Under curfew: 8

Impact of the Corona Pandemic on Loading and Offloading Workers

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For legal aid and human rights

21 days without work

AMMAN – The continuation of the holiday as imposed by the government to curtail the spread of the Corona virus (COVID 19) has cast a dark shadow over the lives of daily workers, as well as those who work in small enterprises. Loading and Offloading Workers are among these workers and in fact could be seen as being at the forefront of them as they lived on subsistence even before the crisis, so how are they now?

Tamkeen for Legal Aid and Human Rights monitored the status of this group, whose members work in a profession that is viewed socially through a lens of lack of interest. Indeed, this meager position is held even though the work of this group, who are often called "porters", often intersects with most professions and trades, which ought to confirm its importance since its workers are urgently needed in various sectors, whether small or large.

The majority of porters are employed on a daily basis or they receive their wages by piece. The workers have various backgrounds including Jordanians, Egyptians or Syrian refugees. As for the migrant workers among them, the majority of them are considered irregular as they mostly work in irregular sectors, while those who work in regular sectors are very few.

Tamkeen began its monitoring of these workers since the onset of the curfew, 21 days ago. It was noted that the curfew has left these workers without work or a chance to secure their livelihoods as it resulted in the closure of most businesses. Even though these measures were taken to curtail the spread of the virus, their consequences on the workers are undeniably heavy and have caused for their living conditions to deteriorate.

Porters: Requests to return to work

The report was based on interviews that were held on the phone or through social media; in addition to 89 complaints that were lodged to Tamkeen by workers in the sector. The interviews focused on their difficult living conditions that have caused these workers to call for a decision that would allow their return to work and thus earn their daily income to secure the needs of their families.

It was evident from the communication with the workers, that the majority of them are unincluded in any Social Protection Frameworks, as they are not covered under the umbrella of Social Security, do not have Medical Insurance and are not provided with occupational safety tools. On the other hand, those who are employed in regularized sectors are covered to an extent.

Regardless of the different nationalities of these workers, their suffering is mutual, whether in terms of the health consequences due to their hard jobs, the violations that they face; or the perspective of society that treats them as though they have low value, even though they continue to need them.

Without Social or Health Insurances

Porters are exposed to difficult working conditions that deprive them from their basic rights, including the coverage of any type of insurance. They are forced to carry heavy weights; their working hours are unstable as they go on as long as the market requires, thus affecting their income, which in turn affects their ability to organize their budgets.

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The Tamkeen team met with 4 workers, one of them is Jordanian, one Egyptian and two Syrians, who all worked for five years in warehouses that distribute cement and steel used for construction in Ramtha. While the employer issued the non-Jordanians a work permit in 2019, he was not unable to renew them due to new instructions, in which the Ministry of Labour stipulates that only licensed warehouse with an area of more than 1000 square meters and a truck will be allowed to issue permits, as one permit will be issued for each truck.

According to the employer, these instructions represent an issue, particularly in relation to his budgets, since he cannot afford such conditions, as these budgets are usually set based on his work load. He added that he also has numerous obligations that he needs to cover that are deducted from his own income.

Even though these workers were left in an irregular status, they continued working for the same employer. Due to their precarious legal position, these workers were not covered under Social Security, even though their job is risky and entails them loading and unloading large loads that could weigh 35 tons on a daily basis, and where they receive 2.5 JOD for each ton they carry.

One of the four workers is called Hassan (an alias), whose foot was fractured as a result of heavy bundle of iron falling on him. He was then hospitalized, and the employer paid most of the treatment, but did not pay him any sum for the days when he was home and unable to work per the doctors' recommendations.

Currently, Hassan is desperate to work to cover his living expenses. Due to the curfew, he is unable to find any work and thus has no choice but to sit at home, even though he cannot secure any of his basis needs. Moreover, he was unable to submit a complaint at the Social Security Corporation in order to receive a compensation for his injury.

The reality of this group was summed by a worker, who told the Tamkeen Team: "This work exhausts me, and I may never return to loading and offloading just so I could maintain my health and remain near my children."

Another worker summed his struggles by saying: "Human Beings cannot endure such work for many years, but our desperate needs confined us to it." The third then bitterly commented: "I left this work more than once to look for another in some other sector. I had to return though each and every time when I could not find an alternative;" while another added: "Employers decide how many hours we work, we might work for 11 hours a day."

Prisoners of Homes and Needs

Despite the bleak conditions that surround their work, workers admitted that the curfew has made them prisoners inside their homes and unable to find any work. They also asserted that they will not be able to receive any unemployment benefits, even though the government confirmed this right for them.

These workers all agreed that their lives are in danger, and in fact, their conditions now are heavier than the weights they had to load and offload. They added that have obligations that were hard to meet even before the curfew, which include their rents, electricity and water bills; and the needs of their families and their children.

Ahmad (an alias), does not have national number since he is a Palestinian from Gaza. He currently lives in the Gaza Camp in Jerash and works as a porter in a brick factory. He receives a wage of 1.5 JOD for each 100 bricks he loads and offloads, and works from the early hours of the morning till late at night.

Following the closure of the construction sector, he is left with no income. Instead, he is confined to his home. He summed his status by saying: "Before the Corona Crisis, we barely managed. Our income could barely cover our daily needs then. How can I do it now when there is a curfew and I am left with no work or any other type of aid?"

During his interview with Tamkeen, Ahmad confessed that he suffers from back pain, which he thinks is caused by disc. He has no idea how he will mange his treatment since he is covered by Social Security or have health insurance. He also cannot register in the National Aid Fund or is eligible to receive aid from the numerous stakeholders, due to him not having a national number. He also admitted that many of his colleagues suffer from similar health issues and do not have insurance either.

Limited number of Workers ... New Burdens

In the agricultural sector, which is mostly concentrated in Irbid, Mafraq, the Valley district, and part of Amman, porters complain that most of them stopped working during the curfew. However, they noted that there are limited numbers of them who were allowed to work on farms, in accordance with the curfew orders, which granted for a limited number of workers to issue permits to ensure that the agricultural production continues.

Based on the monitoring carried out by Tamkeen's team, some Jordanian and Syrian workers in packing, transportation, loading and offloading of fruit, citrus and vegetable boxes confirmed that their business was back to work, in the same manner as it was before the Corona Virus crisis. These workers indicated that their work is mostly seasonal, which means that it is infrequent with periods of work and others of unemployment.

Those who returned to work though said that their working conditions are the same as they were before the crisis. Thus, they are tasked with loading and offloading vegetables, fruits, chicken and meat during the hours in which the curfew is lifted. They added that since their numbers are limited, this has led to the increase in their burdens.

Similar to their colleagues in other small enterprises, agricultural workers are not covered in Social Protection frameworks, as they not covered under the umbrella of Social Security. They are also exposed to many risks and labour violations, especially since their employers continue to not provide them with occupational health and safety tools.

Furthermore, Tamkeen revealed that agricultural porters usually suffer from hard living conditions, which have only gotten worse following the crisis because they do not have any income now, as their work has stopped.

Abu Abdo, who is a Syrian refugee, told Tamkeen his story as he is trapped in the farm in which he works at. When the curfew decision was announced, he could not get out of the farm located in the city of Zarqa, and in the same time, he was unable to obtain a pass to go to the Zaatari camp, located in Mafraq, where his family of six people live so to check on them. His work requires to travel to most governorates and villages, as he loads and unloads the parcels in the trucks, while accompanying the driver so he could continually do his job at every stop.

Abu Abdo confessed that while these journeys usually exhausts him, he still thinks that his job is simple compared to that of his colleagues, who were poisoned by pesticides on numerous occasions. They also have to endure the unpleasant odors in poultry, and bear the summer heat and the severe cold of winter. Additionally, there are the several traffic accidents that have occurred during the different trips they make between their farm and the others.

Though he added that workers in the poultry farms are provided with occupational safety and health tools, since they sprayed both the farms and trucks with pesticides and sterile materials. They are also sterilizing whoever comes in or leaves the farm. He also said that workers have been wearing gloves and masks during their working hours.

Pain in their Backs and Bones

Another category includes loading and offloading workers who work to distribute gas cylinders, who are struggling in their work and to survive.

A Jordanian worker works in loading and offloading gas cylinders in the city of Irbid. The nature of his job means that he has to incur the trouble of loading the cylinders in the distribution car, and then carrying it on his shoulder to deliver it to the homes of customer. He admitted that this work has exhausted him, as it includes long working hours, where he has to carry these cylinders on his shoulders, which have caused him pain in his back and bones.

Ahmad also indicated that he works throughout the month without any vacation or leave, except in cases of illness where he is not given any wages in lieu of sick leaves. He added that he works all day and some hours of the night, as his working hours might reach 13 working hours with a daily wage of ten JODs.

Since these workers are not included in the holiday decision, these workers were not affected like their other counterparts who work in loading and offloading. However, this quality has also added to his fatigue since the demand to replace cylinders has increased dramatically after the outbreak of the Corona pandemic.

According to Tamkeen's team, the suffering of workers in this sector is not just limited to this aspect. It was noted that occupational safety and health measures are not followed in the crisis, since employers are only providing workers with only gloves and no masks. Such lax measures jeopardies the lives of these workers, as it exposes them to the virus when they interact with people, which could potentially lead to many being infected in turn as well.

There are other sectors where porters work who have been negatively affected by the current crisis. These include those who work in the Qualified Industrial Zones, clothers factories; Stores that sell industrial iron, electrical appliances, carpets, rugs, tiles, marble and ceramic; as well as new and used auto parts warehouses.

All of these workers are now unemployed due to the curfew. Since most of loading and offloading workers are daily workers though, they are not included under the umbrella of Social Security, or any other health or occupation protection frameworks. The omission means that not only these workers have lost their income due to the curfew imposed to curtail the corona pandemic, they are illegible to benefit from unemployment salaries or any of the other social security services.

"Scrap" warehouses without Roofs

The worker, who is Syrian, explained that he has been working in an open warehouse (a complex without construction) of solid waste, in what is known as Scrap Yard, which located in Jerash for almost a year.

The scrap is collected by people who wonder in their cars to buy what they can find of old electrical or household parts or any kind of metal or broken car parts. Then, the cargo is unloaded in these warehouses by the worker, who then starts the process of sorting the metals in piles, some of which will then be sent to be cracked and then resold, while some cargo will be sent to be recycled.

The worker indicated that he used to work for more than 10 hours a day for a wage of 10 JODs. He does not have a work permit, and he is not registered under the umbrella of Social Security either. He added that his work entails a lot of trouble, as it includes lifting heavy weights. It is also very risky, as he was injured on different occasions. These injuries could range between bruises, cuts or fractures, which are the result of objects falling on him.

He lamented that while his work is extremely hard and exhausting, since his wage is below the minimum that could provide him with a secure life; the curfew decision came and made things worse since he lost his income. Currently, he waits for the day when the curfew is lifted and he is able to go back to work and secure the livelihood of his family.

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