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Impact of COVID-19 on Somali Workers

SURVEY FINDINGS

August 2020



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Table of Contents

Background	1
Objective	2
Methodology	2
Survey Sample	2
Main Findings	3
Key issues emerging from the Survey	3
1. Violation of health and safety rules within the workplace	3
2. Employers' refusal to pay decent wages	4
3. Delaying payment of wages	5
4. Job losses and unlawful termination of workers	5
5. Attempts to weaken union structures	6
Impact of COVID-19 on Female Workers	7
FESTU's actions during COVID-19	8
Conclusions and Recommendations	9

Background

Since the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as a global health emergency, the Federal Government of Somalia responded by putting in place a raft of measures to deal with the pandemic. The national political leadership outlined how the Government, line Ministries and Federal Member States as well as other key national institutions would respond to the COVID-19 crisis. All these series of measures are indeed commendable and indicative of the Government's desire to deal with the pandemic albeit political differences between the Federal Government and some Federal Member States.

The pandemic has brought to the fore a number of long-standing structural issues, which erode or undermine the country's ability to cope with any major pandemic, emergencies and national disasters.

Somalia has weak capacity to deliver services whether through federal government or federal member states. The country lacks a sound public health system which must include well-equipped public health systems, well-remunerated healthcare workers and responsive systems. Our institutions as a country still need a lot of capacity as even in the absence of such pandemics and emergencies, most government departments both at Federal & State levels operate at deficient levels.

Somalia has a weak capacity to provide services either through the federal government or federal member states. The country does not have a strong public health system which must include well-equipped public health centres, well-trained and adequately enumerated health workers as well as responsive systems. Somalia's public institutions in general are in ruins and need a lot of capacity enhancement.

Over 90% of the population is employed by the informal economy and up to 95% of the population depends on the informal economy for goods and services. Somalia also has a large population of widows, orphans and vulnerable children as well as laid-offs and retirees. The country still does not have a functioning social security system to protect the most vulnerable members of society. Although the federal government, through the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, has announced and implemented cash transfer measures for the poor, this is hardly enough.

One can imagine what happens to a working poor family whose breadwinner was laid off without pay during the pandemic in terms of access to food and basic items. Working poor families cannot afford to store food for 7 days let alone 3 months as employers in different sectors of the economy disengaged workers to mitigate the negative effect of the coronavirus pandemic on their businesses. Several workers have been asked to stay at home unpaid while waiting for businesses to pick-up.

The Federation of Somali Trade Unions (FESTU) has called for prioritizing the well-being of workers, as this will improve their standard of living and support their families during this time of social and economic stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Somali workers, FESTU, with technical assistance from the International Labour Organization (ILO), conducted a survey and examination to provide an evidence-based account on the plight of workers.

Objective

To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on Somali workers by shedding light on the significant impact of COVID-19 on loss of jobs and income.

Methodology

The survey was conducted through social media namely Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter as well as broadcasts from the local media houses encouraging workers to complete the form.

Survey Sample

A total of 1927 workers completed the survey, 448 of whom were women. A total of 921 respondents were between the ages of 25 and 45. Respondents were from Mogadishu, Baidoa, Qardho, Kismayo, Bardhere, Galkayo, Bossasso, Las Anod, Jowhar, Beledweyne, and Goldogo.

Respondents were drawn from the following sectors: transport, commercial services, energy, hospitality, informal economy, education, media, telecommunications, agriculture, electricity, building and construction, clothing/textile, petroleum.

Main Findings

The survey findings highlight the enormous strain that the COVID-19 pandemic is placing on Somali workers. The majority of respondents spoke of the lack of responsibility and consideration displayed by many employers for the dangers posed by COVID-19. Job insecurity, blatant disregard for health and safety precautions and failure to consult with workers and union representatives are some of the main challenges recorded in the research. According to the findings, the sectors most affected are commerce, service and agriculture sectors.

Key issues emerging from the Survey

1. Violation of health and safety rules within the workplace

Respondents spoke of the lack of effective occupational health and safety measures to protect workers from the pandemic. This includes employers failing to provide sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE), suitable sanitation facilities, face masks and hand sanitizers to workers. In addition to failing to put measures in place for COVID-19 prevention, employers have placed little effort in enacting and enforcing policies relating to social distancing. According to one respondent, *“companies we work in do not emphasize observing and maintaining social distance to and from work, and the provision of face masks and hand sanitizers to workers,”* while another stated *“our union raised concerns over the lack of social distancing in transporting workers to and from work or construction sites.”*

Health-related challenges during COVID-19 are not reserved to efforts in preventing the spread of COVID-19 but workers have revealed instances where workers were unable to access proper medical care. The survey highlighted that two workers from the hotel sector in Baidoa died after being denied medical care. This was a direct result of their employer refusing to pay their treatment. Another female worker died from complications aggravated by COVID-19 during her pregnancy, while yet another worker died after being denied dialysis treatment. In addition to the deliberate actions or inactions of employers that resulted in loss of life, it is clear that the pandemic is affecting already-fragile health systems which have suffered from years of neglect and inadequate funding.



2. Employers' refusal to pay decent wages

The issue of employers refusing to pay decent living wages during COVID-19 was prevalent throughout the qualitative responses. Respondents indicated that employers, in response to the harsh economic climate brought on by COVID-19, reduced hours and wages with no or little consultation with employees and/or union representatives.

Respondents in the telecommunications sector indicated that employers were failing to pay decent living wages, a situation rife with inequality given the substantial profits the sector makes. According to one respondent, *"Most workers in telecommunications are being robbed of their overtime and are getting lowly paid wages,"* with another noting that *"we are living in poverty bringing so much profit to telecommunications companies. We want them to improve working conditions and pay decent living wages."* Although it is clear that COVID-19 has caused economic strife both nationally and globally, workers were cautious to accept the new context as a justification for low wages. According to one *"using COVID-19 as a pretext, employers are paying starvation wages."*

Poor wages inevitably impact workers' ability to secure adequate food and necessities for their households. This is significant, particularly since the beginning of the pandemic, the prices of rice, sorghum and maize has increased exponentially.

3. Delaying payment of wages

Where workers aren't dealing with the issue of low wages, they are battling with employers refusing to pay at all. In particular, workers in the hospitality, transport and service industries have faced these difficulties. According to one respondent *"the hotel terminated the 24 workers, including all 3 shop stewards. The hotel claimed the termination was unavoidable due to a lack of bookings or hiring of meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic."* FESTU has actively been engaging with FAVORI LLC since workers at Mogadishu Airport have not been paid since March 2020. It remains very concerning that when workers demand what they are rightfully owed, they face severe consequences. One respondent stated that *"nine workers were sacked last week after gathering to ask the company why a payment of 400\$ for each worker for April had been delayed."*



4. Job losses and unlawful termination of workers

Alongside the issue of reduction in wages, and delay in the payment of wages, the issue of suspension and termination of employees without compensation was one of the key issues raised in the survey. This was most prevalent in the agriculture sector. According to one respondent:

"A third of the 17,000 workers in the country's agriculture are currently suspended or terminated and have yet to receive any compensation from the employers in spite of earlier promises. The rest are working reduced hours in unsafe farms that lack even the most basic precautions to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus."

Similarly, the findings showed that over 3,000 airport workers have been laid-off due to the pandemic. A deeper frustration is the inability of employers to devise a comprehensive strategy and appropriate measures to prevent further job losses. Workers are not given sufficient or clear information on the future of their employment, leading to anxiety and frustration. This lack of engagement is creating opportunities for further exploitation. One respondent stated that:

“Our employer announced its decision to modify the work shift arrangements in all its operational areas. This involves replacing the rotating shift pattern set out in the employment agreement. The employer had not held any consultations or talks with workers to discuss options and the advantages and disadvantages of making this change. Workers believe that the new shift system will have numerous adverse effects on the personal lives and health of workers and will result in dozens of jobs being lost. This has resulted in a 35 per cent reduction in the workforce, meaning that 321 workers are left without a job.”

Respondents who are professional workers and who lost their jobs or income during COVID-19, were asked to indicate alternative work pursued during recent months. The results are highlighted in the list below:

- Tuk-Tuk driver
- Broker for selling lands or houses
- Farm worker to waiter at restaurant
- Security guard
- From teacher to a Farmer
- Butcher for camel/beef meat
- Vegetable seller
- Mechanical person for vehicles
- Electrician
- From bank worker to photographer
- From airport worker to tailor
- Tea seller

5. Attempts to weaken union structures

The lack of consultation with workers and unions noted above can be viewed as a systematic attempt to weaken the power of unions, citing COVID-19 as an extenuating circumstance. Several respondents raised this lack of engagement with unions. According to one, *“my manager refuses to consult with unions on COVID-19 protocols”* while another states that *“many private sector schools in Mogadishu are using COVID-19 as pretext to get rid of union leaders, the government must uphold rule of law and protect unionists.”*

While the economic impact of COVID-19 is largely accepted, the lack of consultation and the refusal of employers to draft a workable strategy to respond to the pandemic is at the core of the problem. One respondent suggested that there is a more overt sabotage of the role of unions, stating that *“most employers in Puntland use union busting to weaken unions, like encouraging the formation of small associations at major employers and not recognizing independent unions.”*

Impact of COVID-19 on Female Workers

The survey sought to deliberately explore how women have been affected during the pandemic. Somali women generally face violence in the world of work and challenges in gender-segregated workplaces. From the survey responses, it is clear that the COVID-19 crisis is having a disproportionately negative impact on women workers. COVID-19 particularly exacerbated poor working conditions of women working in essential services. As the trade unions adapt to the new reality, they will need to strongly factor in the increased risks that women face in order to ensure women are not further disadvantaged as the pandemic continues.



The key gender-related issues emerging from the findings include:

- Women workers' increased vulnerability in catching and spreading the COVID-19 virus
- Violence in the work environment
- Lack of sufficient and appropriate PPE
- Non-payment of salary and/or wage cuts

The negative economic impact of COVID-19 has also resulted in an increased and over-representation of women in the informal sector or in precarious jobs. Women will often resort to taking poorly-paid and risky jobs to get money for the household.

The COVID-19 period has seen increased levels of domestic violence as an additional consequence of isolation and curfew in Mogadishu. In addition, women have been receiving less support as a result of the economic impact of

COVID-19 – economic stress of any kind within a society puts women at a greater risk of violence. Men who have lost their jobs, unable to secure an income or experience economic strife often take this out on women.

The findings also reveal low levels of representation of women in decision-making structures in the workplace, leading to concern about the long-term impact on women's participation in the workplace. Workplaces that are aiming to respond to COVID-19 with strategic measures, need to ensure women's voices and input are heard and incorporated. Solutions that do not take women's particular risks and concerns into account, may ultimately result in women being further marginalized.

FESTU's actions during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, FESTU has been very active in championing for workers' rights, meeting with government and employers and making the case for supporting workers with a decent wage during this period.

Specifically, in order to get the message across to as many workers as possible, FESTU has been publicizing the campaign for protection of workers' health and safety through mainstream media, including television stations run by the private media and social media. Radio stations have also been publicizing the campaign.

The organisation also advocated for a deeper understanding of the dangers of the virus and how workers and communities can protect themselves and others, lower the transmission rate and save lives.

FESTU and affiliated unions set up health and safety committees at 26 workplaces. However, the unions are concerned by the slow pace at which some employers are adhering to health and safety standards to stop COVID-19.

FESTU and its unions have been defending workers dismissed without pay, advocating for the health of female nurses, securing salary increases for health workers, and securing the designation of media workers as essential workers.

Through tripartite dialogue, FESTU has been constantly in discussions with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Somali Chamber of Commerce & Industry to protect jobs and income for the workers, particularly those affected in the private sector.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Respondents made a number of recommendations in the survey, including the need for employers to develop an effective strategy to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, and ensuring that workers' rights are upheld in the process. According to one respondent, *“workers desperately need a coherent and realistic recovery plan for the private sector workers. It is important to engage with unions in this process to be able to integrate labour and social rights.”* The issue of engaging with unions and workers came out clearly in the responses; whilst some negative effects can be expected and felt as a result of the economic impact of COVID-19, consultation with unions and employers towards an acceptable approach must be prioritised.

Respondents were also very clear about the need for the government and employers to recognize COVID-19 as an occupational hazard and act urgently to protect workers. This includes providing the necessary sanitation equipment and products, providing face masks and PPE (where necessary) at the workplace and developing an approach to enforce social distancing.

Apart from the safety nets provided by the Federal Government with the help of World Bank and UN agencies to disaster-affected communities and targeted vulnerable groups, there is currently no comprehensive social protection and social security system in Somalia. This inherent weakness was made glaring in the wake of the fury of the COVID-19 pandemic and called into question the urgent need for Somalia to include in its recovery plan the ILO's two-dimensional strategy for extension social security, namely a horizontal dimension guaranteeing access to essential health care, basic income security for children and families, basic income security for women and men of working age unable to earn sufficient income and an old-age pension, guided by ILO Recommendation No. 202; and a vertical dimension progressively ensuring higher levels of protection, guided by ILO Convention No. 102 and more advanced standards.

Likewise, FESTU strongly recommends the establishment of a job retention scheme co-financed by the employer and the employee that can save the fate of workers who lose their jobs until they are able to find another job. This will help strengthen social cohesion and minimize crime and conflict.

Unless and until trade unions realize living wages for the working population, their battle against poverty, inequality and informality will be far from over in Somalia. As such, FESTU recommends for Somalia to establish a national and sectoral minimum wage systems as a strategy for eradicating poverty, reducing inequality and achieving decent work for all, guided by the ILO Convention No. 131 that covers all groups of wage earners whose terms of employment are such that coverage would be appropriate. In this regard, FESTU should campaign for the ratification of ILO Convention No. 131 and the extension of legal wage protection coverage to the majority of workers, including those most vulnerable to exploitation, such as domestic workers.

FESTU recommends for the Federal Government of Somalia to ratify the following Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Conventions: C155, C161 and C187 to inform the development and implementation of a comprehensive national policy and program on OSH for the protection of working women and men by emphasizing a preventative culture.

Federation of Somali Trade Unions (FESTU) is internationally recognised and affiliated to the International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC), African Regional Organisation of International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC–Africa) and Horn of Africa Confederation of Trade Unions (HACTU)

FESTU is national workers' organization that is accredited to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

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