

Experiences of vulnerable urban youth under covid-19: youth working in factories and industrial parks

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Introduction

Ethiopia declared the first case of coronavirus on the 13 March 2020, and while numbers of confirmed cases initially remained low, by late July 2020 the number of confirmed cases had exceeded 15,000, with 239 deaths. Across the globe countries are reporting multidimensional health, economic and social effects of covid-19 and the ensuing policy responses to contain the disease. The situation is expected to be potentially more challenging in low-income countries like Ethiopia where there is a weak health system, compounded by recurrent political unrest. The outbreak of covid-19 is expected to put women, girls, young people and socially vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, at heightened risk, given that containment measures to slow the pandemic including lockdowns and disruption of basic services are already being seen to exacerbate existing economic and social inequalities (UN, 2020). Rapid virtual research by GAGE has highlighted the challenges that young people are facing in rural communities in Afar, Amhara and Oromia, and in Dire Dawa city (Jones et al., 2020a, b), but as yet very little is known about the specific experiences of vulnerable urban youth. This brief focuses on youth (aged 15–24 years) working in factories, and is part of a series exploring the impacts of covid-19 and the ensuing government policy response on vulnerable urban youth in Ethiopia.



Overview of youth factory workers in urban Ethiopia

Aspiring to open new job opportunities for its burgeoning youth population, meet the Sustainable Development Goals and catapult the country to middle-income status by 2025, the Ethiopian government has invested heavily in developing export-oriented manufacturing industrial parks, centred around sectors ranging from textiles to floriculture (NPC, 2015). Several of these parks now employ tens of thousands of workers – nearly all of whom are young and most of whom are female, poorly educated, and from rural areas (Barret and Baumann-Pauly, 2019; Blattman et al., 2019; Gonsamo, 2019; Earuyan Solutions, 2019; UNDP, 2018). Recent research suggests that not only are these new jobs unlikely to be engines of change at a national level, but that they are putting the health and safety of young workers at risk. Ethiopia's garment industry has been recently criticised for providing the lowest wages of any country (USD26/month – compared to USD95/month in Bangladesh and USD326/month in China), the result of the fact that Ethiopia does not have a minimum wage law (Barret and Baumann-Pauly, 2019; Earuyan Solutions, 2019; WRC, 2018). The floriculture industry exposes workers to toxic agro-chemicals without providing adequate training or protective gear, leading to high rates of illness (Dibaba, 2019; Jones et al., 2019). Despite laws that prohibit the employment of children under the age of 18, there is evidence that girls under 15 are routinely hired (Jones et al., 2019). Forced overtime, wage withholding and abusive work conditions have been documented across the board, with women most at risk given their lower status jobs and more limited communication skills (Earuyan Solutions, 2019; WRC, 2018). With wages low, cost of living high and work conditions almost uniformly difficult, Blattman et al. (2019) found that only one in six workers made it through their first year and that those who left, to pursue farming or trading, earned as much as those who stayed.

Research methodology

The findings in this brief are based on qualitative research interviews carried out by phone in June 2020 with vulnerable urban youth in local languages. The young people were residents of the major urban centres of the three largest regional states in Ethiopia: Adama, (Oromia region), Bahir Dar, (Amhara region) and Hawassa (Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples region) as well as Addis Ababa, the federal capital. The sample of young people was drawn from a combination of beneficiaries of UNFPA-funded NGO programmes in the four locations and purposely sampled adolescents who belonged to specific socially vulnerable categories. Young people were included from two age cohorts – 15–19 years and 20–24 years. In total, 154 youth were included in the research, of whom 100 were female and 54 were male; 79 aged 15–19 years and 75 aged 20–24 years. Among these, 27 were factory workers (see Table 1 for the sample details). A total of 19 key informants from the city bureaus of health, labour and social affairs, women, children and youth affairs as well as NGOs working with vulnerable urban youth in each city were also interviewed virtually.

Table 1: Research sample of youth factory workers by location, gender, age and marital status

		Addis Ababa	Hawassa	Total
Sex	Female	3	13	16
	Male	6	5	11
	Total	9	18	27
Marital status	Never married	9	17	26
	Married	-	1	1
	Divorced	-	-	-
Age	15-19	5	3	8
	20-24	4	15	19
	Total	9	18	27

Findings

We now discuss the findings from the virtual research with youth factory workers – both those living in dormitories within industrial parks and those living outside and travelling daily to the factories – about their experiences since the outbreak of covid-19 in Ethiopia. Where relevant we highlight gender differences in the impacts of the pandemic.

Covid-19 knowledge and practice

Overall the youth working in factories had good levels of knowledge about the pandemic transmission and prevention mechanisms, in part because all had completed at least grade 8 education, and also because they have reasonable access to TV, radio and to social media (especially Facebook and Telegram). Key informants from the Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs also noted that they had organised training for both managers and factory workers, who in turn passed on this training to their employees and peers, about hygiene and social distancing measures required to keep workers safe from the coronavirus. Youth involved in the interviews also confirmed that health workers have provided awareness raising discussions with the factory workers on the health guidance regarding corona virus.

In terms of practice, youth respondents presented a mixed picture of the extent to which recommended prevention measures were being implemented. In the Bole Industrial Park in Addis Ababa respondents noted that they did not have access to hand sanitisers or gloves either in the factory or in the dormitories and moreover that they were restricted from purchasing their own due to ban on leaving the park premises during the pandemic. By contrast in Hawassa, while hand sanitiser was readily available, workers who were predominantly 'live-out' (i.e. those who do not live on the premises) complained that the factory entrances were highly congested and social distancing at these times was not possible.

Moreover, while most respondents reported that they were using face masks in the factories, and that temperature checks were undertaken at the entrance of the industrial parks in Addis Ababa and Hawassa, there was a consensus that given the context of factory work that this was inadequate. A 23-year-old female youth from Hawassa noted: *'As long as I work at the industrial park, I can never be safe from covid-19.'* Similarly, a 22-year-old young woman also from Hawassa explained: *'Although I use a sanitiser after touching each item, I still don't feel safe at work because I can't be sure other people will take the same precautions.'* A major concern is the assembly-line work in which many factory workers are handling the same product. As a 19-year-old male garment factory worker from Addis Ababa noted: *'In the first place the type of work we are doing is unsafe, a garment can be touched by all the workers in one department and all of them don't have hand gloves or don't use alcohol/sanitiser. So, we are working in a very risky condition.'*



► I am washing my hands more frequently than before due to fear of contracting the virus, however my fear has no value as we are still living together in large numbers in a single room.

(A 21-year-old male factory worker from Addis Ababa)

There were also widespread concerns that factory managers were not doing enough to ensure compliance with prevention measures. A 21-year-old male factory worker in Addis Ababa emphasised: *'The company has done nothing to prevent us from the pandemic, except to provide face masks.'* A 24-year-old male factory worker from Hawassa also noted: *'Although the managers of the industrial parks provided hand-washing items and sanitiser during the initial period of the pandemic, now everything has been stopped regarding hygiene condition, and we also work in a crowded situation in the factory. We even have to buy face masks by ourselves [workers]. I fear that I will catch the virus at some point.'* These concerns were also echoed to an extent by key informants from the Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs (BOLSA). An official from BOLSA in Adama explained that the challenges were on the side of both management and staff:

Immediately after the outbreak of covid, the major challenges we faced in relation to factory workers include: (1) the employers being unable to make all the necessary protective measures such as masks and sanitiser available for factory workers at the appropriate time, (2) unable to maintain appropriate physical distance (two metres) among factory workers in their workplace, and (3) shortage of sufficient and appropriate transportation services for factory workers. These were the challenges we faced on the side of the employers which have been resolved through time with our closer follow-up. But we also faced challenges on the side of the factory employees who were not seriously practising the appropriate covid preventive measures mainly due to negligence.'

For those living in dormitories, the challenges of maintaining social distancing were compounded by close living quarters. Some respondents noted that the beds were only 50 centimetres apart and they shared bathrooms with multiple people. As a 21-year-old male factory worker from Addis Ababa noted: *'I am washing my hands more frequently than before due to fear of contracting the virus, however my fear has no value as we are still living together in large numbers in a single room ... Nurses of the factory and supervisors are shouting at us to keep our physical distance, but how can we do that given we are sitting very close to each other and face to face at a table, and while 16 individuals are living in a single room.'* These concerns were exacerbated by the fact that during working hours, onsite residents have to mingle with workers who are living in the community and arguably at higher risk of contracting the virus.

For those who live in rented rooms outside the factories, challenges included overcrowded transport services within and to the industrial parks. As a 24-year-old factory worker in Hawassa reported: *'Within the factories in the industry park buses load many people at a time and the buses are crowded and suffocating. After they went out of the park, the drivers reduce the number of people by half but then we have to use bajaj taxis. However, the taxis are also crowded and it is difficult to maintain social distancing.'* In addition, no measures had been taken to address bottlenecks at the entrances to the factories at the beginning and end of the work day, and clocking-in machines are touched by all workers without the consistent use of hand sanitiser between each one.



Access to sexual and reproductive health services and supplies

Although several key informants noted that they had provided youth, especially female youth, working in factories with SRH information, youth factory workers highlighted that sexual and reproductive health services in the industrial parks were limited. There are first aid corners, and in some larger factories, clinics staffed by nurses. Some adolescent girls and young women also said that they were able to get information on sexual and reproductive health issues and acquire sanitary pads. However, they noted that there were no family planning services onsite, and male respondents complained about limited awareness-raising education or information about sexual and reproductive health issues, and no available HIV or STI testing. Several male respondents noted that some NGO providers had visited the industrial park to provide awareness-raising, but only a few respondents had been able to attend as the sessions were limited. They also noted that even when condoms are available, workers seldom avail themselves of them due to a sense of shame. Moreover, several respondents noted that youth having unprotected sex was common among those residing in dormitories in the industrial parks. As a 19-year-old male factory worker from Addis Ababa explained: *'It is very worrying, while travelling [around the park] in the evening, you can see boys and girls having sex openly ... they don't use condom or contraceptive, as many of them don't have the awareness.'* Another 19-year-old adolescent male factory worker in Addis Ababa noted: *'[One of my*

friends] has a girlfriend and lives in the park. He gets the 'morning-after pill' for his girlfriend for when they have unsafe sex and he gets that through his friend who lives outside since we can't go out.' By contrast, live-out factory workers have access to condoms and contraceptives, although a number of respondents noted that they have temporarily stopped seeing their partners until the covid-19 situation is resolved for fear of contracting the virus and transmitting it to their families.



Vulnerability to violence

Previous research has highlighted concerns of sexual and gender-based violence in factories and industrial parks (UNFPA, 2019). This did not emerge as an issue among respondents in our sample, possibly due to under-reporting on account of the relatively short interviews and/or limited privacy during the phone-based interviews.

The main issue relating to violence that factory workers reported was the fact that verbal violence and insults from employers was commonplace. Many respondents complained that employers do not show respect to the workers and as a result they do not feel happy or safe in the workplace. As a 19-year-old male factory worker from Addis Ababa noted: *'To tell the truth, we are working in a very unpleasant situation, they insult and shout at us for any silly reason. They can even fire us. For instance, they can fire us if we fail to wear face masks by chance....'* A 21-year-old male factory worker residing in an industrial park in Addis Ababa emphasised that especially since covid-19 management practices had become very strict and inflexible: *'If the Koreans [managers] see a worker who failed to wear a face mask, they can automatically dismiss him/her. They also dismiss those who spent an evening outside ... For instance, I heard around five workers had been dismissed for spending the evening outside.'*



Psychosocial impacts of the pandemic

Many respondents – both key informants and youth – highlighted the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic on young people. As a key informant from DSW² noted:

Youth industrial park workers as well as those from flower farms in our project sites in Addis Ababa, Hawassa and Oromia are currently living in a very stressful condition for two major reasons. The first reason which worries these factory workers, especially those who are currently working, is fear of getting infected with coronavirus due to their crowded working condition and their living condition because they used to live in slum areas in low-cost housing in a group, mainly after the outbreak of the pandemic. The second reason is related to their economic worries since they fear that they will be fired from the factory if the lockdown continues for a long time. Those workers who have been temporarily laid off among the industrial park workers in Hawassa with their salaries for the first three months since the outbreak of the pandemic are always worried about when they can get back to their work.

Youth workers noted that they are very stressed about contracting the coronavirus due to their working conditions. A 19-year-old factory worker in an Addis Ababa industrial park emphasised: *'We are in great fear that we can easily get the virus in these working conditions if someone among the workers becomes infected.'* The psychosocial toll of the pandemic was especially challenging for youth are living in dormitories in the factories, as they have to adhere to a strict lockdown beyond the factory premises. As a second 19-year-old factory worker from Addis Ababa observed: *'We are now in a very stressful condition; we can't go out for any purpose ... Previously we used to go out at least on Sundays to entertain ourselves and purchase necessary items.'* Some respondents noted that attitudes in the community have also become quite hostile to factory workers because people fear that workers could be vectors of the virus due to crowded working and living conditions. As a 22-year-old female factory worker from Hawassa explained: *'On Sundays, I used to have a relaxed day with my friends. We used to go to church, eat lunch outside and go to the lakeside, but now, we no longer meet and I feel so sad on Sundays ... Even when I go to visit my family, people say to my father, why do you let her come to visit you? She shouldn't come to our area as she works at the industry park.'* Given the stress experienced as a result of the factory lockdowns and disconnection from their social networks, some young people are planning to leave

▶ We are now in a very stressful condition; we can't go out for any purpose.

(A 19-year-old factory worker from Addis Ababa)

the compound and seek rental accommodation even if the costs will be greater. A 21-year-old male factory worker from Addis Ababa noted:

Many of the workers are planning to leave the compound and live outside in a rental house, as the restriction is beyond our limit. We can't go out for anything ... we are very stressed ... I have a girlfriend ... she is not working in the factory and living outside. I used to go out and enjoy spending time with her, but after corona we are forced to stay inside and I couldn't meet her. The only chance I have now is to contact her by phone.



Economic impacts and access to social protection

The economic impacts of covid-19 on the industrial park sector have been significant. Government officials emphasised that the economic ramifications of the pandemic were a major concern, especially as they feared a sharp rise in youth unemployment from the industrial parks and inadequate social safety nets. An expert from the Bureau of Women, Children and Youth Affairs in Hawassa noted for example that 604 young people, 409 females and 195 males had been laid off from different factories in Hawassa. In response to these early layoffs, officials noted that they had intervened quickly to secure an agreement with industry managers to minimise layoffs. A key informant from Addis Ababa City BOLSA explained the challenge as follows:

There are about 45,000 small-scale industries in Addis. This means they have on average 15–20 workers. The majority of the workers in these industries are between the ages of 18 and 28. ... But we faced a big challenge during the covid outbreak because some industries fired workers and these workers were more exposed to covid since they did not have money for rent and for food let alone for protecting themselves from covid by using preventive equipment which they could not afford. So, they were exposed to street life. ... Fortunately, the city administration has negotiated with the small-scale industry companies in accordance with the Federal State of Emergency Proclamation which prohibits firing these workers from their workplace. So, this policy helped us a lot in mitigating the risks of these workers.

They also noted that in some large industrial parks, they have a BOLSA desk and seek to monitor the working conditions and compliance with covid-19 prevention measures.

Concerns about unemployment and/or decreased salaries were also a common theme among respondents. As a 21-year-old female youth who had been recently laid off from a factory in Hawassa noted: *'Many of us are out of jobs due to covid-19; even the ones at work receive a discounted salary one way or the other.'* There were also multiple complaints about declining salaries but high workloads. A 23-year-old female, also from Hawassa, emphasised that the reduction in salary means that she is not able to support her family as she had been able to prior to the pandemic, but that she is working equally as hard if not harder than prior to covid-19. *'What disappoints us is the fact that the amount of work remains the same despite the reduction of our pay ... I used to send money to my family before corona; but now, it's not even enough to sustain me.'* Young people also complained about the rise in the cost of transportation. A 21-year-old female youth from Hawassa noted that *'because transportation costs have doubled I have started walking to and from work'*, while a 22-year-old factory supervisor explained: *'In some factories the factory bus service was stopped, exposing workers to additional transport costs. In many factories, the bonus payments and part-time payments were stopped. Now the workers receive only the main salary. Given the main salary of many workers is low (from 750 birr to 1,000 birr based on their years of service), they face serious economic problems.'*

Concerns about growing food insecurity were also mentioned by a number of respondents. A 19-year-old adolescent girl from Hawassa emphasised that covering daily subsistence costs was increasingly challenging given salary reductions and rising food prices: *'We usually take food items from the shop on credit and pay it back when we receive our salary. It's like a vicious circle ... I usually have my first meal of the day at lunch time at the workplace.'* Similarly, a 24-year-old male factory worker from Hawassa noted: *'The price of food items has been increasing over time. For example, the price of a kilo of onions was 15 birr before covid but it is now 40 birr; the price of 5 litres of oil was 200 birr before covid but it is 270 birr now.'*

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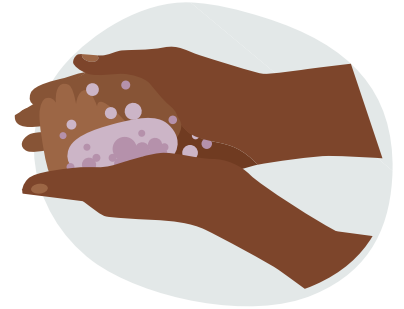
(A 23-year-old female from Hawassa)

Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

Our findings suggest youth working in factories and industrial parks are highly vulnerable in the context of the covid-19-related economic downturn and are also at heightened risk of contracting the virus due to the crowded nature of their workplaces and on-site accommodation. Here we highlight priority actions to address these risks:

1. **Continue to ensure that factories are providing free masks, sanitiser and gloves while simultaneously improving social distancing measures**

In addition to ensuring that factory management continues to provide free masks, sanitiser and gloves to all workers, urgent measures need to be taken to improve social distancing. These should include reducing congested entrances and exits by staggering work start and finish times, mandating limits on numbers of workers to be transported per vehicle in the industrial parks and reducing the number of persons sharing dormitories and bathrooms.

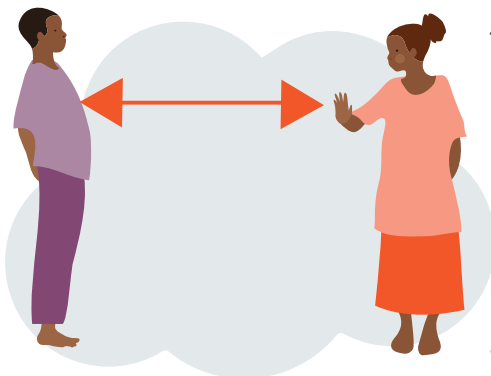


2. **Ensure sexual and reproductive health information, testing services and supplies within industrial parks are strengthened**

To mitigate the risks of unprotected sex among workers, it is critical for industrial park health clinics to strengthen SRH awareness raising, testing services for HIV and STIs, while also ensuring free availability of condoms and contraceptives.

3. **Address verbal violence and labour rights violations within factories**

Youth workers emphasised that verbal violence by supervisors and management is commonplace in the factories. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs should provide clear guidance on acceptable management-staff relationships and monitor its implementation. This should include clear guidance about grievance mechanisms to report cases or abuse, including violations of labour rights such as salary deductions.



4. **Invest in psychosocial support services, including through counsellors and peer-to-peer youth volunteers**

Because many youth workers are migrants living apart from their families, they have limited social support networks to provide support and guidance, especially in the stress-inducing context of the covid-19 pandemic. It is therefore important that management ensure that workers have access to psychosocial counsellors and/or peer support, potentially through youth volunteer networks.

5. **Rapidly scale up the urban PSNP and ensure that unemployed youth living alone are eligible**

While the federal government has temporarily prohibited lay-offs of industrial park workers in the context of coronavirus, it is possible that lay-offs will increase in the medium term and thus it will be important to invest in both the public works and direct support components of an expanded urban PSNP so that unemployed young people can have access to a social safety net.

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Endnotes

- 1 Suggested citation: Amdeselassie, T., Emirie, G., Iyasu, A., Jones, N., Presler-Marshall, E., Tilahun, K., Workneh, F. and Yadete, W. (2020) 'Experiences of vulnerable urban youth under covid-19: the case of factory workers.' Policy brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

The research for this brief was generously funded by UNFPA Ethiopia and by UK Aid. We have listed authors alphabetically to reflect equal contribution to this research output. We gratefully acknowledge peer review comments from Meron Negussie at UNFPA and Estibel Mitiku from the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth. We also thank Anna Andreoli for editing and formatting support.

- 2 DSW or Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung/Your Life is a Germany-based international NGO working in partnership with UNFPA.