

## The Experience of Palestinian Workers Under the COVID-19 Pandemic

### By: Ibtisam Al Bantegi, Hind Qashtah and Abu Khaled

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The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted Palestinian public health as well as economic and social life. These effects have been compounded by the on-going reality of Israeli colonialism and occupation. Restrictions on movement, control over borders, economic subjugation, land seizures, home demolitions, and the continuing presence of the Israeli military have all hampered the Palestinian response to the pandemic. But the effects of the pandemic on Palestinian society are not felt equally. For many—including health workers, and manufacturing or construction workers who must travel to work—it is impossible to stay at home or work remotely. Low-paid and informal-sector workers, who often rely on irregular and intermittent employment, also face major barriers to stopping work. Disparities in health insurance and sick pay similarly affect workers' ability to take time off and declare if infected.

For all these reasons, COVID-19 poses a serious threat to Palestinian workers' rights—many workers have lost their income, unemployment rates are rising, and the pandemic has highlighted stark issues of social and economic inequality. Palestinian women and youth—disproportionately represented in frontline essential labor and in the informal sectors—have been the hardest hit. Women workers also shoulder more of the burden of unpaid care work, including childcare and homeschooling.

The following text is a composite of three interviews conducted by Samirah Abed Al'Alem (Gaza Strip) and Anan Quzmar (West Bank) in November/December 2020 as part of fieldwork for the "Labour in Palestine and Covid19" project funded by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (Regional Office in Palestine and Jordan), and led by Riya Al'Sanah, Rafeef Ziadah, and Adam Hanieh. The interviews have been abridged and edited from the original Arabic.



COVID-19 in Bethlehem, West Bank, Palestine (5 March 2020).  
Photo by By abu adel via Shutterstock.

#### Participants:

Ibtisam Al Bantegi, a fifty-year-old kindergarten teacher, Rafah, Gaza.

Hind Qashtah, a thirty-three-year-old greenhouse worker, Der Al Balah, Gaza.

Abu Khaled, a fifty-year-old construction foreman, Zatarah village, Bethlehem, West Bank.

**Samirah Abed Al'Alem and Anan Quzmar (SAA & AQ):** What was your main source of employment prior to COVID-19 and how did the pandemic impact your ability to work?

**Ibtesam:** I worked as a teacher in a public kindergarten in Rafah city. Prior to COVID-19, I worked between four to five hours a day, five days a week, and earned between 350-400 NIS a month, depending on the number of enrolled children. In general kindergarten teachers don't have employment contracts and receive limited benefits (sick leave and maternity leave only). When the kindergartens across Gaza closed in March as part of the effort to curb the spread of COVID-19, teachers were instructed to stay in touch with our pupils through WhatsApp. But I don't own a smart-phone so a colleague fills in for me. As a daily waged worker, the closure of the kindergartens meant a complete loss of income.

**Hind:** I work at a greenhouse in Deer Al Balah, Gaza. Before COVID-19, I worked for five hours a day, six days a week, and earned 480 NIS a month. With the imposition of restrictions in March, to curb the spread of COVID-19, our workday has been split into morning and evening shifts. I've rarely had a full day's shift since then due to movement restrictions and lack of transportation, which makes access to work difficult. My employer has also cut down on the number of workers and has prioritized male employees. To supplement my income, I tried making yogurt and cheese at home, but the experiment failed. Electricity cuts and restrictions on movement meant that much of the produce spoiled before I could sell it.

**Abu Khaled:** I'm a construction foreman specializing in brick pointing, working across the occupied West Bank, mainly in the Bethlehem governorate. Prior to COVID-19, I had between five to ten men working for me. We would normally take on big jobs, predominantly condominiums, and public buildings. Workers from the Bethlehem governorate were hit first in the West Bank by COVID-19 restrictions. The lack of decent jobs in the area has pushed a large number of workers to seek employment from Israeli businesses or in the illegal settlements. In early March, a number of these workers were diagnosed as carriers of the virus. The Palestinian Authority and the Israeli occupying power swiftly imposed a seventy-two-day curfew on the area, cutting it from the rest of the West Bank and preventing movement within the governorate. These actions stigmatized workers from the area as "virus spreaders." As a result, employers stopped working with us, the new restrictions on movement made it impossible for us to find new work. Employers also seized the opportunity to avoid paying us for work we

had already completed.

Now that the restrictions have been lifted, job opportunities have become scarce and one of the main contractors I work with has informed me that he will stop working with me until the crisis is over and wages are lowered. Loss of jobs and economic hardship created a greater dependency on Israeli employers. Many workers, including those who had been working for me, are now working for Israeli bosses. One of the challenges we face as foremen is when we do get a job, we can't find any laborers. For example, on the building site where I currently work, we are three foremen and one laborer, whereas previously we were four foremen and six laborers.

**SAA & AQ:** Did you suffer economic stress because of the pandemic and how did this impact your ability to support your family, as well as inter-familial and social relations?

**Ibtesam:** My husband used to work in Israel, however since the imposition of the siege on Gaza in 2007 I became the sole breadwinner of our household of twelve. We learned to survive on my income and 750 NIS from social services once every four months, although this was barely enough to cover our debt to the supermarket. With my loss of income, our household was turned upside down; COVID-19 has destroyed our lives. There are days where there isn't a single shekel in the house, even if we needed medical care, we couldn't afford to get ourselves to the clinics. Sometimes my son finds work for 20 NIS a day. On those days he brings some supplies, but I never ask him to; my pride does not permit me to. My inability to provide for my family is a crushing emotional and psychological burden on me as a mother. On a broader social level, the impact of COVID-19 will be grave; the lack of jobs and income as a result of COVID-19 may lead many youths to criminal activity or suicide. This level of strain is unbearable. We are fearful for our children; we hope this pandemic will be over before we lose them.

**Hind:** I'm the sole provider for my family of ten as my husband had lung cancer and had to undergo treatment in an Israeli hospital. He is physically weak and in need of expensive medication and care. I also have three children who require hearing aids. Despite our desperate conditions we have yet to be granted assistance from social services and are only eligible for 80 NIS of weekly shopping coupons. This amount doesn't meet our basic needs and we are now in three months' debt to the supermarket.

My children have not been attending school and are unable to participate in remote learning as we don't own the necessary equipment and facilities (comput-

ers and internet). My deaf children are particularly vulnerable and no specific assistance has been arranged for them. COVID-19 is imposing a heavy burden on my family and myself, financially and mentally. The inability to provide for my family, particularly the maintenance and batteries for my children's hearing aids, has a heavy psychological impact on me.

**Abu Khaled:** The majority of construction workers are precarious day laborers, for whom the sudden loss of income led to a real financial crisis and increasing debt. During the intense days of the closure, our electricity and internet were cut off because of the inability to pay the bills. This prevented my children from partaking in remote learning and left them with little entertainment during the lockdown. Now as job opportunities are scarce and with the decrease of wages, we can just about cover our food costs. The hardest elements of it all are my inability to continue supporting my elderly parents and witnessing the psychological impact on my children and trying to explain the sudden shift in living conditions to them.

**SAA & AQ:** With the apparent economic impact of lockdowns and restrictions, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas government launched a number of relief funds for affected workers and their families. Were you eligible for any of these financial assistance funds?

**Ibtisam:** I didn't receive any support or aid from our local government (Hamas in Gaza) or the Palestinian Authority. Despite registering for several COVID-19 relief funds, including Wakfet Izz Fund, we received nothing. [1] People like us, those in desperate need of support have not received any help, it seems like all the financial support has been extended to public employees. We do not demand much. All we ask for is a support for those who need it, a decent monthly salary, and job security.

**Hind:** The government imposed restrictions to reduce the spread of the virus, but it didn't offer us any assistance in return. We agricultural workers didn't receive any assistance and did not benefit from Wakfet Izz Fund or the Qatari Fund. [2] Recently there was a declaration from the Presidency (Mahmoud Abbas's office) that workers who endured a loss of income due to COVID-19 related regulations are entitled to 700 NIS, however, I didn't find my name on the list. We agricultural workers are some of the most vulnerable workers, yet I don't understand why we are not amongst those who are entitled to financial support.

**Abu Khaled:** I didn't receive any support from the Palestinian Authority, and as far as I know, none of my workers received any aid either. I added my name to

the list of workers who had lost income due to COVID-19 in the hope of receiving 700 NIS in financial assistance, however, I wasn't deemed eligible. Thousands of people registered, but favoritism determined who had access to these funds. It is distressing to witness the level of favoritism, lack of transparency, and lack of support for workers, especially during times such as these. COVID-19 pushed me, and daily waged laborers like me, to think of finding jobs which can provide us and our families with a stable income. We must think of new sources of income. There is little to no agricultural production in our village, we must start thinking of ways to develop local productive sectors such as agricultural production and farming.

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[1] Wakfet Izz Fund was established with the declared aim of providing financial assistance to sectors affected by COVID-19, including Palestinian workers. Up until May 2020, the Fund raised seventeen million USD in contributions from the Palestinian private sector and businesses men.

[2] In March 2020, Qatar pledged 150 million USD in assistance to Gaza's government. These were to aid in paying government employees' salaries, reconstruction projects, and financial aid to those most in need. To be eligible for the 100 USD monthly assistance a family must be composed of over six members, have no working member, and receive no financial assistance from social services. Israel often delays the transfer of these funds as a form of political pressure and the Hamas government has been accused of prioritizing party members and affiliates.

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