

# Masking Misery

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MIGRANT WORKERS  
IN SÃO PAULO'S FASHION INDUSTRY



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# Executive Summary

Fashion is one of the industries worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Crisis-caused losses have been on a global scale, impacting the lives of workers across the supply chain, with workers from marginalised groups most affected. The situation is no different in Brazil, where the pandemic continues to expose and exacerbate systemic inequalities and leaves workers facing a humanitarian crisis over their livelihoods. This report analyses how the pandemic is affecting one of the most vulnerable groups in São Paulo's fashion supply chain: migrant workers.

Between 21 July and 16 September 2020, Business & Human Rights Resource Centre surveyed 146 migrant workers in São Paulo's fashion industry, living in the capital and surrounding metropolitan area. The survey sought to understand how workers were impacted by the pandemic. In establishing a demographic, we identified the typical profile of a migrant worker employed in sewing and embroidery in São Paulo, most of whom are Bolivian women. Within this demographic, we investigated issues related to: the impact of COVID-19; the flow of and demand for labour; the impact on the price of manufactured products; the impact of the pandemic on mental health, well-being and familial relationships; and the greatest challenges encountered during the period.

Often faced with precarious working conditions and living in on-site accommodation where small sewing workshops operate, migrant workers generally do not have formal labour contracts that guarantee labour rights and access to social protection. Without this security, they have been deeply affected by the pandemic's suspension of fashion industry operations. Complex supply chains and a lack of formal ties between workers and brands make it difficult to identify and hold business actors to account. Brands have used their disproportionate power over factory suppliers to cancel agreed orders, pay suppliers substantially less than agreed, and/or grossly extend payment terms<sup>1</sup>. Widespread lack of demand has also brought about a sharp drop in income and in turn affected the subsistence of these workers and their families.

**78%** said that prices of sewn products have decreased

While the industry faced a general lack of orders, there was still demand for fabric masks. Despite this, reduced prices further compromised the livelihoods of these workers. Testimonies recall masks being sewn for just R\$0,05 (USD 0,00885), a minuscule amount which speaks to the desperation among workers to provide for their families. At home, workers also faced obstacles educating their children without access to internet. Supporting family in their countries of origin also proved difficult, and the remittance of wages out of Brazil practically ceased.

The circumstances endured by this vulnerable population during the COVID-19 crisis call for stronger mechanisms and policies around the protection of migrant workers' rights. Responsibility must be assumed by brands and investors, and the government must play a greater role in understanding migrant workers and the conditions they face. Government must include migrant workers within Brazil's social protection network, develop stronger instruments for monitoring working conditions, and partner with migrant worker-led groups and civil society organisations (CSOs).

For businesses, it remains clear that transparency measures are essential to monitor conditions within supply chains. Information on purchasing practices, payment terms and the delimitation of non-negotiable labour costs should be implemented and shared publicly. Other measures such as the provision of personal protective equipment and occupational safety and health policies should also be introduced.

By spotlighting the experiences of migrant workers in São Paulo's fashion industry during COVID-19, this report aims to set a path to effectively guarantee human rights to migrant workers in this sector.

**61%** had difficulty accessing food

**84%** sewed masks during the pandemic

# Introduction

COVID-19 has pushed countries to pursue aggressive measures to prevent the spread of infection and simultaneously respond to the economic and social fallout from widespread cessation of non-essential business operations and necessary changes in social interactions. Existing inequality continues to determine who suffers the worst effects of the pandemic. Brazil, a country with extreme existing social and economic inequality, has witnessed a political crisis combined with uncoordinated public action and a reckless re-opening, which has worsened the crisis. We have watched as the pandemic exacerbates existing structural and historical problems.

Looking specifically at the fashion industry, unprecedented measures have been taken both in terms of scale and reach. The fall in demand for clothing is a direct consequence of measures taken by governments closing non-essential business to slow infection rates. The consequences have generated billions in losses for the industry, with the closure of some retail stores, layoffs and shutdowns throughout its supply chains.

Brazil's fashion industry is the fourth largest in the world, with more than 70,000 companies spread throughout the country. They are mostly small enterprises, generating 1.3 million positions in formal employment<sup>2</sup>. The country hosts every stage of the fashion supply chain — from the cotton plantation to the fashion runway; with workers at every stage of the process, spinning, weaving, sewing and selling. However, this industry, — the second largest employer in the country — has a dark underside. Hidden beneath a veneer of order, informal workers persevere in precarious conditions, subject to exploitation and rights violations in efforts to survive.

In São Paulo, a city of 12 million people, it is common to find migrant workers at the base of the industry's chain. Many are Bolivian nationals, who started to arrive in Brazil at the end of the last century to meet the demand for fast fashion labour. In spite of these precarious conditions, there are success stories, many of which have inspired other Bolivians to migrate. According to Federal Police records there are 75,000 Bolivians in Brazil at present. In 2009, the Free Residence Agreement for nationals of Mercosur states<sup>3</sup>, alongside Chile and Bolivia, was an important milestone regularising the status of many immigrants in the region. However, official data fails to include a significant part of the Bolivian migrant population, as many are undocumented.

Estimates from non-governmental organisations indicate there may be over 300,000 Bolivians in São Paulo. This discrepancy further accentuates migrant vulnerability, their powerlessness emphasised by their statistical non-existence and the contradictions between reality and the law, all of which creates an intense instability<sup>4</sup>.

The following report presents the impacts of the pandemic as described by survey respondents for this research. It sheds light on the experiences of the most vulnerable actors in São Paulo's fashion supply chain and points to harsh truths the industry must face to effectively address, respect and protect human rights. In doing so, this research takes stock of demographic variables within in this group, such as migrant status, gender, race, language, age and or class, and the discrimination they likely confront on this basis, all of which are heightened in times of crisis. We conclude this analysis with recommendations for government and businesses operating in Brazil.

# Who are we talking about?

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## Profile

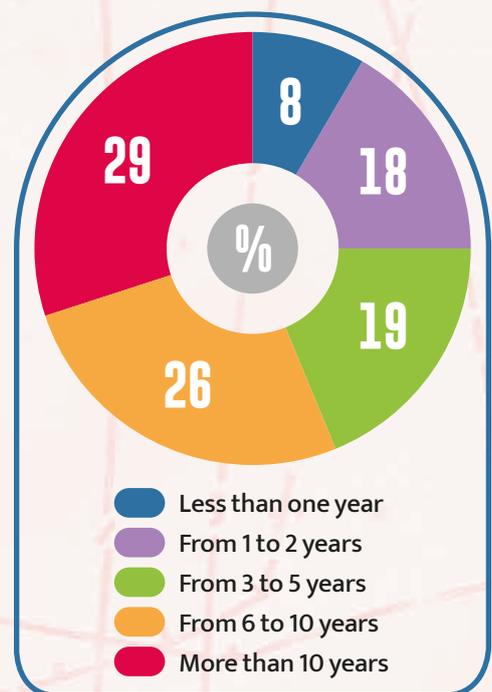
The sample profile for this study were predominantly Bolivian – (97%) 142 respondents – along with three Peruvians and one Paraguayan respondent. Survey respondents were aged between 17 and 65 years, and the average age was 34 years. Nearly three-quarters (73%) were women. All respondents lived in the city of São Paulo or in its metropolitan region; such as the cities of Barueri, Itaquaquecetuba and frequently Carapicuíba.

Due to the informality in labour relations in the garment industry, it is difficult to estimate data on this population without building a probable sample profile. Though this sample cannot represent all cases, it does share similarities with the Brazilian Association of the Textile and Clothing Industry (ABIT) data, which estimates three-quarters of the industry’s workers are female, reflected in our sample set .

A large number of those surveyed are fairly settled in the country, with 55% of respondents having lived in Brazil for at least six years. Fewer than one in ten reported living in Brazil for less than a year, which might mean weaker ties in the country and further limited access to social protections.

Four out of every five (80%) respondents lived with family members, less than a fifth (17%) lived with friends (and might also live with both family and friends) and 3% live alone. The average number of adults per household is 2.8 and 56% of respondents have school-age children.

### HOW LONG HAVE YOU LIVED IN BRAZIL?



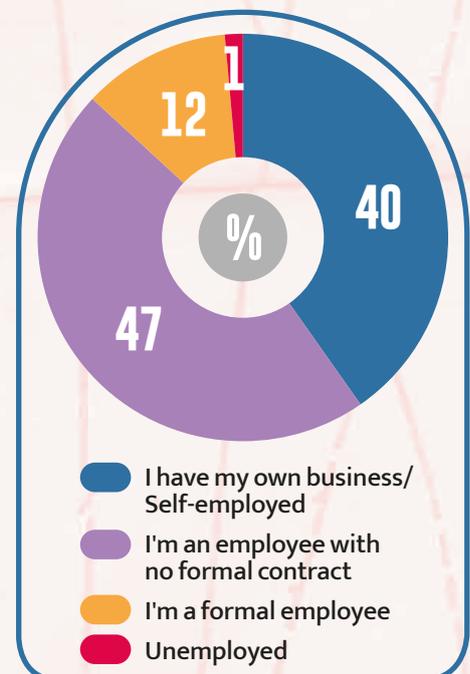
## Working Conditions

Survey respondents typically work where they live, with 89% saying this was already their setup before COVID-19. These houses are usually rented by the owner of the sewing shop, typically a migrant who often lives and works in the same space too. Accommodation is cramped, with whole families often living in tight rooms without any ventilation or natural light. Conducting work in living quarters means working conditions are often difficult, with limited room for family life and activities. This is often referred to as the “sweating system”, in which workplaces can be confused with residences and where work is performed under extreme conditions of oppression, low wages, exhaustive working hours and precarious or non-existent safety and health measures.

In Brazil, workers surveyed either own or work in small sewing shops supplying fashion brands. Two in five (40%) respondents reported having their own business as the owners of small sewing shops outsourced by some company or clothing shop. Just one per cent considered themselves unemployed. Those who worked for sewing shops can be classified into two groups: those with work contracts (12%) and those without (87%).

From the data, it is clear the most prevalent profile is of a Bolivian woman, working and living in the same space, without the security of a formal job and labour guarantees. She is also more vulnerable to the negative effects of the pandemic, not to mention impacts beyond the scope of this research, including heightened risk of domestic violence, as many women have been forced to isolate with their aggressor.

### WHAT'S YOUR WORKING SITUATION?



# Impacts of COVID-19 on migrant workers in São Paulo

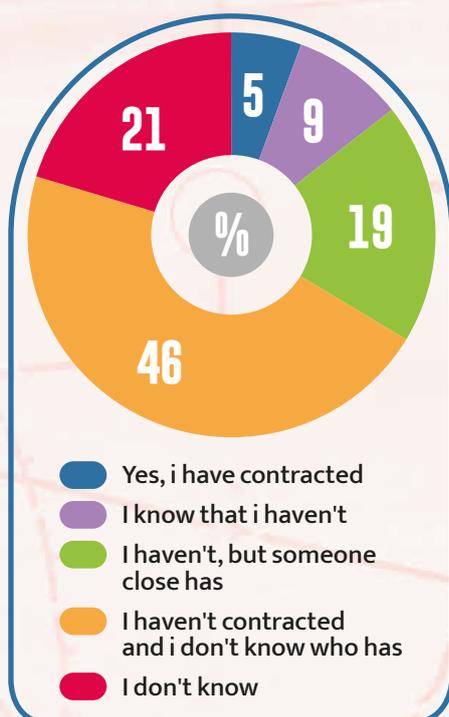


## Mental health and well-being

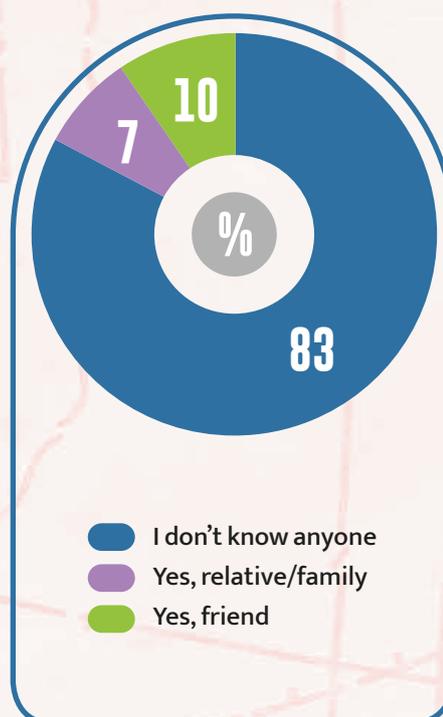
The toll of the pandemic on mental health is evident among migrant workers surveyed, with more than four-fifths of respondents afraid of the virus. Among the emotions frequently experienced during the pandemic, more than two in five said sadness (41%), more than a third (36%), despair and stress/anxiety (34%). Hope, in turn, was the most reported positive feeling, present in almost a fifth (18%) of responses.

To gauge migrant workers' proximity to COVID-19, we asked whether anyone close to them had contracted the virus. Two out of three respondents have not had close contact with COVID-19, almost half said they had not contracted it and did not know anyone who had, and nearly half (46%) said they did not know if they had been infected. The rate of confirmed infections was one in 20 (5%) and among these, two thirds indicated they had not received public health treatment. Two-fifths of those interviewed know someone who died because of the disease. However just one in ten (10%) of respondents had access to COVID-19 tests.

### HAVE YOU CONTRACTED OR KNOW SOMEONE CLOSE WHO HAS CONTRACTED COVID-19?



### HAS ANYONE CLOSE TO YOU DIED FROM COVID-19?



## Impacts on migrant families

Adding to the many challenges brought about by the pandemic, survey respondents reported two additional challenges: online classes for their children and a shortage of funds to send home to their families.

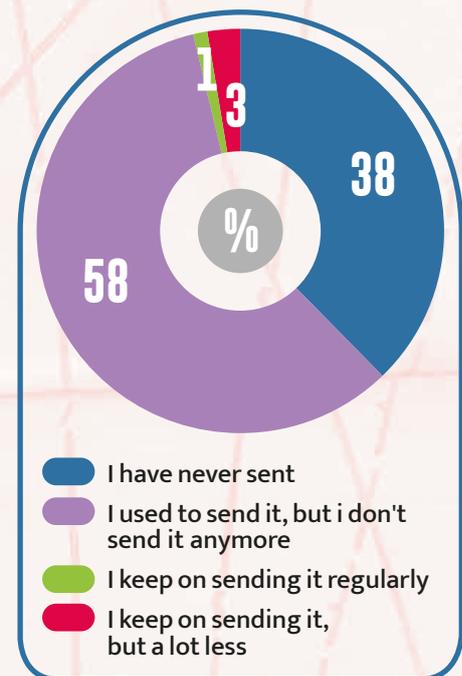
More than half the interviewees had school age children taking online classes. A third reported difficulties undertaking school activities due to lack of internet access or lack of an internet-enabled device, both of which obstruct access to education and accentuate existing inequalities. The children of migrant workers may also live in homes that do not have the space or environment conducive to study, or an adult present to help them.

**“ Quarantine has affected my daughters' studies, because I still don't understand Portuguese very much and sometimes I can't connect to the internet and they lose school activities ”**

We also investigated how the pandemic affected the families of migrant workers in Brazil still living in their countries of origin and receiving money from their relatives. Most respondents sent money home before the COVID-19 crisis but almost all (93%) had been unable to send remittances due to new economic challenges caused by the pandemic.



### DO YOU STILL SEND MONEY TO YOUR FAMILY IN YOUR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN?





The impacts of the pandemic on family were not all negative. Respondents reported feeling closer to their families. Accustomed to working over 14 hours a day, workers typically had less time and attention for family life and their children before COVID-19 struck. With the scarcity of work amid the pandemic, long working hours were replaced with family time.

**“ During this quarantine I've been through happy and sad moments at the same time, in fact, before the quarantine, our lives were all dedicated to work without even noticing how valuable it is that we have our families around us. We could be more united and have a relationship that, perhaps, didn't exist, because it was only work, work. My children, dedicated to them more time, the care they need, I've learned that the family is the first thing one should take care of and we've learned to be more united. ”**

This was an element present in several open answers. Despite all the difficulties the pandemic has brought to the lives of workers and their families, we have seen that some look positively at certain changes. An optional space was left in the survey for respondents to share stories from quarantine during the pandemic. Seven in ten respondents chose to share their experiences with many reflecting on time spent with their families.

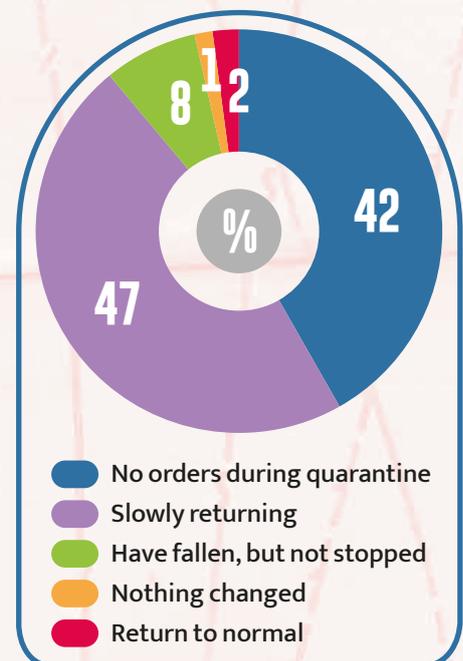
## Sewing in the pandemic: less work and lower prices

The reduction of work amid COVID-19 was felt by respondents, along with the direct impact on their livelihoods. Usually job requests are offered at the Bolivian community's fairs and social spaces, for example churches, public squares and street markets. Workshop owners are typically in charge of acquiring orders through relationships built with potential buyers. They can be a representative of a brand, retail store, production manager or a third party who has received the order, generating a further outsourcing of labour. Order requests increase in scale depending on the type of work and the quality of the product delivered.

Survey answers revealed that orders completely stopped for most workers (91%) at the start of the pandemic. Among them, more than two in five (42%) indicated that orders had still not yet resumed; almost half said that orders were slowly returning to normal. Only two out of 146 migrant workers indicated that orders had returned to normal. Very few (just 8%) said they had managed to continue to work, albeit with vastly reduced orders.

The impact on the flow of orders was clearly significant and lack of work widespread. When asked about the greatest challenge they faced during quarantine, just over half the respondents (50%) referred to lack of work. When asked to share stories from quarantine during the pandemic, more than one in six (16%) answers raised explicit concerns about the lack of work and, consequently, money for essential needs.

### HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED YOUR WORK?



“ My biggest difficulty was that I had no job, because we come here with a dream and with COVID everything was locked down, the debts have increased and there's no consideration from some house owners ”

More than one third (38%) of respondents indicated the decline in orders and work generally was the greatest change they experienced at work during the pandemic. Two in five respondents noted the need to adopt new protection measures, such as hygiene, the use of hand sanitiser and personal protective equipment like face masks.

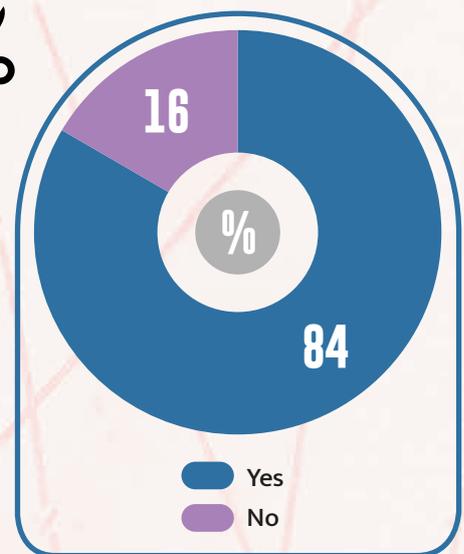
The impact on work dynamics did not stop with the decline in orders, but affected the types of products ordered too. More than four in five (84%) survey respondents indicated they had made masks during this period, and that these were often the only products ordered.

“ During quarantine I didn't know that I would only sew masks and I not get paid ”

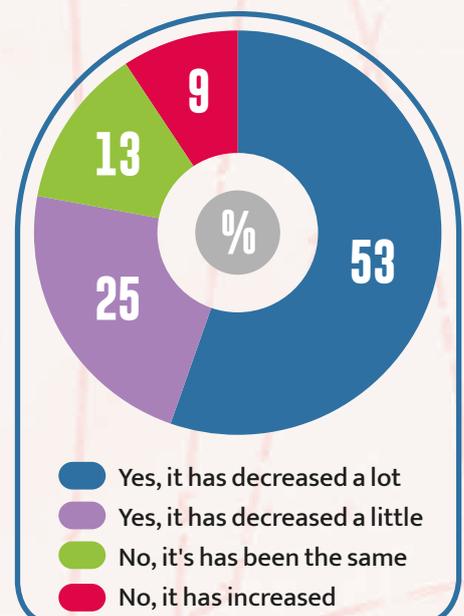
Not only was there a shortage of orders, but the prices of the few orders that did materialise were reduced. As smaller garments, masks do not generate the same income as say, dresses: more than three-quarters of respondents indicated that the prices paid for orders decreased.

While face masks became a mandatory item in most people's pockets and demand and retail prices increased, workers making the masks reported the opposite effect on their wages. With business taking advantage of the large surplus of available labour during the pandemic, buyers' orders would arrive, but with increasingly reduced value.

DURING THE PANDEMIC DID YOU SEW MASKS?



HAS THE PRICE OF THE PRODUCTS YOU SEW DECREASED?



## “ I have even worked for five cents ”

In the fashion supply chain, the owner of the brand or business determines the purchasing price, which is then imposed on the migrant who owns a sewing workshop or works at one. This offer is typically non-negotiable, and those who try to negotiate are often disregarded while the request is passed on to another workshop owner, who may accept. The same is true for other purchasing practices including the delivery and payment schedule, and other details of goods. Product details are usually only understood by the workshop owner, who receives a piece for employees to replicate. The owner is regularly the only one with a relationship with the buyer, but they and their employees are unlikely to know the final destination of the piece, as labels will be sewn elsewhere. To avoid being held responsible in labour inspections, clothing brands and businesses typically have their own groups that focus on labels.

Reduced prices and costs of labour also appeared in responses to open questions. When asked about the greatest change they had experienced at work, one in every seven answers referred to reduced prices. Media reports have also highlighted non-payment of wages for workers producing these materials.

The correlation of some data tells us more about the context these workers have been living in. Among those who reported having less or no work during the pandemic, the majority (94%) lacked formal ties; these respondents were either in informal employment or self-employed. On the other hand, in answers to the same question, workers in formal employment instead referred to the issue of sanitation: the need to wear a mask and disinfect the work environment.

Among respondents without formal ties, more than two in five (44%) said that the reduced work or lack of it was the greatest change experienced at work; among respondents with formal employment ties, this figure was only one in five. The data shows that concerns around work during the pandemic varied between migrant workers with formal labour contracts and those without, demonstrating a direct relationship between lack of work and precarious employment.

We also looked at the correlation between the price paid for the products and ties to employment. Here, workers without formal employment saw more reductions in price paid per product — almost three in five (56%) informal workers and over half (53%) self-employed workers reported a price decrease — compared with the one in three (35%) formal workers reporting a decrease. It is clear the financial impact of the COVID-19 crisis hit informal workers harder than those with a formal contract. Informal workers, often the most vulnerable in supply chains, appeared to bear the financial burden of the pandemic. These workers sit at bottom of the chain, unprotected and unable to exercise labour rights. Without collective organisation or union association, there is no protection in place to shield workers in times of crisis.



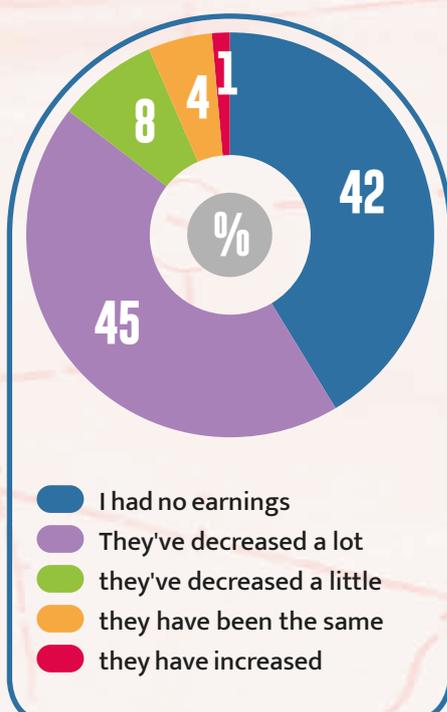
## Impacts on income

Changes at work during the pandemic had a direct impact on the income of workers and their families. Consistent with data collected on the changes in working conditions, we identified that most respondents (87%) felt a drastic change in their incomes. Among them, over two fifths (42%) reported that they were left without income during the pandemic, while 45% said their income decreased greatly.

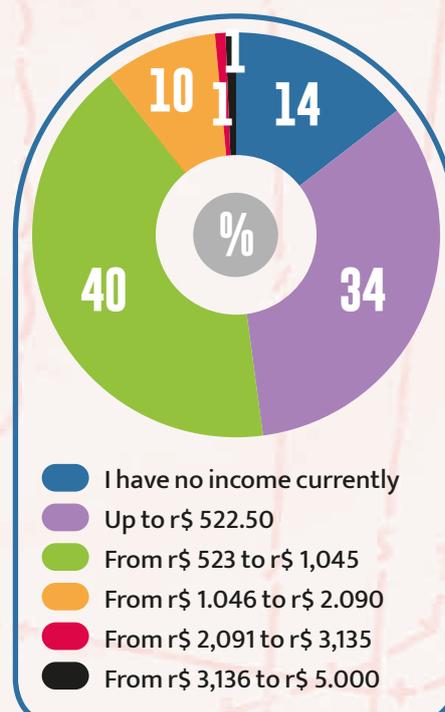
In light of these findings, we tried to present a picture of income brackets among migrant families in this group. The harsh reality is that the majority (87%) of interviewees indicated they had a maximum monthly income of up to R\$ 1,045 (less than US\$ 200) per month. This is the minimum wage in Brazil, set by law and guaranteed by the Federal Constitution.

Given we are working with a non-representative sample, we cannot generalise and apply these findings to all migrant workers in Brazil's fashion industry. But it is important to note living on less than US\$1.9 a day is officially understood as extreme poverty, and the average number of adults per household observed in our sample was 2.8. As such, there is a strong argument to be made that almost half of these workers likely live in conditions of extreme poverty, and many others live in poverty<sup>5</sup>.

### HOW DID THE PANDEMIC AFFECT YOUR EARNINGS?



### WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT MONTHLY INCOME APPROXIMATELY?



The direct impact on income has also made hunger a reality to many of these families, evidenced in almost two in three answers which reported difficulties accessing food during the pandemic.

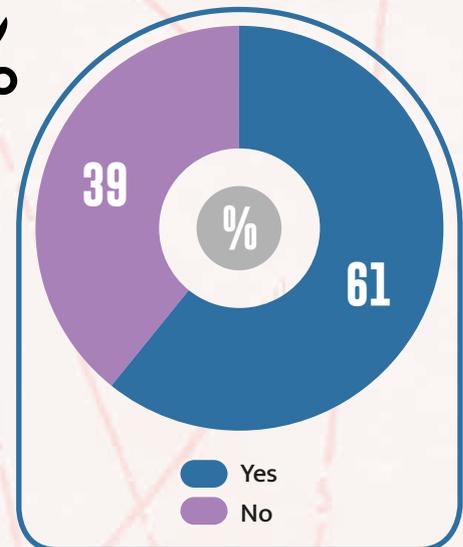
Lack of access to food also appeared in over a third (18%) of answers to the question "What has been the greatest challenge during quarantine?" In answers to open questions, struggles for survival are prominent: just over two in five (22%) respondents indicated difficulty paying bills and avoiding debt. Many were also concerned about their children's education and some reported acquiring debt when unable to pay rent and bills.

**“ I need some help, 'cause I have already gone into debt, 'cause I work with a staff, but with this quarantine we haven't been working at all and I have opened by myself my own workshop but It's not been working out 'cause I have just gone into debt ”**

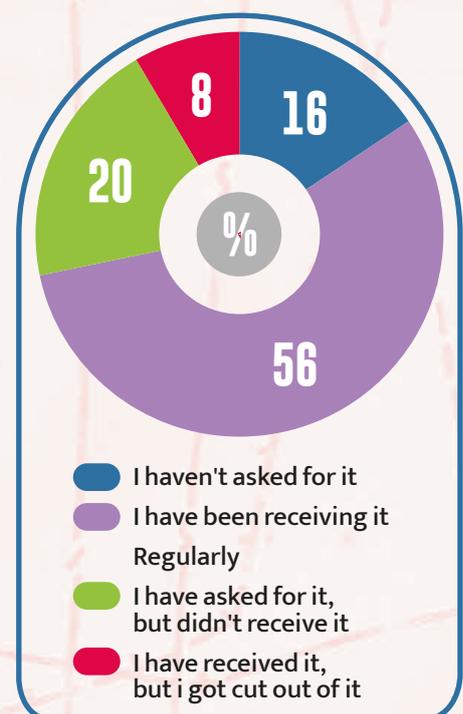
When asked about receiving emergency aid, a basic income provided by the Federal Government, we identified that more than half (56%) had received the benefit. However, more than a quarter (28%) of respondents who requested the benefit had yet to receive it, indicating a substantial portion of this population struggle to access public social protection. Of these, a fifth (20%) have not yet been approved and some (8%) have already been disqualified.

We also asked about other types of financial aid or donations. Just over a third of the respondents (35%) had been receiving some kind of donation from NGOs, churches or other religious organisations. A third (35%) had not received anything at all.

**ARE YOU HAVING PROBLEMS ACCESSING FOOD?**



**HAVE YOU BEEN RECEIVING EMERGENCY AID FROM THE BRAZILIAN GOVERNMENT?**



# Recommendations

The following recommendations build upon the survey data and analysis presented above, with aim of driving improved policies and business action to better support the rights of migrant workers, which have been demonstrably and disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Although these recommendations are not exhaustive, they are targeted toward building an agenda for action.



## Brazilian Governments must:

- **Map the migrant population working in the fashion industry**, identify who they are and gather accurate, reliable and publicly-accessible information about their living and working conditions<sup>6</sup>;
- **Strengthen existing regulations**, or create new ones where necessary, to hold companies at the top of the supply chain to account for cases of labour and human rights abuse;
- **Include migrant workers in emergency social protection measures** and ensure these protections are institutionalised through laws and policies that are applicable beyond the pandemic;
- **Define public policy strategies that prioritise gender-responsive actions** when designing reforms and protections aimed at this population;
- **Intensify measures of supervision** on working conditions;
- **Strengthen CSOs that have played a strategic role** in ensuring the livelihood of this population;
- **Ensure the continuity of policies to combat all forms of labour exploitation in Brazil**, including more resources for labour prosecutors and auditors;
- **Ratify the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families** and ensure that it is properly implemented.

## Companies must:

- **Map their entire supply chain** and keep details up-to-date, transparent and publicly available online;
- **Publish information demonstrating the implementation of policies and codes of conduct**, such as factory audit reports and workplace monitoring results;
- **Ensure that migrant and informal workers are explicitly covered by company policies** and that the protection of workers are focused on rights and not legal status;
- **Publish information regarding purchasing practices including payment terms and costing policies, and adopt responsible purchasing practices**, including long-term commitments to production units and prices that are sufficient to pay workers Brazil's legally required minimum wage, protected in contractual agreements, when placing orders;
- **Establish credible and effective worker-centred grievance mechanisms** for all workers throughout the supply chain in line with criteria under the UNGPs;
- **Ensure all workers in the supply chain, particularly migrant and informal workers, have the right to organise and are represented in bargaining agreements;**
- **Conduct due diligence to identify, prevent and mitigate risks and negative impacts on their production chains**, in accordance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) <sup>7</sup>, and regularly engage with migrant worker groups, trade unions and CSOs to audit and monitor working conditions in supply chains;
- **Provide dedicated funding for independent third-party training on labour rights, constitutional guarantees and human rights** to ensure workers in supply chains understand and can exercise their rights;
- **Publicly support state labour protections**, including ratification and implementation of all ILO conventions throughout the supply chain;
- **Publicly support the defence of human rights**, including the rights to a healthy environment, to a decent salary, social security and the rights guaranteed by the Federal Constitution;
- **Work with suppliers and business partners to support the implementation of ILO recommendations** and health and safety guidance to protect workers from COVID-19.

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> **BUSINESS & HUMAN RIGHTS RESOURCE CENTRE.** Major apparel brands delay & cancel orders in response to pandemic, risking livelihoods of millions of garment workers in their supply chains. 24 March 2020.

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<sup>2</sup> **ABIT – ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DA INDÚSTRIA TÊXTIL E DE CONFECÇÃO.**

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<sup>3</sup> **INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATIONS - ILO.** Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration: Non-binding principles and guidelines for a rights-based approach to labour migration. Geneva: ILO - International Labour Organization, 2006.

[https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmmain.showPractice?p\\_lang=en&p\\_practice\\_id=187](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmmain.showPractice?p_lang=en&p_practice_id=187). Access on: 12 Nov. 2020

<sup>4</sup> **NOGUEIRA, Christiane V.; NOVAES, Marina; BIGNAMI, Renato (orgs.).** Tráfico de pessoas: reflexões para a compreensão do trabalho escravo contemporâneo. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> **WORLD BANK.** 2020. Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020. Washington, DC: World Bank. 2020.

<sup>6</sup> **BUSINESS & HUMAN RIGHTS RESOURCE CENTRE.** Union busting & unfair dismissals: Garment workers during COVID-19. August 2020.

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<sup>7</sup> **UNITED NATION - UN.** Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights:

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Access on: 12 Nov. 2020

# Fact sheet

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We are also grateful for the collaboration of the NEB-FGV (Bureaucracy Studies Centre of Getulio Vargas Foundation) for the methodological support, research and data collection.



# Masking Misery

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MIGRANT WORKERS  
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