workers who work in a country of which they are not nationals regarding rights that guarantee equal pay, health care, medical insurance, work leave and other workers’ rights. In this case, they must enjoy equal rights like Israeli nationals in accordance with Article 7 and Article 25 of the Convention. The same applies to social security -- Article 27 and Article 9, which necessitates the protection of their lives, and Article 16, which guarantees their right to personal safety in addition to Article 28 that obligates the foreign country in which they work to provide full medical care on equal ground with the country’s nationals without discrimination.

Israeli occupation authorities have inhumanely treated Palestinian workers before the Coronavirus pandemic much less during it. They are not testing workers, securing preventative measures or offering them the necessary treatment, which are all measures the ILO has necessitated countries to provide in order to safeguard the health of workers and guarantee a healthy workplace for them amid the pandemic. Countries are obligated to provide all means of protection including clothing, sanitizers and other means at the workplace in addition to full health care. They are also required to follow the guidebook of public safety measures compiled by the ILO entitled “An employer's guide on managing your workplace during COVID-19”.