



# Stitching together a future

Myanmar's garment workers  
fight for their lives against  
COVID-19 and a military coup

A MIXED METHOD STUDY

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Sara Tödt, RMIT  
Business and Human Rights Centre  
and CARE International



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# ABBREVIATIONS

AMH	Aung Myin Hmu
CARE	CARE International
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
EBA	Everything but Arms
EU	European Union
ILO	International Labor Organization
RMIT	RMIT University Business and Human Rights Centre
US	United States

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The findings establish the importance of garment work, not just for workers but for their extended families who depend on their income.

This report brings together two new sets of data to describe how garment workers are surviving the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. This report presents the findings from the first project to collect large-scale data from garment workers in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup. It depicts the dire impact of the military coup on these women and their livelihoods, compounding the already severe effects of the global economic recession resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The report outlines garment workers' needs for support at this time of crisis and makes recommendations to garment brands as well as unions and non-government organizations (NGOs). The study combines an analysis of a rapid assessment survey of 221 garment workers, Study Two, with a longitudinal study using in depth interviews with 24 women garment workers over a six-month period, Study One. It also allows a deeper dive into the dire emotional and psychological impacts of these changes. The workers shared how both the pandemic and coup have affected their aspirations and life plans. The impacts of the pandemic and coup can be seen in raw numbers, with thousands of workers losing their jobs or experiencing great uncertainty around employment when factories were opening and closing daily. However, numbers only show one aspect of workers' experiences.

This report paints a far more intimate picture of how these geopolitical events are affecting women's daily lives, and what they are doing to survive.

The findings establish the importance of garment work, not just for workers but for their extended families who depend on their income. This report describes how women from rural villages working in the garment industry are key income providers for their families. They make decisions and sacrifices in pursuit of a better future for themselves and their dependents. Garment production jobs represent an opportunity for major increase in income and a better life for these women. Many jobs that are available to women in their rural villages do not provide the same stability as work in the garment industry, as these are often seasonal agricultural jobs. The motivation to make a better income was found to be a fundamental driver for internal migration to take up work in garment factories.



This report describes how garment workers' decisions around starting work in the garment industry are joint family decisions. There are significant tensions between the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of women in their home villages and their role as a rural-to-urban migrant income provider. However, as more and more women move from their home villages to start work in the garment industry, they the perception of women working in the garment industry and living away from their families is shifting.

Women and their extended families are dependent on the income, and women workers have moved long distances and changed their lives greatly to accommodate garment work. Women are conscious of their age and bodily limitations to work in high-production garment factories and worry about taking breaks from work at an age where they might be considered too old when trying to return. These dynamics were at the forefront of women garment workers' worries during periods of unemployment during 2020 and in their decisions to stay in the city or move back to their home villages in the face of the military coup of 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the global garment industry. The findings of this study outline the impacts of the pandemic on garment workers in Myanmar. Garment brands' rapid responses to drops in demand saw the financial impacts, uncertainty of cancelled orders, and delayed payments pushed onto factories, who in turn were forced to respond with abrupt changes for workers. In their interviews for this report, workers described how factory closures and lay-offs happened without warning, making it extremely difficult for them to plan and organize coping strategies.

Garment workers and their families are extremely vulnerable when faced with longer periods of unemployment. COVID-19 and the subsequent reduced working hours and job losses for garment workers during substantial parts of 2020 severely limited and restricted the income of workers and their families.

Without garment worker's contribution, their families were forced to deplete their savings and sell important belongings to survive. Several workers described how they had to sell gold jewellery and other precious items at pawn shops. This report further describes how the pandemic reduced garment workers and their families' ability to withstand further negative shocks.

The pandemic and the coup have significantly reduced workers' ability to save for these future aspirations.

The pandemic had considerable negative emotional and psychological impacts, as well as financial impacts, on workers. Women garment workers view work in the garment industry as a means to support and enable their aspirations for a life outside of and beyond their years working in a factory. The pandemic and the coup have significantly reduced workers' ability to save for these future aspirations.

The military coup of 2021 also caused mass unemployment in Myanmar. Around 220,000 workers in the garment industry lost their jobs during 2021. Since the coup, an estimated 64 garment factories have closed permanently and 140 have closed temporarily, and another 80 factories have reduced their workforce significantly.<sup>1</sup> This report studied garment workers who were employed in the garment industry at the time of the coup. The report finds that the majority (174) of the 221 garment workers who participated in Study Two were employed in the garment industry at the time of the survey in May 2021, while the remaining 50 garment workers were without income. The findings indicate that workers with experience and higher-level positions have been re-hired first after the coup disruptions to the industry.

<sup>1</sup> International Labour Organization, Employment in Myanmar in 2021: A rapid assessment, 2022, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/asia/-/ro-bangkok/-/ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms\\_835900.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/asia/-/ro-bangkok/-/ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms_835900.pdf)



The military coup exposed workers to both safety risks and unemployment risks. In the months following the coup, many garment workers fled the unrest in Yangon and returned to their hometowns, after several townships in the city were placed under martial law. The workers then had to navigate the difficult balance of going back to work to earn an income and staying safe. The report finds that many garment workers chose to return to Yangon to rejoin the garment industry despite great risks and uncertainty that work was available. This uncertainty was due to the flexible strategies adopted by factories to navigate changing order levels. There continues to be a lack of clear information about where and for how long jobs are available at factories in Yangon. Garment workers reported being worried about food prices and not being able to feed themselves and their families. The workers who are employed said they worried about not being able to make enough money due to cuts in overtime and how long they can keep their jobs. The report describes how garment workers predicted they would likely have to reduce their food spending and opt for cheaper living situations if the negative impacts they were experiencing at the time of the interviews continued. As of August 2022, the situation in Myanmar and the context under which garment factories in the country is operating has still not improved. Recent reports indicate that the military are taking action to have factory workers from townships that are resisting the regime fired.<sup>2</sup>

After fleeing to their home villages to escape the violence of the coup, many garment workers chose to return to Yangon to rejoin the garment industry despite great risks and uncertainty that work was available.

Garment workers often reported choosing income over safety. Garment workers who were employed reported continuously assessing whether the wage they were receiving was worth the risks of commuting to and from work. The report also finds that in the face of uncertainty about what the longer-term future holds, many garment workers were not sure of how they would survive and were torn between trying to stay in Yangon and returning to their home villages.

The garment workers interviewed and surveyed saw income and cash support as their priorities during the intersecting crises of the coup and the pandemic. Many reported their main goal was to keep or regain their jobs. The report finds that there is a level of desperation that makes garment workers willing to sacrifice other needs in order to be able to support themselves and their families.

Decisions by different stakeholders should therefore carefully evaluate and take into account both how important work in the garment industry is for workers and their families and the associated risks to workers posed by the coup and the pandemic. To address the significant risks women workers are taking to produce garment orders, garment brands and other stakeholders should continuously carry out human rights' due diligence as the situation in Myanmar evolves. There are currently ongoing human rights risks related to both exiting Myanmar and fulfilling orders. It is crucial that garment brands and involved stakeholders take action to remedy adverse human rights impacts connected to their business operations. At the same time, the immediate needs of women and their families impacted by COVID-19 and the military coup must be urgently addressed.

<sup>2</sup> Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, Myanmar: Garment factories reportedly ordered to dismiss workers from townships resisting military rule, 2022, <https://www.businesshumanrights.org/en/latest-news/myanmar-garment-factories-reportedly-ordered-to-dismiss-workers-from-townships-resisting-the-military-rule/>





The ILO estimates that in 2021 the equivalent of 3.1 million of Myanmar's full-time workers' working hours were lost as direct consequence of the coup, with the garment industry among the hardest hit industries with year-on-year employment losses reaching an estimated 27 percent in 2021.

## INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from the first project to collect large-scale data from garment workers in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup. It depicts the dire impact of the military coup on these women and their livelihoods, compounding the already severe effects of the global economic recession resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The report outlines garment workers' needs for support at this time of crisis and makes recommendations to garment brands as well as unions and non-government organizations (NGOs).

Myanmar is at a critical point in terms of fundamental human rights and international trade relations. Until 2016, the country was under wide international sanctions by the United States (US) and the European Union (EU). As Myanmar set out on a path to democracy, holding elections and creating a coalition government, respect for human rights seemed to be improving. This (re-)attracted international sourcing of garments from Myanmar, with the country's export value of garment production tripling between 2016 and 2018.<sup>3</sup> The garment industry was initially predicted to grow in production capacity and size, with a predicted correlating growth in employment to one million people by 2020, but that did not occur, due to the widespread impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of 2020, 700,000 workers were employed in apparel production in Myanmar. During 2020, more than 150,000 workers lost their jobs, and 350,000 workers were threatened by layoffs.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, as it looked like the global demand for garment was increasing and the Myanmar garment sector was in the process of recovering from the impacts of COVID-19, the military staged a coup d'état on the 1st of February 2021.

The coup saw Myanmar placed under a military regime with the arrest of elected politicians and the imposition of a military State Administration Council. Many national, state/regional, and local administration staff were replaced and many arrested. The military coup has also evoked fears of wider economic sanctions if the country loses the EU's Everything but Arms (EBA) eligibility or no longer enjoys duty-free access to its key apparel export markets. The country's garment industry could be among the biggest losers. Key businesses are exiting Myanmar or pausing their sourcing from the country while evaluating the situation. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that in 2021 the equivalent of 3.1 million of Myanmar's full-time workers' working hours were lost as direct consequence of the coup, with the garment industry among the hardest hit industries with year-on-year employment losses reaching an estimated 27 percent in 2021.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> EuroCham Garment Guide, 2020, <https://eurocham-myanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Garment-Guide-2020.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> ILO Liaison Office in Myanmar The impact of COVID-19 in Myanmar: A Study Of Workers Laid-Off In The Garment Sector, 2021, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms\\_815349.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms_815349.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, Employment in Myanmar in 2021 : A rapid assessment, 2022 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms\\_835900.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms_835900.pdf)

## PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

This report is based on two studies with garment workers in Myanmar. The report draws on both studies to:

1. Explore the impact of the military coup on garment workers and their livelihoods, as well as how they are affected by the global economic recession derived from the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Examine garment workers' needs for support at this time of crisis.
3. Evaluate the potential role of unions and NGOs in providing support for workers at this time of crisis.



# METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted through a partnership between CARE International (referred to as CARE) and the RMIT University Business and Human Rights Centre (referred to as RMIT). The data and analysis that forms the basis for this report embraces a collaborative methodology, with researchers from both organizations working together in virtual teams to design and conduct field research at this time of crisis and change in Myanmar.

The report is based on data from two complimentary studies to collate and compare data collected from different methodologies. Study One tracked 24 women garment workers over a six-month period that covered the pandemic and the coup, conducting two lengthy interviews with each participant about the ways they have survived both crises. Study Two conducted short-form interviews with 221 garment workers through a rapid assessment survey. The data collection process for these two studies are explained in greater detail below.

Study One depicts how garment work shapes women workers' lives, as well as the social context within which they make decisions about work. This report draws on in-depth interviews with the 24 women to describe how women garment workers make decisions about work and how this impact on life events and their roles and responsibilities as women. Study One was conducted in two stages, the first during the COVID-19 crisis, just before the coup, and the second just after the military coup took place, in June 2021. The in-depth interviews thus provide insights into how women are navigating the impacts of both these significant events.

The rapid assessment surveys of Study Two provide a broader overview of the impacts garment workers have experienced from COVID-19 and the military coup. Study Two provides a more quantifiable picture of the situation for garment workers post-coup and post-pandemic. Data from this study help build insights of how existing challenges were exacerbated by the overlapping crises in Myanmar.

## METHODOLOGY FOR STUDY ONE: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

This section provides a more detailed outline of the methodology for Study One. Study One tracked 24 women through the pandemic and the coup through two sets of interviews conducted six months apart. As part of doctoral research being conducted by Sara Tödt at RMIT, 24 women garment workers were recruited to participate in in-depth interviews about how work in the garment sector shapes their lives and livelihoods, as well as their experiences of COVID-19 and the military coup

This report brings together two new sets of data to describe how garment workers are surviving the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. Study One followed 24 women garment workers across a six month period, interviewing them before the coup and just after the coup. Study Two conducted a survey with 221 garment workers a couple of months after the coup.



## Recruitment and Interviews

Recruitment was carried out by staff of CARE's Aung Myin Hmu (AMH) project (no longer in operation) in Myanmar between November and December 2020, through their existing network of women garment workers. AMH were at the time operating a training center for garment workers, offering a sewing machine operator course to women who had moved to Yangon to work in the garment industry.<sup>6</sup>

Former participants in AMH's courses were contacted by a team at AMH via phone and asked to participate in interviews.<sup>7</sup> Two selection criteria for participation were applied: the women should at the time of interviews be over 18 years old and either currently work in the garment industry or had worked in the garment industry within the last five years. No other selection criteria were applied, and women were accepted into the study based on their voluntary availability. All 24 women who volunteered to be part of the study had or were at the time of interviews working in garment factories in Yangon.

All recruitment and interviews were conducted over the phone by CARE's AMH monitoring and evaluation team. The same 24 women participated in two rounds of interviews, with the first round taking place between December 2020 and January 2021 and the second round in June 2021. The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview schedule combining short and longer answer questions. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English and have been thematically analysed by Sara Tödt at RMIT.

## Participants

All participants in the in-depth interviews were female garment workers, ranging from 19 to 45 years old, with an average age of 30. A majority of participants (14) were single with no children. Eight of the women were married and four of these women had children. Two women were divorced, and one of these had children.

All of the women were born outside of Yangon and had migrated to the city to work in the garment industry. The majority (17) had finished their education at middle school; three had finished at primary school level and three went on to high school. One woman had attended university. The women had started working in the garment industry at different times in their lives; the average age for entering into work in the industry was 19 years old, with the two youngest women being only 12 and 14 years old when they started, and the oldest 25 years old.



<sup>6</sup> As part of their internal monitoring and evaluation process, AMH regularly conducted both quantitative and qualitative data collection on former participants to better adapt their course content and build an in-depth understanding of migrant workers

<sup>7</sup> All the contacted women were informed beforehand that participation in the interviews was voluntary and that participants could choose to withdraw from the interview at any point, or not to answer the questions posed if they wished. This was ensured using a verbal consent script that was read to the interviewees by the researcher.



## METHODOLOGY FOR STUDY TWO: RAPID ASSESSMENT

This section provides greater detail about the way that Study Two was conducted. Study Two conducted rapid interviews with 221 garment workers who were either currently working in open garment factories or had recently been laid off and returned to their home provinces.

### Scope of the Assessment and Sources of Information

This assessment is a result of ten days of data collection across 22 of 30 garment factories that received COVID-19 assistance from the AMH project. The sample was chosen from 18 open factories and four temporarily closed factories. Eight members of the AMH project team carried out the data collection. Key senior staff contacted factory management to request permission to interview workers. In addition, AMH staff contacted the temporarily closed factories' management teams to request the contact numbers of laid-off workers for interviewing.

### Data Collection

Two hundred and twenty-one surveys were conducted via phone interviews in May 2021. This sample represents one percent of all workers across the 22 factories targeted by AMH. CARE's management and evaluation team defined the number of interviews to be conducted per factory, and then consulted with the AMH senior key team members who have been working with the factory since the project started.

Once the factories were identified, a sample of one percent (10% men and 90% women) of the total number of workers was selected from each factory. Purposive sampling was applied due to difficulties in reaching the workers by telephone or other means such as Viber, Facebook Messenger, or via the factory. The interviews were held with factory workers who were either currently working in garment production or had been laid off since the military coup and

had returned to their home villages due to deterioration in security conditions where they lived.

Respondents were recruited from factories the AMH project had previously engaged.

The data collection was carried out using KoBo Collect, and the data completeness and outliers were checked using this software. The clean data were then exported to Microsoft Excel and analysed question by question. Finally, a frequency table for each question with the gender disaggregation was developed.

### Reporting

This report includes the key findings from the assessment of Study Two, reflections from the interviewers, and analysis and interpretation of the findings with recommendations. CARE's monitoring and evaluating team conducted the primary analysis of the quantitative data which, was reviewed further and included in draft reporting by team members from CARE's Asia Regional Office.

Study Two is the result of ten days of data collection across 22 of 30 garment factories that received COVID-19 assistance from the AMH project. A total of two hundred and twenty-one survey were conducted via phone interviews in May 2021.



### Participants

Figure 1 shows the diverse range of occupational garment factory employees included in Study Two. Most of the respondents were from sewing sections of the factory i.e. sewing machine operator, sewing worker and sample operators. Other production staff included came from quality control, cutting, helping/trainees, finishing, packing, and warehouses. Office staff indicates a clerk, cleaner, driver, health care worker, merchandizer, planning officer, trainer, human resources team member, operations worker, accountant, and IT staff. Multiple groups and levels of staff were targeted to build an understanding of the diverse experiences of workers.

### Male – Female Ratio

Eighty seven percent of participants were female. This ration fits with the data on the gender split of garment factories in Myanmar, in which 90% of the workforce are female.<sup>8</sup>

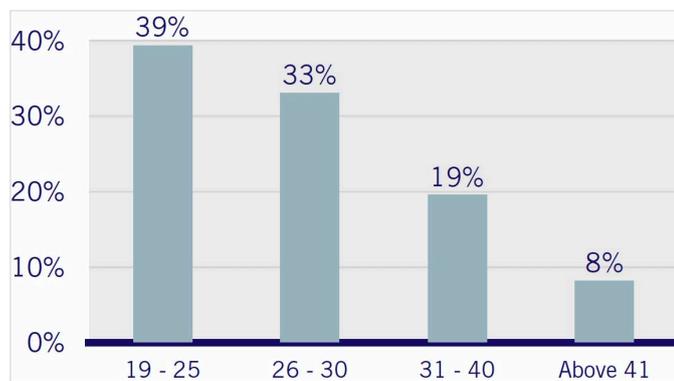
### Age Range

The majority of the participants in Study Two were between the ages of 19 and 30 at the time of the study. Nearly 40% were under 25. Very few workers were over 40 (see Figure 2). The age of participants reflects the realities of Myanmar's factory workers, which are similar to neighbouring countries' garment manufacturing industries.

**Figure 1: Current/most recent position of the workers in the garment factory**



**Figure 2: Age of Workers Interviewed**



<sup>8</sup> Libby Hogan, "The True Cost of Myanmar's Growing Garment Industry", The World, May 29, 2018, <https://theworld.org/stories/2018-05-29/true-cost-myanmars-growing-garment-industry>



## FINDINGS

This report brings together data from two studies to describe how garment workers in Myanmar are surviving the COVID-19 pandemic and fallout of the military coup of February 2021. Combining analysis of the longitudinal Study One using in depth interviews with 24 women over a six-month period, with Study Two, the rapid survey of 221 garment workers, this report describes how work in the garment industry shapes workers' lives and their decisions in times of significant change. The findings show how important work in the garment industry is for Myanmar women and their families. The workers were found to make great sacrifices and take social risks such as leaving their rural villages for better income and having to either bring their immediate family with them and set up a new life in the city or be separated from their social network at home.

These decisions are driven by a need to provide for their families, who are active participants in this decision-making. The garment industry provides opportunities for women to become income providers for their families and dependents, incrementally creating change in the roles and responsibilities of women from rural villages. This means that the impacts of the pandemic and the coup, with thousands of workers losing their jobs or experiencing great uncertainty around employment, has significant implications not just for the women but for all their dependents. With many garment workers being without work for substantial periods of 2020 due to the pandemic, workers and their families were forced to try to survive on hard-earned savings, eroding their resilience towards further negative impacts. Furthermore, garment workers face extreme danger and social and economic uncertainty in the face the military coup and ongoing instability in Myanmar. They are surviving day by day by taking up work in the garment industry on very insecure terms, often being paid daily wages, and taking significant risks living in or commuting to Yangon.



The first part of this section outlines the findings from Study One and describes how garment workers make decisions about work and how these decisions impact their life events and their roles and responsibilities. The second part draws on findings from the first round of interviews of Study One, which took place before the military coup, and describes women garment workers' experiences of the impacts of COVID-19. The third part connects findings from Study One and Study Two to outline the impacts of the military coup on garment workers in Myanmar.

## HOW GARMENT WORK SHAPES WOMEN'S LIVES

The below findings establish the importance of garment work not just for workers, but for their extended families who depend on their income. The first round of interviews for Study One focused on how the participants had made the decision to start working in the garment industry. Interview questions were aimed to build a better understanding of participants' motivations as well as their roles and responsibilities in decision-making processes, and how this might be changing. All 24 participants had moved to Yangon from their hometowns to start work in the garment industry. The most common home regions were Ayeyarwady and Magway, two of the regions with the highest level of rural poverty in the country.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The Chin state has the highest percentage of poverty, whilst Ayeyarwady, with a larger population, has the highest number of poor inhabitants. Magway has the fourth highest percentage of poverty. See World Bank Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017, 2017, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/921021561058201854/pdf/Myanmar-Living-Condition-Survey-2017-Report-3-Poverty-Report.pdf>



### Motivations for Starting Work in the Garment Industry

The motivation to make a better income for themselves and their families was found to be a fundamental driver of women's internal migration to take up work in garment factories. When asked the main reasons for moving to Yangon to start work in the garment industry, 11 of the 24 women answered "to support my family financially". Three of these women added "to have career options" as a second reason; another five women had this as their first reason. Interestingly, six of the 24 women chose "to start a life in Yangon" as their main reason for moving from their home villages, indicating that they intended to establish longer term living in the city. This stands in contrast to other reports that have found garment workers to be young small-town migrants who move to the city for a few years and then return to their home villages.<sup>10</sup>

Garment production jobs represent an opportunity for major increase in income and a better life for Myanmar's women. Many jobs that are available to women in rural villages do not provide the same stability as work in the garment industry as these are often seasonal, agricultural jobs (such as peanut paddy cultivation, or working sesame fields).

*"If I work in the village, I have to work in the mud. When I work in the garment industry, I could be smart by working indoors. I can build a large network with friends and gain knowledge".*

Several women talked about garment work as "suitable for women", in that the work is stable, indoors, and accessible for people with lower levels of education, and that women often have been taught some sewing skills. One participant said "I'm not educated, and I think this job is suitable for me. In my village, although I work in hot weather in daytime, I cannot make much money. Working here provides enough money and the condition is better than in the village".

A couple of women described the attractiveness of working in the garment industry in terms of how it compares to other jobs available to them. However, the women also described garment work as tiring and physical, more so than they perhaps expected. The women pointed to back pain and eye issues and their physical capability to keep working. This was a reoccurring theme when they spoke about their timeline of work and how long they could keep working.



When asked the main reasons for moving to Yangon to start work in the garment industry, 11 of the 24 women answered:



"to support my family financially"

<sup>10</sup> ILO Country Office for Myanmar, Weaving Gender Challenges and Opportunities for the Myanmar Garment Industry: Findings From a Gender-Equality Assessment in Selected Factories, 2018, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms\\_672751.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms_672751.pdf)



“At first, my mom didn’t want me to go as she’s worried for me. But we had been financially insufficient. So, I had to work and transfer my salary to my family”



## How and Why Women Began Work in the Garment Industry

Participants said they took considerable social risks by moving to the city to pursue garment work. There are significant tensions between the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of women in their home villages and those of a rural-to-urban migrant income provider. While leaving the village to start garment work was an opportunity for the women to make a better income, it was generally seen as a joint family decision. The decision to start work in the garment industry and moving away from their hometowns were made in consultation with the participants’ parents. The women described themselves as having varying degrees of autonomy in these consultations. Some described how they struggled to get the approval from their parents, often referring to how one parent would be worried about them moving and living in the city by themselves. In these instances, several women described how their parents were convinced to let them move after finding an arrangement where the woman could live or work with a friend or family member. One participant stated: “No, my mother didn’t want me to go but my father allowed me. She was worried because the person whom I was going to Yangon with was not from our village”.

For other participants, the approval of their parents seemed to be heavily based on financial needs of the family. One woman described how the financial situation of her family changed her mother’s mind: “At first, my mom didn’t want me to go as she’s worried for me. But we had been financially insufficient. So, I had to work and transfer my salary to my family”. Another woman described how she moved against her father’s will: “My father did not allow me to work. So, I secretly went along with my friends to Yangon to work. I informed him only when I arrived here”.

Many participants spoke of their mother as the person they looked to for guidance. The women who described their decision to start working in the garment industry as their own would often add that they had also discussed the decision with their mother. As one woman put it, she would make her decisions “all by myself and my mother. I follow my own desire”.

The participants’ decision to leave their villages was often driven by an acute sense of responsibility to contribute to and support their families, with the garment industry providing an opportunity to do so.





“My parents did not want me to work in Yangon at that time. Yangon is far from my village, and I had never been in Yangon before. However, I understood that I had to start working for living and for my family. I could not think of any work in my village. So, I decided to come here. My parents did not want me to leave my village. Finally, they allowed me working in Yangon after my persistent desire.”

Leaving the village to conduct garment work has been traditionally associated with social stigma in Myanmar, so many participants perceived risks associated with the work. Several of the women described how moving to the city for work as single women has been looked down upon by people in their home villages and seen as negatively impacting a woman’s ‘image’. One woman described how she “has to be careful” and that living with her sister in the city helps maintain her reputation back home. However, the majority of the participants said that people in their home villages’ views of them as garment workers were generally positive, often connecting this back to their ability to contribute to their family’s income. One woman described how she saw this as changing the dynamics of her home village and within families. This suggests a change in views around garment work may be occurring in villages.

### **Work in the Garment Industry Shapes Women’s Timeline of their Life Events**

The interviews found women in Myanmar are shaping their lives to fit with garment work and continue to work after getting married and having children. Participants in Study One described a range of experiences and approaches to life events such as getting married, having children, and taking care of their parents and spoke about how these life events are structured around work in the garment industry. Many of the women saw having children as a key event to structure their work timeline around. Whilst several of the women described the maternity leave available through garment work as short and that they often needed to either quit their job or have a family member or friend to care for their baby, the great majority either return or had the intention of returning to work after having a baby.

When asked if they saw their jobs in the garment industry as permanent, temporary, or supplementary to other income, 23 participants answered that they see their jobs as permanent. This contrasts with other reports that have described garment work as a temporary job that young women in Myanmar often take up before getting married and starting a family.<sup>11</sup> With increased urban migration, more women and men are getting married and setting up nuclear families in the city. None of the women interviewed who were married described their husbands as finding their work unacceptable; some described how they would discuss work together and how their husbands were supportive of them working. One woman described the involvement of her husband in decisions around her work: “When I am upset with my work, he told me to quit. As long as I’m happy with the job, he doesn’t say anything”.

<sup>11</sup> Chaw Chaw, “Rural women migrating to urban garment factories in Myanmar” In *Social Challenges for the Mekong Region*, eds. Mingsarn Kaosa-ard, John Dore (Yangon: White Lotus, 2003)



## Sewing Skills Enable Women to Access Career Options

While garment work is often seen as a 'low skill job', the data from Study One showed that women required some skill in sewing before they could find employment in the garment industry. Indeed, the ability to quickly step into high production factories and perform at a high piece rate is an important skill for workers migrating from smaller towns to the city to earn money to provide for their families. Participants highlighted the importance of having some skills or talent for sewing in order to be able successfully get a job in a 'good' factory. Several of the women talked about sewing skills as something they had learnt from their parents or other family members with the intention of equipping them to take up work in the garment industry. One participant highlighted this:

"I saw people working in garment industry. I was so impressed with them and also, I'm interested in sewing. My parents are also very keen in sewing and taught me about the sewing. Then I could do the sewing. At that time, working in garment industry can make a lot of money so I wanted to join the industry. I didn't know that wage depends on the capacity and workload of individual at that time. I just knew that working in garment can make a lot of money. The more I sew the more I can earn. I was confident enough to join."

Experience from the factory floor equips women with skills that they see as helpful in pursuing career aspirations outside of the factory. One woman stated "I'm interested in this job. I can gain the sewing skills. Even if I quit the job, I can sew by myself". This aligns with the fact that a majority of the women answered that they had considered running their own small clothes making or tailoring business when asked what they would do to make an income when they leave the garment industry.

## Working for a Better Future

Participants saw garment work as vital for a better future. The women in Study One described the regular income and employment benefits of working in the garment industry that are not available in other jobs accessible for women: an indoor work environment, community with their colleagues, and the ability to provide income for their families. For all the women interviewed, moving to Yangon from their rural home villages provided a new or better opportunity to access paid work, with the garment industry having a reputation in the villages as offering stable income and the possibility for more money when compared to other available jobs.



When asked if they feel proud of working in the garment industry, an overwhelming majority of the participants in Study One said they did. The women described how work in the garment industry has provided them with new skills and exposed them to social situations and interactions they had not had in their home villages. They reported working with a wide range of people has improved their communication skills and confidence. "My personality changed as I worked indoors" said one participant. "Things are available in Yangon but in our village, not everything is available. I gained more knowledge and had more exposure. I have learnt how to deal with different people. I gained confidence and wanted to be smart. And I got businesses-minded." Many of the women also talk about how they have gained friends by building a community with other garment workers they have worked with, and described how this is a key positive aspect of work.

The participants also saw their work in the garment industry as a means to support and enable their aspirations of a life outside of the factory. When asked what they thought was the most important thing to achieve in life, a majority of the women replied it was to be able to live with their families.

"Things are available in Yangon but in our village, not everything is available. I gained more knowledge and had more exposure. I have learnt how to deal with different people. I gained confidence and wanted to be smart. And I got businesses-minded."

In particular, several of the women highlighted they would like to be able to live with and take care of their mothers. The women also mentioned being able to support their children to get an education, living an honest and moral life, and improving their living conditions. Some also reported wanting to move back to their home villages and live a "peaceful life".

When asked whether their jobs in the garment industry were helping them achieve these goals and purposes the majority said it did by providing them with income. Some said they were at the time able to save small portions of their wages towards their goals, these women appeared to be married women with a husband who was also working. Many of the women expressed an ambition to change into different work when they had saved enough money or sent enough money home to their families. One woman describes her views on what she would like to do:

I have my ambition. My house is not in good condition. When I get a job in Yangon again, I would work and save money. I would buy a compound and build a house for my family. When my wish come true, I would quit the job, return to my village and work there. I am thinking of leaving the garment industry in five years when I turn 25. I will do any work available in our village. I will stay with my parents. I would do in farming services. I do not do house work and cooking. My sister does all things. I would work as a laborer outside.



## Negative Associations with Garment Work

Participants reported the physical limitations and emotional stress of garment work restricted how they structure their work and life events. Though the women we interviewed for Study One saw garment work as beneficial to their futures, they also had much to say about the negative aspects of the work. Negative aspects they identified included strict production targets, physical and psychological pressure, exhaustion and tiredness, and limited access to leave. Many of the women said they were very aware of their age and the and limitations of their bodies, and that they saw these as key factors determining their employability. They said they often worry about taking leave from work at an age where they might be considered too old to return, with some women describing how this has influenced their decision to have kids earlier. Some of the women also pointed out how being reprimanded by supervisors for a minor mistake often frustrated them. However, the majority of the women felt the positive and negative aspects of garment work were equal, followed by a large proportion that felt that the positives outweighed the negatives.

For most women interviewed, the decision to start work in the garment industry meant a decision to move from their home villages to the city, which entailed considerable negative social impacts. Being separated from their families and their social networks in their home villages was a key negative dynamic of garment work identified by the interviewees. Several women described how they had not been able to take leave to visit their family for important events, such as traditional celebrations and funerals. In particular, caring for their parents when they are sick and attend their funerals are moments were described as a key responsibility, and the women found not being able to meet those responsibilities because of their work in the garment sector particularly painful.



Whilst many of the women explained that they can take leave if needed, they felt it was only acceptable to take leave for a couple of days and only at certain times of the year. Some of the women also described how they feel uneasy approaching their supervisors to request leave, and that they are concerned that taking leave might have a negative impact on how their performance is viewed by management. Access to leave was also described by participants as limited, due to frequently having to meet hard deadlines set by buyers' shipment dates. One woman described how lack of access to leave had devastating consequences for her and her family:

*"I sought a two-day leave when my father was sick and hospitalized but was not granted. My brother and mother tried to reach out to me over phone but failed. When I went to my house after work hours, I heard that my father had already died." After saying this in the interview, the woman burst into tears.*



## IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup on garment workers were critical. Drops in demand and lockdowns due to COVID-19 resulted in garment workers suffering unemployment and disruptions in employment prior. It is estimated that more than 150,000 garment workers lost their jobs during 2020 due to the pandemic, but this number could be a lot bigger as a large proportion of the labor force is informal.<sup>12</sup>

The first round of interviews in Study One took place between December 2020 and January 2021, and as such captured some of impacts of the pandemic the women had experienced before the coup of February 2021. Sixteen of the 24 women interviewed had lost their jobs during 2020 due to COVID-19, and of these the majority had been without work from April to December 2020. Eleven of the women were still without work at the time of the interviews. For the periods they were without work, most of the women had to move back to their home villages, and five of the women who were without work were still living in their home villages.

### Abrupt Job Losses Created Instability for Workers

As garment brands rapidly responded to drops in demand for garments, they both cancelled orders and delayed payments to their factories. Factories responded by sacking workers. The women in Study One described how layoffs were often announced without warning:

For the periods they were without work,



most of the women had to move back to their home villages

Measures that factories put in place to manage the drop in orders created uncertainty for the women in terms of how to make their decisions around work — if a half work-day without guarantee of continued work was worth the health risks.

“No, we didn’t know in advance. On the 16th, they announced the dismissal and they called all of the line supervisors. Only at that time, we knew who were dismissed using a code number. We haven’t had any negotiation”.

As well as layoff, factory management responded to these changes in various ways that impacted garment workers, including reducing lunch hours, cutting out overtime, introducing half day workdays, alternating workforce, and paying wages daily. These measures created uncertainty for the women studied in this report in terms of how to make their decisions around work, such as having to decide if a half work-day without guarantee of continued work was worth the health risks of attending work.

The participants described how they were affected both financially and emotionally by factory management’ responses to order uncertainty. For example, one woman reported:

*“Since there was COVID-19 and stay at home order in April, they said they would reopen the factory on 21st April but they couldn’t. They postponed it again and again and now they have completely shut down the factory. So, I think if there is no COVID-19, our factory would not shut down and it would continue gradually and slowly. Of course, I love my job and have strong attachment to my factory.”*

<sup>12</sup> ILO Liaison Office in Myanmar, The Impact of COVID-19 in Myanmar: A Study of Workers Laid-Off in the Garment Sector, 2021 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms\\_815349.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms_815349.pdf)



## Loss of Key Income Eroded Workers' Savings for the Future

Participants reported surviving the pandemic has considerably eroded their savings for the future. As outlined earlier in the report, Study One found that making an income and providing for their families as they move to the city for work were identified as key responsibilities by women garment workers. COVID-19 and the subsequent reduced working hours and job losses for garment workers during has severely limited and restricted the income of workers and their families. The loss of income was mentioned by all participants in Study One when asked how COVID-19 has impacted their lives.

The participants in Study One were asked to rate how well they were surviving on their wages, on a scale across 'struggling', 'barely enough', 'low pay', 'fair', 'comfortable' and 'really well'. Six women did not indicate any change in how well they could survive on their wage since the pandemic; out of these women, five rated their wage as 'fair' and one as 'barely enough' both before and after the impacts of COVID-19. Only two of these six women had been without work during 2020, one for the month of April and one for 20 days. The remaining participants rated their wages as having decreased due to impacts of COVID-19. The rating system is very simple and was only carried out for the twenty-four women in Study One, but it nonetheless provides an indication of how garment workers have struggled to get work during 2020.

Many of the women interviewed were forced to temporarily move back to their home villages when they lost their work for longer periods during 2020. Several were able to pick up other types of small jobs around the village, jobs that they had previously felt a sense of pride of being able to have moved away from, such as farming; one participant said she was back working "in the mud". Many of the women said they were worried they might be seen as too old to return to work in the garment industry once the impacts of the pandemic had eased. As mentioned earlier, most of the women returned to Yangon at the end of 2020 as factories were beginning to receive more steady levels of orders.



Participants reported that without their income, their families were struggling to make ends meet, indicative of the importance of the jobs. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the participants in Study One were the main income providers for their families. When asked how they were coping with the financial impacts of being without work for substantial parts of 2020, the women described how their families were cutting costs, reducing their food spending, and contemplating every purchase to be able to survive on a single salary. Some of the women's families had to resort to living off the pensions of older family members. One woman described how her family was trying to cope with the situation:

*"In the past, I did not need to think too much but now, I have to think again and again before I make a decision. I have to check in various factors before I buy a thing. Also in the industry, I need to pay more attention to my work to avoid mistakes. Feeling so much worried with everything!"*

The lack of primary income has meant families have had to draw on their savings to survive. Several women described how they had to sell gold jewelry and other precious items at pawn shops: "When I worked in Yangon, I made a saving from my earning and bought some jewelry. During lockdown, I borrowed money from the pawn shop by giving the jewelry as a mortgage". Going without work for substantial periods of time has eroded the savings that the women had planned to use to support them in achieving their ambitions for life after garment work. The women reported that using these savings to survive 2020 has reduced their and their family's ability to withstand further negative financial impacts and job losses.



Three participants stated that they had gained access to financial support through the European Union's rapid response fund Myan Ku (Quick Assistance). The women who accessed this funding – 75,000 (USD\$91/EU€78) monthly for one to three months – described how it has been an important part of their and their family's strategies for survival.<sup>13</sup>

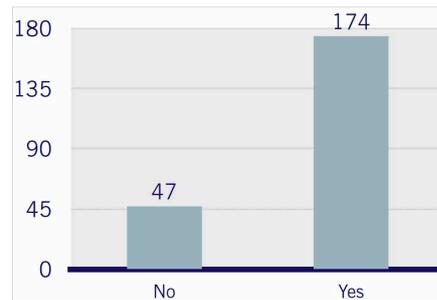
### IMPACTS OF THE COUP

Around 200,000 workers in Myanmar's garment industry lost their jobs when the military seized power in February 2021.<sup>14</sup> The garment industry in Myanmar employed 700,000 garment workers before the pandemic<sup>15</sup> and was predicted to grow to employ 1 million people by 2020.<sup>16</sup> As already described, 150,000 garment workers lost their jobs in 2020 due to COVID-19. In 2021 an estimated 220,000 garment workers lost their jobs because of the combined effects of the coup and the pandemic. With continuing unrest and instability post-coup, employment levels in 2022 remains well below 2020 levels.<sup>17</sup> The employment situation in the garment industry remains difficult and uncertain, with the ILO reporting that there is increased use casual or daily labor and irregular working hours.<sup>18</sup>

Study Two was conducted in May 2021 and surveyed 221 garment workers to understand how the coup and ongoing instability was impacting them. As described in the Methodology section, the survey was distributed among workers at 22 garment factories that at the time of the survey were open and operating, and four factories were temporarily closed. The data from Study Two therefore represents the situation for and views of garment workers who were not only employed in the garment industry but also who were laid off in May 2021. Since then, there has been several reports of garment factories closing either temporarily or indefinitely.<sup>19</sup>

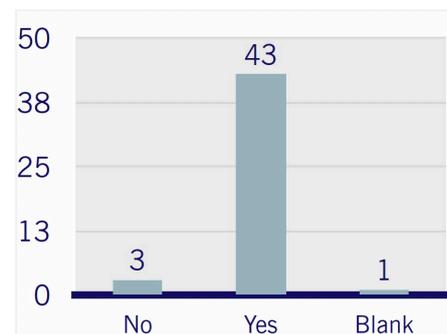
Most of the participants in Study Two (174) were employed the garment industry at the time of the survey. Forty-seven were not working in the garment industry at the time and the majority of these workers (43) had lost their jobs after the February 2021 (see Figures 3 and 4).

**Figure 3: Study 2 participants currently working in the garment industry**



**Figure 4: If not working, did you leave your job in the garment industry after 1st Feb 2021?**

Workers in Study Two reported a large amount of uncertainty about job availability and a lack of clear sources of



information on if and where work is available. Nineteen percent of the workers said they had heard information about their factory potentially closing within three months; 81% of the participants had not heard any information about potential closures, showing how workers are receiving different information. When asked whether they had heard any information about orders to their factory being reduced, 62% of participants answered yes, whilst 38% said they had not heard information about orders being reduced.

<sup>13</sup> The Eu Myan Ku launched its cash disbursements on 1st of May 2020 and is still continuing to provide support funding to apparel sector workers, not just EU invested factories or factories supplying EU buyers, until the 31st of December 2022. Some particularly vulnerable workers, such as pregnant women and young mothers can qualify to receive up to 7 months of cash support under some conditions.  
<sup>14</sup> Chaw Chaw, "Rural women migrating to urban garment factories in Myanmar" In Social Challenges for the Mekong Region, eds. Mingsarn Kaosa-ard, John Dore (Yangon: White Lotus, 2003)  
<sup>15</sup> According to the latest statistics published by EuroCham, Garment Guide, 2020, <https://eurocham-myanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Garment-Guide-2020.pdf>  
<sup>16</sup> Myanmar Garments Manufacturers Association, Myanmar garment industry: 10-year strategy 2015-2024, (2015), <https://www.myanmargarments.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Myanmar-garment-industry-10-year-strategy-Aug-2015.pdf>  
<sup>17</sup> ILO Liaison Office in Myanmar, The Impact of COVID-19 in Myanmar: A Study of Workers Laid-Off in the Garment Sector  
<sup>18</sup> ILO, New ILO estimates show Myanmar remains deeply affected by job losses in first half of 2022, 2022 [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_852675/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_852675/lang-en/index.htm)  
<sup>19</sup> John Liu and Frontier Myanmar, "Garment workers face a fresh threat: a boycott", Frontier Myanmar, 7 October, 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/garment-workers-face-a-fresh-threat-a-boycott/>



These responses were provided in May 2021. Since then, there have been several reports of garment factories (up to 200) in Yangon closing<sup>20</sup> and garment brands such as Bestseller and Primark have resumed and re-paused their orders.<sup>21</sup> This implies a poor level of information sharing and communication between garment brands, factory management, and the workers.

This was further expressed by several of the participants in Study One, who described how they get most of their information from Facebook and how information is spread through informal networks with other workers. “We have to enquire the factories open” said one participant.

*“We get the information from the network of workers. Once they know which factory opens, the workers, in a huge amount, apply for the jobs in that factory”*

Several women also described how daily wages were introduced at many factories, adding to the uncertainty around job availability. Workers reported the uncertainty and lack of clear and reliable information about where jobs are available as well as the general safety situation was impacting their ability to make decisions around work. One woman described how “in the past, I could make the decisions confidently. But now, things are changing all the time and it’s hard to make the decisions”.

**Impacts on Workers’ Monthly Income**

The coup created severe financial downturn for Myanmar. This study found the loss of work and income caused by the coup has impacted and continues to impact garment workers and their families.

Their livelihoods and savings had already been disrupted and impacted by COVID-19, reducing families’ financial security, making the financial impacts of the coup even more arduous.

Table 1 outlines the change in monthly income for the 221 garment workers in Study Two from just before the coup to the first few months of the coup. The majority of the participants were employed in the garment industry at the time of the survey in May 2021. The clearest indicator of a change is the category of workers that are without income. The number of workers in this category increased drastically from zero in January 2021 to 50 in April 2021. The workers who earn the most have increased between January and April, which potentially reflects how workers with experience are the ones being re-hired first when factories receive new orders in the post-coup and post-pandemic landscape.

The change in middle level income earners is less clear, but there is an overall downward trend. It would seem that many of the lower-income earners completely lost their source of income, and that several of the middle-income earners were pushed down to lower income levels.

**Table 1: Monthly income of the garment workers in the first four months of 2021**

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
0-9000		7	33	50
10000-49000	1		3	
50000-90000	4	8	15	11
100000-190000	74	102	89	65
200000-290000	95	74	53	54
300000-390000	29	17	16	15
400000-490000	9	5	4	6
500000+	9	8	8	20
	221	221	221	221

<sup>20</sup> Jasmin Malik Chua, “Myanmar Garment Sector ‘Unlikely to Recover’ if Brands Cut and Run”, Sourcing Journal, 24 June, 2021, <https://sourcingjournal.com/topics/labor/myanmar-200-garment-factories-closure-coup-apparel-workers-unions-287164/>

<sup>21</sup> Simon Glover, “Bestseller Halts Myanmar Orders” EcoTextile, 1 September, 2021, <https://www.ecotextile.com/2021090128267/fashion-retail-news/bestseller-halts-myanmar-orders-over-covid-fears.html>



## Protests and Moving Back to Their Villages

In the first couple months after the military seized power, there were reports of garment workers being at the forefront of the protests taking place in industrial zones and areas with larger factories.<sup>22</sup> However, this appeared to change in March, after violent clashes between protesters and the military at several Chinese-owned factories in the Hlaingthaya township of Yangon. In response, the military declared martial law in the Hlaingthaya and Shwepyitha townships, which both host the majority of the city's garment factories. Shortly after, another nine townships in Yangon came under martial law, giving the military the ability to shoot people on the streets not complying with curfews and rules at will. At the time, AMH researchers in Myanmar estimated that up to 120,000 garment workers had fled from these townships back to their hometowns.

A majority of the women in Study One described how they moved back to their home villages in February or March in their second interviews, and described how other garment workers had done the same. Most of the participants in Study One had returned to Yangon by June by the time the second round of interviews took place. Several of these workers described how they did so against their families' objections, committed to finding a job in the garment industry, whatever that might be.



<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Paton, Myanmar's Defiant Garment Workers Demand That Fashion Pay Attention, March 12, 2021, New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/12/business/myanmar-garment-workers-protests.html>



The uncertainty of whether they would be able to re-join the industry lead some participants to remain in Yangon. “I did not want to lose my job,” replied one participant when asked why they had stayed in Yangon.

In relation to taking leave immediately after the military coup in February, workers were allowed a three-day emergency vacation, which was not enough to allow most to go back to their home villages and come back to the factories. Hence some workers sought leave without pay, but this was not granted in many of the factories. Participants in Study Two told AMH researcher how after three days many workers failing to re-join the factories after three days of were fired from their jobs. In some factories, however, unions helped the workers take leave without pay.

Several of the women in Study One describe how taking leave without pay to go home to their villages impacted their status as a worker and the benefits they could receive. “If they want to leave,” said one participant, “they could but when they return, they will be counted as new staff. They cannot enjoy the old staff benefits. Even when they want to come back, if the line is full, they couldn't join”. The uncertainty of whether they would be able to re-join the industry lead some participants to remain in Yangon. “I did not want to lose my job,” replied one participant when asked why they had stayed in Yangon. “If I went back to my village, I would not be sure I would get my job back when I returned.”

The majority (174) of the garment workers in Study Two were working in the garment industry at the time of the survey.

Combined with the statements from the 24 women in the in-depth interviews in Study One, it appears that the majority of workers who left Yangon at the early days of the coup later returned to the city to rejoin the garment industry.

### Feeling Unsafe and Worried for the Future

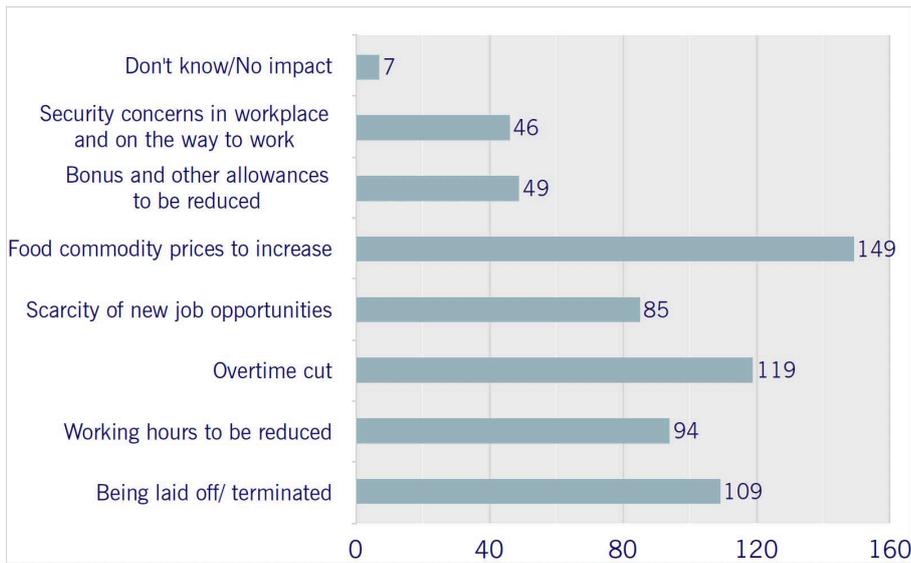
It is clear that the garment workers who had returned to work or kept working through the turbulent time following the pandemic and the coup were worried about their safety. Several of the workers in Study One said that they felt scared coming into work but that they chose to continue to work in order to make sufficient income for their families.

*“I have to work for my living so that I came back here,” said one worker. “Of course, I’m scared to work. My parents do not want me to go back and they want me to work in the village. We do not own farms in our village. Therefore, I decided to come back to Yangon to work since I don’t want to lose my job.”*

In the in-depth interviews, many participants described how they often had to pass through several different military check points to access their factories, and a several said there were soldiers guarding the factory. One woman described how she sometimes felt like there was “gun fire everywhere”. The security situation shaped the workers decisions of where to work and live, with many choosing to live as close to the factories as possible. Whilst most workers stated that they felt relatively safe in the factories, they also reported feeling worried as they travel to and from work. “I did not want to leave home and go for work,” reported one participant. “Working in the factory is quite safe, although they couldn't guarantee our lives, I was concerned for the security on the way from home to work”. It is clear that workers took risks when working during and after the coup.



**Figure 5: Impacts workers expected to experience**



In the first round of interviews for Study One, many of the participants talked about the importance of working with good colleagues and friends. They described how building networks with other garment workers helped them deal with stress at work. Some participants reported organizing childcare and other social support collaboratively with their fellow workers. Because many workers moved back to their home villages and the others moved to jobs in new factories after the pandemic and the coup, many of these important social connections were lost. When asked how other garment workers provided an income for themselves, one woman answered “I have lost contact with them so that I do not know about them. Most of the work’s closed”. She continued:

*“I’m lost at the moment. What we heard is that due to political situation, purchase orders could not reach to us. Some buyers moved their business to other countries. We have heard that the factory only has an order for next two months. Afterwards, the factory will close for a couple of months. We feel insecure about our job as the factory might be closing. We are worried that we couldn’t support our parents.”*



Study Two asked the garment workers which impacts they expected to experience in the future (Figure 5). The workers could choose multiple answers and were asked to select all that applied. 'Overtime cut' was the most chosen answer, followed by 'being laid off' and 'food commodity prices to increase'.

Overall, 149 of the garment workers expected to feel the impacts of increased food prices. These expected impacts were coupled with workers' concerns over decreased overtime and general working hours, losing their jobs, and a scarcity of job opportunities. The focus on food prices should be viewed in the context of the fact that a majority of the garment workers who participated in Study Two were employed in the garment industry at the time of the survey. Because they were able to earn an income, it follows that these workers would be primarily concerned with increased costs and decreased hours. Forty-six of the workers reported they were concerned about security in the workplace and while commuting to work.

Study Two also asked the garment workers in May 2021 which coping strategies they would have to deploy if the impacts they had experienced continued.

The workers responded that they would adopt the following strategies their survival:

- ✓ reduce their food spending (87%)
- ✓ stop sending money to their parents and families back in their home villages (55%)
- ✓ opt for cheaper accommodation (43%)
- ✓ borrow money from lenders or micro financing agencies (33%)<sup>23</sup>
- ✓ selling gold jewelry and physical assets to meet their basic expenditure (56%)

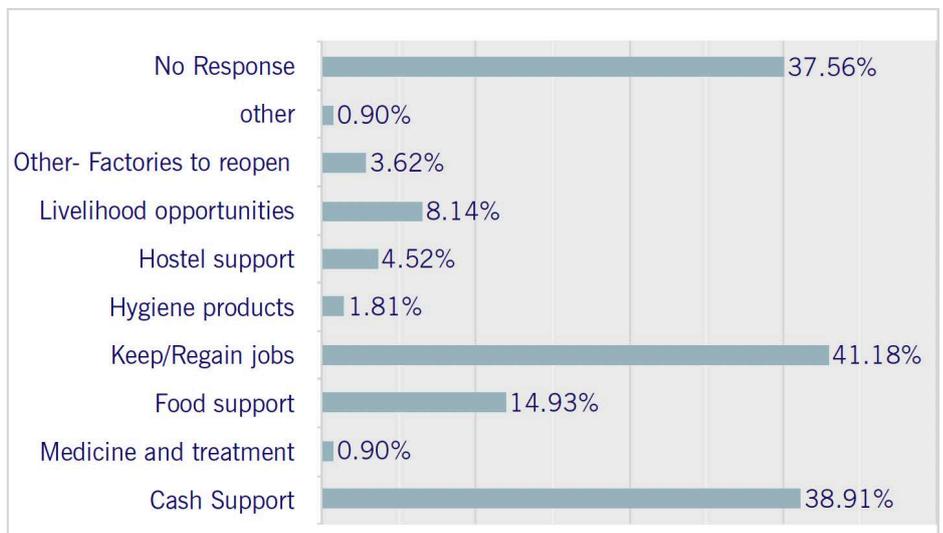
Demonstrating the extent of the financial strain on garment factory workers, one participant stated "In February, I only had one-time meal per day as I had nothing more to cook".

### SUPPORT WORKERS NEED NOW

The data from this report paints a dire picture for garment workers in Myanmar dealing with the lingering impacts of COVID-19 and ongoing uncertainty and turmoil of the military coup. The 221 workers in Study Two were asked what kind of support they need to meet these challenges, and Figure 6 depicts their responses.

A significant proportion of the garment workers in Study Two found it difficult to answer this question, with 86 choosing not to answer. This might indicate that the workers find it difficult to know what kind of support would be helpful and how they may be able to access support in a safe and reliable way.

**Figure 6: Workers Current Needs multiple response permitted**



<sup>23</sup> Borrowing and accessing money is problematic following the near collapse of Myanmar's banking sector in February 2021. The Central Bank has been struggling to distribute funds to meet account holders' needs for cash. The Myanmar currency continues to devalue, making transfers into the country difficult.



### Help Keeping or Re-Gaining Garment Work

The majority of the workers (41.18%) stated that keeping/re-gaining their jobs was their most pressing need (see Figure 6). Access to job opportunities was also embedded in the 'livelihood opportunities' option, as well as reflected in several of the open answers given by the workers. Eight workers who chose to give their own answer said a "willingness to reopen factories" was the support they needed the most. Workers' need for work and income opportunities was also reflected in the in-depth interviews of Study One. One woman described what she sees as most important for her and her colleagues: "We want to have a regular work and income. We do not want the factory closed. Without purchase orders, the factory could not run. So, purchase order is the most important".

### Cash Support

Cash support was the second most common support the participants in Study Two said would help them survive (38.91%) (see Figure 6). It is evident that workers need income support. As mentioned earlier, during COVID-19 workers who were employed by European owned garment factories had access to the EU's quick relief fund. Several of the participants in Study One who received this funding expressed in the first round of interviews how this made a significant difference to their family's income during the months they were without work. When the participants were asked in the second round of interviews if they had received any support after the coup, only four said they had received support. Two of these participants explained how this support had been from a community based micro-lending organization that had given them a small group loan to be shared between five to ten people. The two other participants had received food and necessities from the 'village administrator'.

The garment workers in Study One described how cash support would only be a temporary solution and that they hoped a more stable political future in Myanmar would increase work and orders to the garment factories. "I would rather need a job rather than the support. Then, I can have my own job to support my family" one woman replied when asked if she would find cash support helpful. Another woman said "security and stability. Money matters. I hope I could go to work peacefully and securely. I wish the factories did not close as I do not want to lose my job".

Figure 7: Longer-term strategies



The majority of the workers (41.18%) stated that keeping/re-gaining their jobs was their most pressing need

The graphic features ten blue human silhouettes arranged in two rows of five, positioned to the left of a grey sewing machine icon. The text above the icons states that the majority of workers (41.18%) consider keeping or regaining their jobs as their most pressing need.



## Other Options

Study Two asked the 221 garment workers what they would do if the current impacts the workers are experiencing prevails for a longer period. The two most common strategies reported were to either stay in Yangon and try to find another job or to leave and return to their home villages. It is again clear that workers are dealing with high levels of uncertainty; 65 workers said they wanted to wait to see how the current situation might improve and 34 did not know what their strategy would be. Only three garment workers considered the option of migrating to another country (see Figure 7).

Several garment workers chose to add their own response rather than opt for one of the given alternatives. Seven of these workers said their strategy was to wait until factories reopened. Three workers said they would try to open their own business, working from home.

In the additional comments section at the end of the rapid assessment survey, 16 garment workers added that they were “willing to attend training” and “willing to get job opportunities”.

## Workers' Acceptance Of Working With NGOs or CSOs

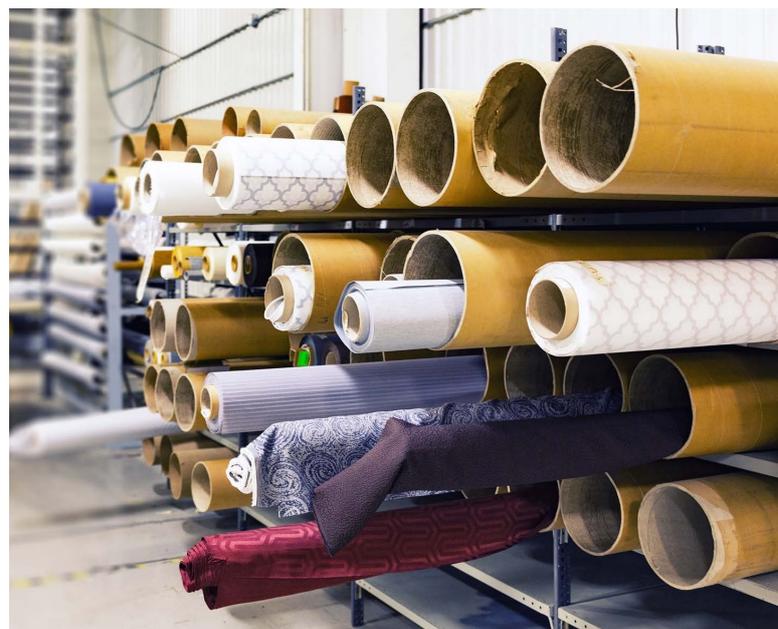
All the participants in Study Two, the rapid assessment survey, 1 said they would work with international NGOs or Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to gain necessary support and services during the crisis. When asked further about the support they would feel comfortable to receive from CSOs or NGOs, respondents mentioned emergency relief supplies i.e., hygiene kits, COVID-19 preventive measures, food, and water assistance.

For emergency relief supplies, 43% of interviewees felt comfortable, 33% felt very comfortable, 14% felt uncomfortable, and 5% were very uncomfortable with receiving support from CSOs or NGOs. Five percent of the respondents remained neutral to all the questions.

Regarding financial assistance (such as cash and vouchers), 52% of respondents said they felt very comfortable, 20% felt comfortable, 18% felt uncomfortable, and 6% remained very uncomfortable with receiving such report from CSOs or NGOs. Ten percent of the workers were neutral on this point.

Regarding receiving the vocational and educational training to support their livelihoods and education (such as short education courses), 26% of respondents said they were very comfortable, 38% felt comfortable, 18% felt uncomfortable, and 8% felt very uncomfortable with the prospect of assistance from CSOs or NGOs. Ten percent of the workers were neutral on this point.

Overall, the level of discomfort towards receiving specific services from CSOs and NGOs varies between the 14% and 18%. In addition, 5% to 8% of respondents felt very uncomfortable with receiving assistance from CSOs or NGOs. Though the qualitative part of this study did not dig into why there was discomfort, the respondents presumably had either poor understanding and awareness of this support, or had negative views of CSO and NGO interventions.



## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this report ought to act as a call to action for garment brands, consumers, the international union and civil society movement, and all concerned with the future of Myanmar's women garment workers. Work in garment factories is crucial for women in Myanmar, as they depend on the income and are in many cases the primary income provider for their family. The loss of this income due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup of 2021 has consequently been devastating. Workers need income, cash support, and other supports for their daily needs.

Before these disruptive and violent events, the garment industry was both a major employer and export income earner for Myanmar. The garment industry grew rapidly after the removal of international sanctions in 2016. According to the European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar, garments accounted for 31% of all exports in 2018, worth \$4.59 billion.<sup>24</sup> Significant employment was created for the country's female workers, who often have few qualifications to make them eligible for work in other sectors. Without this employment option, their options include small trading, agriculture, low paid care work, or other exploitative informal jobs.

The garment industry offers women not only a job, but also an opportunity to be the central income provider for their family, helping to ensure education for their children and support their family's well-being.

The garment industry offers women not only a job, but also an opportunity to be the central income provider for their family, helping to ensure education for their children and support their family's well-being. Work in the garment industry also provides a site is for building women's social skills and ambitions for future career options. Many women in Myanmar have moved great distances and changed their lives to take up garment work. Some are conscious of their age (garment work is considered a young woman's work) as they face periods of unemployment.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the garment industry in Myanmar, as brands reduced or cancelled their orders and delayed payments. Workers in this study described layoffs happening without warning, making planning and organizing their coping strategies extremely difficult. Garment workers are extremely vulnerable when faced with longer periods of unemployment or reduced working hours. Without the contribution to family income, families are depleting their savings or selling off their assets.

Adding to the devastation of the pandemic, the military coup has compounded losses for these women, with large numbers of workers losing their jobs after the coup that they had only just regained following the pandemic. The military coup exposed workers to both safety and security risks as well as unemployment. Torn between trying to stay in Yangon for work and returning to their home villages for safety, many women put themselves in extreme risk to maintain their employment in the garment industry.





## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Based on the findings of this report, CARE and RMIT can make several recommendations for stakeholders in Myanmar's garment industry. These recommendations are anchored in two key aspects of garment work in Myanmar in the current situation.

Firstly, there needs to be a clear recognition of the importance of jobs to garment workers in Myanmar. These are jobs that both support garment workers, of which a majority are women, and provide main income of the women's families.

Secondly, considering how dependent garment workers are on these jobs, and the devastating impact of widespread job losses during the pandemic and the coup, there is a clear risk of workers' desperation being leveraged and exploited. Garment workers need support and protection so that they can make informed decisions about their work that do not force them to put their lives at risk.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GARMENT BRANDS

The United Nations Guiding Principles (UNGP) sets out clear tasks for businesses to respect human rights and provide remedy for human rights abuses connected to their operations. The UNGPs outlines it is the responsibility of businesses to carry out human rights due diligence to a) identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for how they address their impacts on human rights; b) outline processes to enable the remedy of any adverse human rights impacts they cause or to which they contribute.

Since the coup in February 2021, whether garment brands can still conduct meaningful human rights due diligence and whether sourcing in Myanmar causes harm to the rights of workers remain key questions. Brands are encouraged to reassess their presence in Myanmar and consult with their stakeholders following the UNGP human rights due diligence and Fair Wear's Heightened Human Rights Due Diligence Policy.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See OHCHR, Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, 2011, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf) and Fair Wear, Renewed advice to Fair Wear members on the deteriorating, 2021, Renewed advice to Fair Wear members on the deteriorating situation in Myanmar, 2021, <https://www.fairwear.org/stories/renewed-advice-to-fair-wear-members-on-the-deteriorating-situation-in-myanmar/> and Fair Wear, Pushing garment brands to take responsibility <https://www.fairwear.org/programmes/brands-responsibility/>



Whenever brands do decide to stop, decrease, or pause sourcing from a supplier, all steps of Fair Wear's regular responsible exit strategy should be followed. We are also closely monitoring the Myanmar situation and any possible additional measures that the European Union may impose as a result.

In addition to applying a responsible exit strategy and thinking more long-term, global brands should consider ensuring workers are trained in transferable skills should unexpected events occur as part of their business model, and that these workers have skills that support to find new work both in and outside the garment industry.

Global brands should consider ensuring workers are trained in transferable skills should unexpected events occur as part of their business model.

### Considerations should include:



- how to reduce uncertainty around orders to factories and engage with factories to enable them to shift away from daily wages



- engagement with factories to facilitate clear and direct communication to workers about job availability. Brands should make access to information a key part of their plans to minimize risks for workers when placing orders



- the location of housing for workers in proximity to factories and the risks of commuting to work. Garment brands should make safe housing and safe commuting key parts of their plans to minimize risks for workers when placing orders



- innovative ways to financially support workers. Brands should consider relief funding to workers before placing orders to reduce the risks of exploiting workers' urgent need for income



- innovative ways to support workers to temporarily migrate back to their home villages. Garment brands should make options for safe temporary migration a key aspect of their plans to minimize risks for workers when considering placing orders to garment factories in the country.

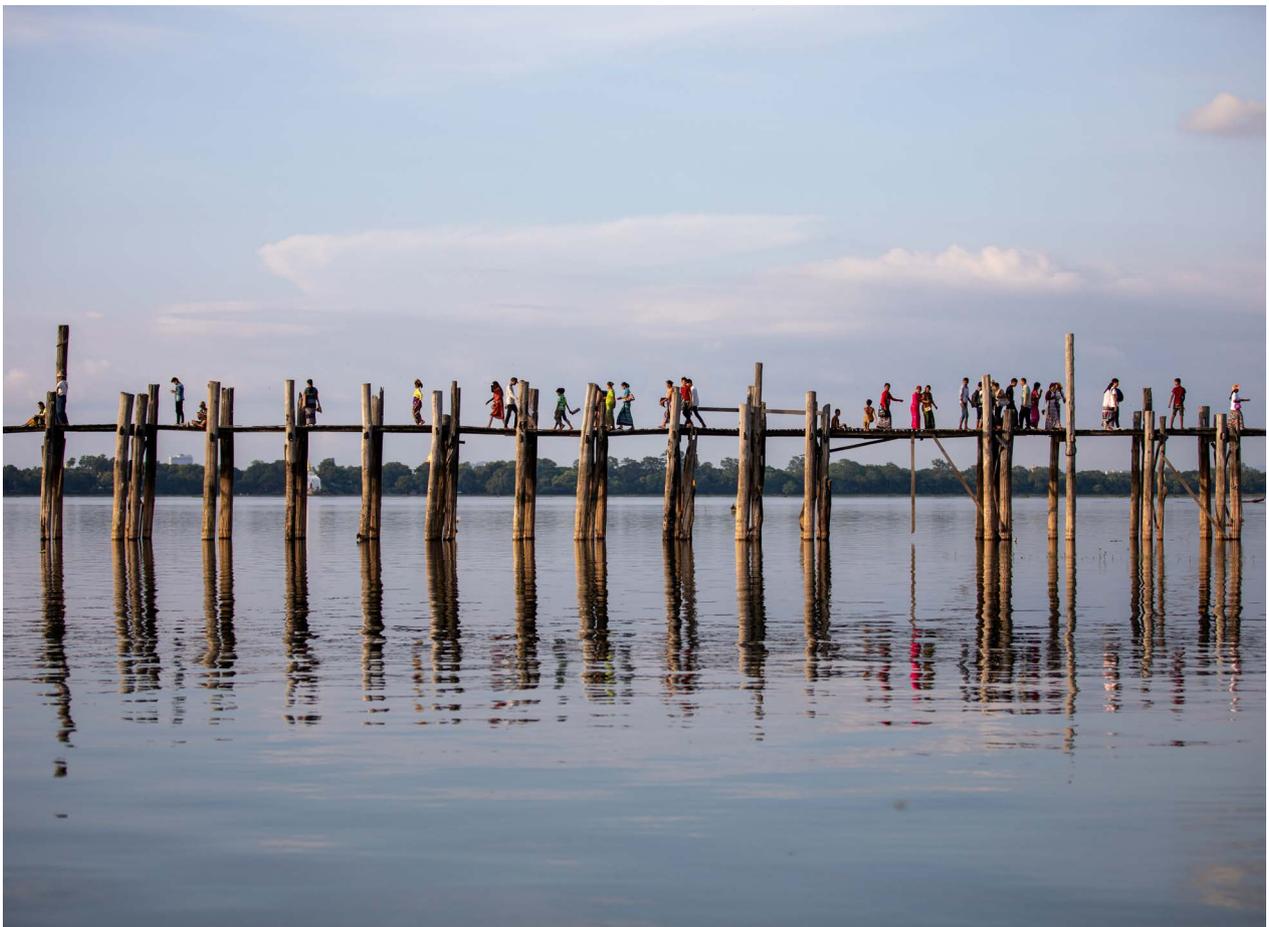


## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

Garment factories have been key employers in Myanmar for peri-urban families who now face food shortages, loss of work, and increasing violence. Many of the migrants previously employed in the industrial sector have left Yangon, affecting the incomes of many smallholder urban vendors. For those who remain, there are further challenges to their livelihoods, as many are facing debt or have had their assets destroyed. For those who have managed to save money in bank accounts or who are reliant on social protection schemes, there are challenges in accessing this cash, as most bank branches are closed. Reductions in income coupled with movement restrictions have further hindered people's access to healthcare, medicine, and other basic needs.

We recommend humanitarian actors:

- monitor the situation of women workers in the garment industry and inform and advocate for their needs to be met with brands, and development partners
- identify programming interventions to support women garment workers' immediate humanitarian needs, advocating with brands and other development partners to respond to these needs
- identify programming to meet the longer-term needs of women garment workers for jobs or income generation using the skills they have learned in garment work



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