



# ReFashion

How is COVID-19 impacting  
food security for workers in  
Cambodia's garment industry?

ReFashion Research Brief 1  
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**Covid-19 has severely impacted employment opportunity and earning potential for workers in Cambodia’s garment and footwear sector. The Refashion study is tracking the impacts of the pandemic on a cohort of 200 female workers. New findings indicate that a sharp reduction in income is creating a chronic situation of food insecurity for workers and their families.**

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

Committee on World Food Security, 2009

## The problem

The Covid-19 pandemic is creating significant disruption in Cambodia’s garment and footwear industry. Beginning as an economic crisis, the impacts of manufacturing shutdowns and consumer lockdowns around the world continue to slow the garment sector’s output. In 2020, Cambodia’s garment sector exports fell by 10%.

The impacts of this ongoing disruption for the garment industry’s workforce are severe. In January 2020, approximately 800,000 people were directly employed in the garment and footwear sector in Cambodia. Around 90% of these workers were women. Although comprehensive data on employment impacts in Cambodia is as yet not available, reliable estimates suggest that, at peak, between one quarter and one half of all factories had suspended production, potentially affecting between 150-200,000 workers (Arnold 2021). By October 2020, already 35-40,000 workers were estimated to have been made permanently unemployed (Arnold 2021).

The Royal Government of Cambodia has introduced an emergency wage subsidy scheme for workers whose employment contracts have been temporarily suspended. Under the programme, workers receive \$70 per month, of which \$40 is contributed by the state and \$30 by the employer. The scheme therefore compensates only 36% of the statutory minimum wage for the garment sector, fixed at \$192 per month from January 2021. Further, workers whose contracts are terminated rather than suspended are not eligible to receive this support.

There is urgent concern about workers’ ability to meet the cost of basic needs for themselves and their families on severely reduced incomes.

## COVID-19 and food security: key findings

- The Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to a situation of deepening food insecurity for garment sector workers
- Food insecurity occurs when households lack money or resources to buy adequate food
- Average income for female workers in Cambodia’s garment and footwear sector has dropped by 20% since the beginning of the global Covid-19 pandemic in January 2020
- 88% of female garment workers believe they are financially worse off than before the pandemic
- 85% of female garment workers report reducing expenditure on food since the start of the pandemic
- Among those reducing food budgets, the average daily spend on household food has dropped by 35% between Jan ’20 and Mar/Apr ’21
- In Mar/Apr ’21, 57% of female workers recalled recent instances where they or household members had to eat less than they thought they should
- In Mar/Apr ’21, 17% of female workers recalled recent instances when they or household members were hungry but did not eat due to a lack of money or resources for food
- Industry stakeholders must immediately act to ensure workers are guaranteed a sufficient income to meet basic needs



## Who we are

ReFashion Study is leading mixed-methods and longitudinal research on the impacts of Covid-19 on female garment and footwear workers in Cambodia. ReFashion is led by a team of UK and Cambodian researchers from Royal Holloway, University of London; the University of Nottingham; and the Cambodia Development Resource Institute.

The study combines a quantitative survey of female workers to measure trends in employment, household finances, and wellbeing, with qualitative interviews to explore emergent themes in greater depth, each repeated with the same cohort of participants at strategic intervals. To date, two rounds of quantitative survey results have been recorded, in Nov/Dec '20 and Mar/Apr '21, and two rounds of qualitative interviews, in Jan/Feb '21 and May/Jun'21. The research methods are designed to capture an in-depth and long-term understanding of women workers' lives through the pandemic. The experiences of the 203 women in our initial sample are not representative of every garment worker in Cambodia, although corroborating evidence suggests the challenges they highlight are likely widespread.

### ABOVE:

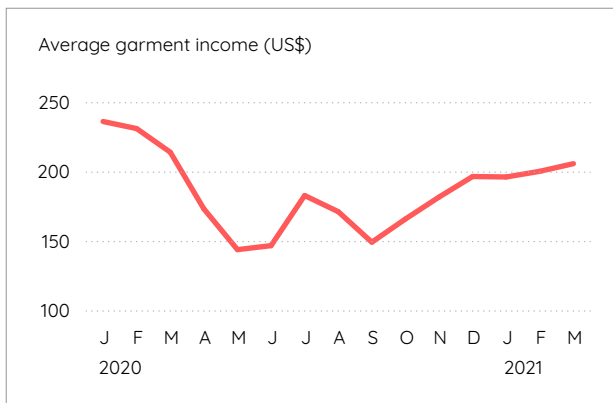
A closed market in one of Phnom Penh's red zones. Credit: Thomas Cristofolletti / Ruom & Royal Holloway

## Key findings

Covid-19 has significantly reduced employment opportunity and income for workers in Cambodia's garment and footwear industry. Over 15 months from January 2020, the average monthly wage has fallen from a peak of \$237 per month in January 2020 to lows of \$145 and \$147 per month in May and October 2020, respectively (see Figure 1). Over the same period, the average worker has lost an estimated 20% of their expected income. Evidencing the long-term impacts of the crisis for garment workers, across two phases of the survey conducted to date, a consistent number of workers described themselves as 'worse off' than before the pandemic: reported by 87% of respondents in Nov/Dec '20 and 88% in Mar/Apr '21.

Workers have pursued a number of different coping strategies to adapt household budgets to these income constraints. These include borrowing money, selling assets, and using savings. However, the most common coping strategy reported was reducing money on daily living and, in particular, food. The number of workers who report reducing food expenditure has increased across the two phases of the survey, from 77% in Oct/Nov 2020 to 85% in Mar/Apr 2021. Among workers who report making a reduction in food expenditure, the average daily household food budget dropped from \$4.38 in Jan '20 to \$2.83 in Mar/Apr '21, a fall of 35%. At the same time as food expenditure has been cut, food prices have been rising (Care 2020; UN 2021).

As a result of declining food expenditure and rising food prices, the quantity and quality of food that workers and their household are consuming has significantly reduced. In Nov/Dec '20, 23% of women reported eating less meat than before Covid-19, 13% reported eating fewer vegetables, and 11% reported eating less fish. By Mar/Apr '21, the percentage of women reporting reduced consumption of these key food items has grown to 52% (less meat), 30% (fewer vegetables), and 46% (less fish), respectively.



**FIGURE 1**  
Average income reported from the garment sector between January 2020 and March 2021



**FIGURE 2**  
Food insecurity among workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Most workers now regard their household food intake as inadequate and many report experiencing hunger during the pandemic. In Mar/Apr '21, 57% of workers could recall a time in the last month when they or others in their household ate less than they thought they should because of a lack of money or other resources. Of those, 56% reported this happened 'always' or 'often'. At the same time, 17% of workers could recall a time in the last month when they or others in their household were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money or other resources for food. Of those, 39% reported this happened 'always' or 'often'. These figures were consistent across our Nov/Dec '20 and Mar/Apr '21 round of surveys (see Figure 2) suggesting food insecurity has become a chronic rather than short term problem for many households.

Our findings align with a United Nations study released in April 2021 that showed Cambodian households are increasingly adopting coping strategies to manage access to food, including reducing expenditure. The study found that, by the end of 2020, only half of Cambodian women aged 15-49 consumed a sufficiently diverse diet. It emphasised that adequate food intake and diversity is important for protecting health and wellbeing, maintaining productivity, and boosting immunity and preventing non-communicable diseases that are risk factors for higher COVID-19 morbidity and mortality (UN 2021).

### In their own words

"When I got a small amount of my salary, I had to keep it as saving for the loan repayment. I would reduce my food consumption. For example, I normally spend 5,000 Riel on food daily, but I would reduce it to only 2,000 Riel in order to have more savings to repay the loan... I endured hunger. I had to endure eating salt and fermented fish until I had a full salary."

Chanthou, 58, Phnom Penh

"I go to work every day, I just eat rice and I can never desire any other snack because I cannot afford it [she is crying]... I could tell you one word [to describe my situation] is hardship. I have reduced my spending on food. Some days we only have eggs for meals."

Lida, 60, Phnom Penh

"In 2021, the food price has increased sharply... [It] has shocked me, making me afraid about spending on food because everything has become so expensive. Since the factory started to suspend, we have earned so little compared to before. Before, we could spend 7,000 Riel or 8,000 Riels on food and we could have 2 or 3 meals available for two people. Now, we spend 10,000 Riel and that is barely enough to serve only 1 meal for two people."

Sophea, 27, Phnom Penh

## Recommendations

Most of our field work was conducted prior to the implementation of Cambodia's national lockdown in April 2021. Continued transmission of Covid-19 in Cambodia has since caused further local lockdowns, quarantines, and infections among factory worker populations. We anticipate therefore that the food security of workers may have deteriorated since our research was conducted. There is an urgent need for action to ensure workers can secure access to adequate food intake.

**Global brands and retailers** should act responsibly toward suppliers and workers in their supply chain by making complete and timely payments to suppliers; and establishing emergency funds to guarantee that workers receive full and regular income during the pandemic.

**The Cambodian government** should protect the health and wellbeing of Cambodian workers by increasing the wage subsidy payment for suspended workers to match average pre-pandemic salary levels in the garment sector; extending eligibility for support to all garment sector workers unable to work, including those affected by contract termination, shutdowns, lockdowns, quarantine and Covid-19 infection; and ensuring that the sectoral minimum wage is fixed at a living wage level sufficient to meet the basic needs of workers and their households.

## Further reading

Arnold D (2021) *Cambodia's Garment Sector in Transformation*. Utrecht: CNV International.

Care (2020) *Garment Worker Needs Assessment During Covid-19*. Phnom Penh: Care.

FAO, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2021) *Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2020*. Bangkok: FAO.

United Nations Cambodia (2021) *Cambodia Covid-19 Lockdown: Food Security and Nutrition Brief*. Phnom Penh: United Nations.

Worker Rights Consortium (2020) *Hunger in the Apparel Supply Chain: Survey findings on workers' access to nutrition during Covid-19*. Washington DC: Worker Rights Consortium.

## Contact

This research brief was written by members of the ReFashion Study team. Our research project is ongoing. Find out more about the project by visiting our website, [www.ReFashionStudy.org](http://www.ReFashionStudy.org), and keep up to date by following us on Twitter, [@ReFashionStudy](https://twitter.com/ReFashionStudy). For further information about the contents of this brief or the project, please contact us via our website.

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