



Corona chronicles

The impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on leather workers in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc around the world since late 2019, and the end is not yet in sight. We have seen a high number of fatalities and patients, overwhelmed public health institutions, as well as economic setbacks. Among the global sectors that were hit hard by the pandemic, the garment and footwear manufacturing industries took severe blows. In this short paper, we highlight the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on a particular sub-sector of the global garment and footwear industry: the leather-based garment, footwear and accessories industry.

The pandemic has had a huge impact on the industry, particularly on workers. We want to bring to light the dramatic consequences of the crisis on leather workers in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India by portraying six workers. They speak about their experiences during the first lockdowns in 2020 and how the pandemic has affected them in terms of employment, livelihoods, rights, and how they fear for the future.

The global leather goods industry

Millions of people worldwide work to produce leather garments, leather footwear and leather accessories. This global production network includes various phases, from animal husbandry to slaughter; from the tanning of raw hides to the finishing of leather; from the cutting of leather components to the production of a wide variety of leather end-goods, such as jackets, trousers, shoes, gloves, bags, trunks, and accessories.



Leather jacket manufacturing and stitching work shop in Pakistan, 2016. Photo by Asim Rafiqi / NOOR.

Like the garment and textile industry in general, leather-based garment production is strongly globalised; cattle may be raised in China, hides processed into leather and leather turned into shoes, coats and accessories in Bangladesh, and the end-products marketed in Europe by US-based brands.

South Asia is an important production hub in this global network. [Bangladesh](#), [India](#) and [Pakistan](#) are important producers of (semi-) finished leather and various types of leather products for the international market. Each of these three countries has its own particular niche and associated industrial structure. India is an important producer of leather footwear as well as leather trunks, bags and suitcases for export. Bangladesh produces leather and leather goods, particularly shoes and to a lesser extent belts, bags, suitcases and wallets. Pakistan specialises in leather apparel, in particular leather gloves. From the perspective of international end-buyers, the value chain consists of a number of tiers, related to the production phases and manufacturing processes.

With the coronavirus outbreak, production came to an abrupt halt. The international transport system, including container shipping, was completely upset. Supply chains were disrupted due to a lack of inputs and later on by the cancellation of orders by brands and retailers.

This short paper has been made as a part of the [Together for Decent Leather](#) programme, which aims to improve working conditions and to reduce labour rights abuses, focusing on production hubs for leather products in South Asia – in particular in Vellore and Chennai districts in Tamil Nadu, India; greater Karachi in Pakistan; and the greater Dhaka region in Bangladesh. The Decent Leather programme particularly focuses on tanning, manufacturing, trade and retail phases of the leather and leather goods supply chain.

Our Asian partners in the Together for Decent Leather consortium have spoken with many workers about the coronavirus crisis. [Bangladesh Labour Foundation \(BLF\)](#), [Cividep India](#) and [NOW Communities](#) are in contact with tannery and factory workers in their respective countries on an ongoing basis. The six interviews in this paper were selected from a substantial number of interviews conducted by BLF in June 2020 in Bangladesh, by Cividep in July 2020 in India, and by NOW Communities in September 2020 in Pakistan. Both Cividep and BLF have published reports and analyses about the impacts of coronavirus on garment and leather workers in India and Bangladesh.¹

Added to these worker testimonies we present a set of recommendations and demands to governments and businesses, to make sure the rights of workers are better protected. For this, we consulted publications and analyses by trade unions, NGOs and improvement initiatives. We spoke extensively with our partners in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. They shared how the coronavirus pandemic has affected their constituencies as well as their own work as civil society organisations.

A pre-corona snapshot of the leather and leather goods industry in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India

It takes many different steps to produce leather and leather goods. From slaughter to store shelves, animal hides undergo a wide range of treatments to make them into workable leather that can then be used as a basis for making final products such as shoes, garments, gloves, and bags. The tanneries and manufacturing facilities where these processes take place come in all sorts and sizes, from home-based units to small leather workshops, and from stand-alone garment factories to vertically integrated factories with both tanning and manufacturing of end-products. In addition, traders, agents and buying houses are involved in this industry. Products are subsequently shipped and sold all over the world by brands directly or by (online) retailers.

This complexity also concerns employment relationships. Workers may be hired directly by the tanneries or leather goods factories they work for. However, workers are often recruited and contracted by labour contractors who are operating independently from the workplaces. The leather industry is further characterised by a high level of subcontracting. Various production processes, for example, the production of shoe uppers, are subcontracted to home workers or informal workshops.

Vulnerable groups of workers, including migrants, contract workers, informal workers, home workers, workers from religious minorities and workers with a low caste background make up an important part of the workforce in the leather and leather goods industry.

1 'The impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on Tamil Nadu's leather workers', Cividep, 2020, <http://cividep.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/A-Study-on-the-Impact-of-the-Covid-19-Induced-Lockdown-on-Leather-Sector-Workers-in-Tamil-Nadu-Cividep-India-Dec-2020-1.pdf>, and 'Situation analysis of the tannery industry in the age of Covid-19', BLF, May 2020, <https://togetherfordecentleather.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Situation-Analysis-Covid-19-Tannery-Bangladesh.pdf>.

In India, social factors such as religion and caste continue to play a major role in the composition of the workforce. The people working in the Indian leather sector come from marginalised and vulnerable communities including Muslims and workers with a low caste background.

In all three production countries, a sizeable portion of workers in the leather and leather goods industry work as contract workers, daily labourers, informal workers or home workers. Regular workers with an open-ended contract are in the minority.

The six stories clearly show that the disadvantageous starting position of workers determined the extent of the impact of the coronavirus measures. Workers had no rights, no financial reserves, no network, no voice, and were simply not in the position to take the blow of the coronavirus crisis.



Tannery in Hazaribagh, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2014. Photo by Martje Theuvs / SOMO.

The story of Tasneem² – a factory worker in Bangladesh

Tasneem is 60 years old and has been working in the leather industry for over 20 years. She works at a factory that exports leather shoes, bags and furniture to countries like Brazil, China, Italy and Spain.

‘My task is to cut the leather into shapes after the hides have been tanned and dried. We do everything using hand tools. Before the pandemic, I worked six days a week, eight hours each day. Although I have been at this factory for a long time, I do not have a formal employment contract.

In March 2020, the government ordered a country-wide lockdown. My factory closed for six weeks. The closure came as a complete shock to me. My fellow workers and I immediately got into trouble, as we did not get our wages for March in time, and our April wages were decimated.

In the six weeks of the lockdown, I did not receive emergency relief or food rations. I could not afford to buy food, so we went hungry. The landlord of our single room home became very abusive because I wasn’t able to pay the rent for two months. To make ends meet and take care of my family, I had to take out loans.

Many of my fellow workers went back to their hometowns during the lockdown. But I am from Rangpur Division, about 300 km from Dhaka, which was too far for me to travel to. Luckily, I could return to the factory when it reopened in May 2020. But there are far fewer buyers for the leather, so there is less work. Our wages have been reduced; after the lockdown, I only received 65 per cent of what I earned before. Nobody has been fired yet, but I am very afraid that someday soon I will be let go, as I have seen that happening around me a lot.

Management put in place a number of health and safety measures to prevent workers from being infected with Covid-19. Before we enter the factory, we must clean our hands with soap. We also have our temperature checked. For additional hygiene, the factory’s machines are disinfected three to four times per day.

Still, I do not feel safe at work. I think these measures are inadequate. There are not enough places for us to wash our hands inside the factory, and there is no additional protective equipment. I have to bring my own mouth mask. I do not feel at ease with the other workers around me as I cannot tell who is infected with the virus. It is difficult to keep distance from each other, as management has not put in place such measures.

I have no choice but to go to the factory even though I am scared. I have no other sources of income and won’t be able to find another job at my age.’

2 The names of the six workers are pseudonyms, to protect their identity and prevent possible repercussions.

Rashid's story – a tannery worker from Pakistan

Rashid is a 56-year-old tannery worker. He lives in the town of Baldia, Karachi, Pakistan, with his wife and three children. With a workforce of around 1,000 men, Rashid's tannery is one of the biggest in Pakistan. It exports leather to Germany and France. The tannery is part of a group of companies, that as well as leather and footwear they are involved in the production of mutton and beef, milk, flour, and many more products and goods.

'We process raw hides into finished leather. My job at the tannery is to select and grade the leather. We check the hides that have been tanned and sort the leather according to quality, colour, texture and how it feels. Every year, the tannery produces over two million square meters of goatskin, sheep, cow and calf leather. All this leather is used for shoes and handbags. I have worked for this tannery for more than 30 years, but I have never had an employment contract or even an appointment letter.

In March 2020, the Pakistan government ordered a national lockdown. My tannery also closed its doors, but only for three days. Other tanneries and factories in Karachi remained closed for a few weeks, but management decided to keep our tannery open in secret.

Although the tannery continued operating, I wasn't called back to work. Management followed the instructions from the Pakistan government that workers of 50 years and older should not work because of the heightened health risks. I had to take paid leave for three months. It only covered my basic wage of 17,200 Rupees (90 Euros) not the additional income I normally make from working overtime.

When after three months I started working again, I noticed that about 50 to 60 of my fellow workers had not been called back. The demand for leather had apparently slowed down, so fewer workers were needed.

I don't work as much as I did before. I now only get to work 8 hours per day and miss out on the 200 Rupees (2.32 Euros) I used to make for overtime work. My basic salary is just not enough to meet all my expenses. We were lucky to receive some food through a religious organisation that distributed rations in my neighbourhood, but still, I had to take out loans from relatives to pay for food, medical expenses and other basic needs. I am very worried about how to pay back these loans with the little income I have now.

Management has taken some measures to prevent workers from getting infected, like providing hand sanitiser at the entrance and temperature checks. We have to wear a mouth mask in the tannery. Still, I do not feel safe at all. Because I had to take paid leave for three months, I cannot take leave anymore. So, I just cannot fall ill. If I were to take sick leave, I would have to pay for it. I cannot afford that at all.

I am very disappointed with our government. In April 2020, the government in Pakistan promised an emergency program that would help vulnerable citizens with financial assistance to buy food. Families were to get 12,000 Rupees (about 60 Euros), but we didn't see any of it. We did not get food rations or any other kind of support from the government either.'

Samia's story – a tannery worker from Bangladesh

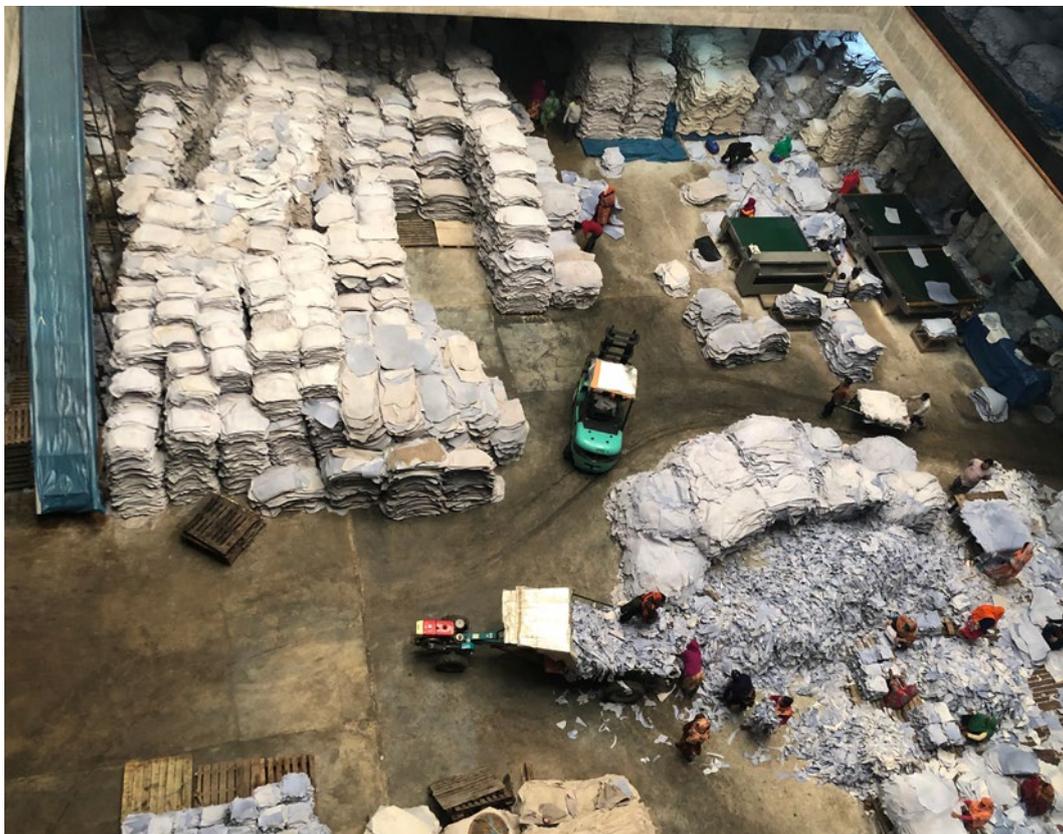
Samia (26) works in a tannery in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. She lives in a rental house and provides for four people. The pandemic caused severe problems for Samia and her family, they suffered hunger and anxiety.

'I work at a tannery that employed 36 workers before corona times. We produce leather for export mainly to China, Hong Kong, Italy, India, Spain, and Japan. I work for the 'wet blue department' where cut, tanned and coloured hides are smoothed and sorted. Moist chrome-tanned leather has a blueish colour. My job is to check all the processed wet blue leather and select the best pieces for further processing.

I started working in tanneries when I was 15 years old, so I have a lot of experience in the industry. My wage is very low though, especially compared to my male co-workers. My employer also treats me and my female co-workers unfairly at times. He is led by the prejudiced belief that women don't work as hard as men.

At the end of March 2020, my factory closed down for seven weeks. We were sent away. The closure was completely unexpected, but fortunately, these weeks counted as paid leave. We also received the full festival bonus, a yearly perk for Eid al Fitr. But we only got 60 per cent of our regular wages. Since my wage is already very low, this led to acute financial problems.

My reduced wage was not enough to cover our basic needs and I had to take out loans to feed my family. The interest on the loans added an extra burden. To save money on rent and other expenses, I even thought of leaving Dhaka and returning to my home village over 200 km away, but the pandemic-affected transport system made this impossible.



Tannery in Bangladesh, 2020. Photo by Ashraf Uddin Mukut.

I tried very hard to reclaim the remaining 40 per cent of my wages. I called upon my employer, industrial authorities, and the labour inspection, but to no avail. Without an employment contract, it is hard to get anything done.

My workplace reopened in May 2020. I was fortunate to get my job back, while many others, in particular the temporary workers, were laid off. My tannery restarted with 40 per cent less workers. I resumed working six days a week, eight hours per day, but there is no more overtime work, so I still earn less than before the closure.

My employer introduced some health and safety conditions when the tannery reopened. We have to wash our hands before entering the compound, and there is a temperature check and regular disinfection of our workplaces. But I feel vulnerable and unsafe because hygiene is lacking at the factory. We don't get masks, and there is no social distancing.

I feel very insecure about the future of my family. I still fear being dismissed, have less income than before and am burdened by the loans I took to survive the lockdown. What I would most want is assurance that I will not lose my work and income. Emergency food and cash incentives from the government would also be welcome.'

The story of Arumugam – a day labourer in India

Arumugam is a 41-year-old former worker at a tannery in Ambur, India. He is part of the Dalit community. Before the pandemic left him without work, he used to soak raw hides in a chromium solution.

'As a casual worker, I had no employment contract and never knew if there would be work for me. When raw hides were delivered to the tannery, I was called to work. No hides, no work, and no money. It was a hard life. But the pandemic made my life even more difficult.

Before this crisis started, I could make some 8,000 Rupees (92 Euros) per month. As casual labourers, we were paid on a piece-rate basis. For one hide we got 0.85 Rupees (a bit under 0.010 Euros).

The tannery where I used to work was quite big, it offered work to 450 workers. Before the corona crisis, the tannery processed between 1,000 and 1,500 raw hides per day. I worked in what we call the drumming section. To stop the raw hides from decaying they are soaked in chromium baths. Next, the hides are immersed in dye and tumbled dry in a rotating drum. The chromium and the dyes are foul chemicals and very nasty to work with.

When the tannery shut down on government orders in March 2020, there was no work for me anymore. All of a sudden, I had no income whatsoever. Worse, they didn't pay me for days I had already worked. I have a family of six to feed, and we became fully dependent on food rations.

When other tanneries and factories reopened in May, our tannery remained closed. Together with other workers, we went to see the owner to demand our back pay, but he didn't listen to us.

We have gone back to the tannery many times, but we always found it closed. We heard that there are not enough orders and that they decided to close to fend off financial problems. We were told the tannery may reopen, but they haven't told

us when. I have no idea whether they will call me back. I fear I won't get my old job back. It seems the owner is more interested to lease out the premises than reopen the tannery.

My wife is also working in a shoe factory in Ambur. We were very lucky that she could keep her job. In normal times, she earned about 14,000 Rupees (160 Euros) per month, but since the lockdown, her wages are halved. It became very difficult for us to cover even the basic needs of our family. We cannot make ends meet and all our savings are gone. We received some rice rations that the government distributed, but this was really insufficient to feed all six of us. We got maybe a quarter of the rice we needed. Paying for more rice, vegetables and other food was a struggle.

When the tannery closed, I had to look for other work. As a Dalit, there is not much work that I can get. There is construction work, but as I lack experience they only allow me to work as a helper. Occasionally, I can clean sewerages as a manual scavenger, as other Dalits do. I feel ashamed to be so dependent on my wife's income. The schools shut down and my children are at home. This crisis affects their education but I do not have the financial means to do anything about it. I feel like I am failing as a husband and a father.'

The story of Faizan – a hide cleaner from Pakistan

Faizan (45) is an unskilled day labourer from Karachi, Pakistan. He lives and works in Allah Wala Town in Korangi Industrial Area. He cleans hides, a dirty and heavy job, for low and irregular pay. He and his family of nine have lived through many hardships, but with the coronavirus pandemic, things took a turn for the worse.

'I get paid by the day. If there is work, I receive a salary, if there is none, I don't. Whether there is any work for me depends on the incoming orders. My work is very irregular, and so is my payment. Sometimes I get paid once per week, sometimes only once per month, depending on the number of hours and days I worked.

When the pandemic first hit Pakistan in 2020, the warehouse where I work had to close for weeks on end. I didn't have any income and did not get any government support. I was lucky to receive dry food ration kits from a local charity, otherwise, I would not have been able to feed my family. I did not have savings or other buffers, so going without any income for weeks had an immediate effect on me and my family. I had to take my children out of school and could no longer afford medical expenses.

After two months of closure, the warehouse reopened. I was lucky to be called back to work, where others were not needed anymore. But there is less work now, and it is even more irregular than before the crisis. I now work around 40 hours a week, which is far from sufficient to sustain my family. The insecurity is the worst part and makes me very worried. My boss hardly shares information on expected working hours and lay-offs.

My job involves clear health risks as I am working with chemicals to clean hides. I was already used to wearing a mask and occasionally also gloves, but nonetheless have always suffered from skin irritation on my hands and feet. I even have difficulty breathing sometimes, as the warehouse is not properly ventilated. The pandemic also made things worse in this respect. My warehouse did not give us protective gear and did not take any other measures to protect us from the virus.'

The story of Swati – a worker stitching shoe uppers in India

Swati is a 43-year-old shoe worker from Tamil Nadu, in the southeast of India. She provides for her family of four by stitching shoe uppers at her home. She has always been able to take care of her family, be it just about, but due to the pandemic work dried up and without a safety net to fall back on Swati landed in a terrible situation.

‘I have been doing this work for the past 25 years. Before the corona crisis, I worked 15 to 20 days per month, just enough to survive. My work is paid on a piece-rate basis. For each stitched upper, I used to make 7-15 rupees (8-17 euro cents), depending on the shoe model. Before the pandemic, I already had incurred debts I struggled to pay off.

I tend to stitch four different models of shoe uppers, for various middlemen. I don't know which factories I work for, let alone for which foreign brands. The middlemen bring materials to my house, and come back to pick up the stitched uppers. There is no contract or prior agreement, they just show up, or not, they don't even call me in advance.

When the lockdown was proclaimed, the middlemen no longer showed up, and I was left without any income. I didn't even get paid for work I had already done. Soon after I found it hard to meet the basic needs of my family and put food on the table. We got rice for free from the authorities, but of very poor quality. I couldn't afford gas cylinders and had to revert to cooking on a wood stove. I had to borrow more money and got into more trouble paying my loans back.

In June 2020, when this lockdown came to an end, the middle men came back, but there was much less work than before. What's worse, the rate I get per item has dropped to only two rupees (2.5 euro cents). My monthly income went down by 80 per cent compared to what I earned before the pandemic.’

Most-heard hardships endured by workers during the coronavirus crisis

The global garment and footwear supply chain is characterised by outsourced production and sub-contracting to further tier suppliers. The power relations between international customers and local manufacturers is lopsided; the buyers have more power than the suppliers. Big international brands and retailers are able to negotiate low prices for the end-products.

Manufacturers are often not in the position to refuse and in turn pass on the demand for fast work for a low price to workers and subcontractors. Poorly paid jobs for millions of workers in this global industry are the result of this unfair and unsustainable business model. The coronavirus crisis was felt the worst by the most vulnerable workers; informal workers like homeworkers and day labourers, workers without an employment contract and older workers.

Workers were very much taken by surprise by the national lockdowns and the closure of their workplaces, it just happened to them. They were left in the dark about the re-opening of their workplaces, the reduction of the workforce - or not, and about adjusted working hours. They were not informed, let alone consulted, and just had to accept what was decided for them. Home workers are among the least informed workers, as they do not have direct contact with the factories for whom they work. They fully depend on middlemen for work, payment and information.



Tannery in Hazaribagh, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2014. Photo by Martje Theuvs / SOMO.

Day labourers, even if they have been working for a tannery or factory for years, are still regarded as disposable workers. They are completely at the beck and call of their employer, without any job security. Homeworkers are in a worse position when it comes to job security.

Labour unions are only present in a few tanneries and factories in this subsector of the garment industry. In those few places, the union was not involved in decisions around closure and reopening, workforce reduction or dismissals.

When workplaces reopened, many workers were not taken back and lost their employment. Often, it turned out to be difficult for them to find alternative sources of income. Workers from the Dalit communities, for example, have little access to employment.

In the case that workers were taken back by their employers, they had to accept a reduction of working hours, the annulment of overtime hours, and/or a lower piece rate – which all led to a lower income. Earning very little anyway, workers in this sub-sector had no financial buffers, so the loss of income during the lockdown and the reduced income since lockdown has made their lives very miserable. To live through the lockdown, workers had to take out loans. Loans come with interest. Having no financial buffer and reduced income, loans are very hard to pay off. Such loans become burdens for a much longer time and put workers at an increased risk to debt bondage or other forms of forced labour.

Workers are very worried about getting infected with the coronavirus. The vaccination rates in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are low³. Workplace health measures are not sufficient. Workers mentioned temperature checks and handwashing, but also voiced anxiety about the impossibility to uphold social distancing on the work floor and in public transport.

Workers feel very miserable and fear for their future. They have not experienced the 2020 lockdown as just an episode that passed, but as a major event that has changed their lives for the worse.



Tannery in Hazaribagh, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2014. Photo by Martje Theuvs / SOMO.

Recommendations

Based on everything we have heard and learned about the impact of the pandemic on already vulnerable workers in the leather-based garment sector, we formulated the following recommendations to brands, retailers, e-tailers, suppliers and local government authorities in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, and other similar low-wage production countries as well as governments of countries where buyer companies are headquartered. It is high time that workers in this sector are enabled to enjoy their rights and are adequately supported to maintain a decent livelihood during this ongoing pandemic. Corporate and government actors have an urgent responsibility to ensure that workers are not pushed into further precarity.

Suppliers (tanneries, factories, workshops) in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan (and similar production countries) should:

- Pay their workers their full wages. Outstanding payments of wages and benefits owed to workers since the start of the coronavirus pandemic should be settled without delay. This should apply to all categories of workers including apprentices, contract workers, daily labourers, home-based workers etc;

3 Bangladesh: <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/bd>; Pakistan: <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/pk>; India: <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/in>.

- Retroactively allow their workers to take paid sick leave for the lockdown period, as well as allow workers to take paid sick leave if they need to, without harassment or threats;
- Develop and publish a robust non-discrimination policy applicable to retrenchment and re-hiring decisions;
- Refrain from illegal lay-offs and terminations, for example on the ground of “absenteeism” during the lockdown. Retroactively assess lay-offs and terminations that have taken place since the coronavirus outbreak;
- Ensure that workers are covered by social protection schemes and that they have the information and support required to make use of such schemes;
- Respect freedom of association and engage in social dialogue with workers and their representatives;
- Create and maintain robust grievance redressal mechanisms to address the problems of workers at the workplace level;
- Make workers’ health and safety a priority, by following Covid-19 guidelines issued by national governmental bodies, the World Health Organization, and/or other relevant organisations including trade unions, and by taking inspiration from good practices shown by manufacturers, to prevent and respond to the spread of Covid-19 at workplaces and among communities. This includes facilitating safe transportation facilities for commuting workers;
- Publicly disclose information on buyers, suppliers, subcontractors, agents, middlemen etc. in their supply chain, to contribute to supply chain transparency – which is key to enabling further collaboration among local and international business actors.

International brands, retailers, and e-tailers should:

- First and foremost, international brands retailers, e-tailers must adopt responsible purchasing practices. This includes guarantees that orders are not unilaterally cancelled, without applying emergency clauses that may be included in contracts to stop orders that are underway or as a pretext for not paying for manufactured products. Buyers must assume long term responsibility for the textile, leather, garment, and footwear suppliers in their supply chain, and engage in discussions regarding future orders and pricing⁴;
- Release withheld payments to suppliers and support them in resuming their operations;
- Engage closely with their suppliers in order to adequately support them to make sure they are able to implement all the above. Most important is that all workers in the supply chains, including those employed in sub-contracting and home-working jobs, are paid full wages throughout the pandemic, or receive adequate financial compensation for jobs lost. Buyer companies to enable suppliers to keep on paying workers at pre-pandemic rates;
- Commit to paying supplier prices that are sufficient to ensure living wages for all workers in the supply chain and for decent, safe and healthy working conditions in the workplaces;
- Undertake meaningful engagement with relevant stakeholders, including workers and their representatives, trade unions, labour rights organisations and other civil society organisations;
- Undertake human rights due diligence throughout their supply chains, including the sub-contracting and home-working segments, in order to assess the existing human rights risks in their supply chain and the new human rights risks that have emerged in light of Covid-19;

4 Principles for Action on Covid-19 in textile, garment, shoes and leather industries, IndustriALL Global Union, June 2020, <http://www.industrial-all-union.org/principles-for-action-on-covid-19-in-textile-garment-shoes-and-leather-industries>.

- If cancellation of supplier relations and disengagement is absolutely unavoidable, buying companies should ensure it is done responsibly by mitigating impacts on workers and by formulating a responsible exit strategy, in consultation with suppliers, trade unions, workers and other stakeholders;
- Provide enhanced transparency about their full supply chain, including end-products suppliers, tanneries, sub-contracted units, and providers of raw materials including hides and chemicals.

Governments in production countries, including but not limited to Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, should:

- Improve their communications and outreach to workers and communities to promote and properly implement Covid-19 aid schemes;
- Conduct regular monitoring and inspections to ensure that factories comply with government guidelines to prevent and address the spread of Covid-19 at work-places;
- Ensure that all workers receive wages for the lockdown period. Formal notifications should be issued to industries in this regard;
- Ensure that employers do not resort to layoffs, retrenchments and terminations. Corrective action should be taken if companies resort lightly to such practices;
- Put in place functioning, fair social security systems.

Governments in countries where buyer companies are headquartered should:

- Make sure that brands and retailers that receive government support make sure that the rights of workers in their supply chains are fully respected, now more than ever;
- Actively enforce existing legal instruments concerning respect for human rights in international supply chains;
- Develop and adopt Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) legislation – at a national level and in EU and international settings - that obliges companies to conduct HRDD in line with the OECD Guidelines and which applies to companies of all sizes and types and covers the full supply chain.

Clean Clothes Campaign has started a campaign in response to the coronavirus crisis. Their succinct demands to brands are the following. Brands must:

- 1 #PayUp for what they ordered
- 2 Assure that workers receive their wages in full
- 3 Prevent workers from going penniless again
- 4 Stop union-busting under the guise of Covid-19
- 5 Ensure that workers are kept safe



Colophon

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The impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on leather workers in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India

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Photos Cover photo: Men cleaning and shaving animal skin using various chemicals and acid mixes. Photo by Asim Rafiqui / NOOR. The photos in this publication do not portray any of the interviewed workers or their production facilities.



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Together for Decent Leather

Together for Decent Leather is a three-year programme, carried out by a European-Asian consortium of seven civil society organisations. Our goal is to improve working conditions and to reduce labour rights abuses, focusing on production hubs for leather products in South Asia – in particular in Vellore and Chennai districts in Tamil Nadu, India; greater Karachi in Pakistan; and the greater Dhaka region in Bangladesh.

Together for Decent Leather works to secure increased commitment from companies to fulfil their human rights due diligence obligations and governments to put in place safeguards and regulations to improve adherence to international labour standards.

For more information, see www.togetherfordecentleather.org