

# FACT Sheet

## LABOR IN IRAN

August 2020

While Iran has a skilled and educated workforce, its workers face serious rights violations. Independent unions aren't recognized, labor leaders and activists are imprisoned and there is widespread child labor, migrant worker exploitation and discrimination against women and minorities.

## Workers' rights denied

### Workers face:

Unpaid wages, often for months

Wages below fair wage levels

Mismanaged/corrupt privatization schemes



### Right to organize: denied

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Independent trade unions not recognized
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	No effective collective bargaining, dispute resolution or grievance mechanisms
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Independent labor leaders imprisoned
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strikers risk arrest and dismissal
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	State-controlled "Workers' House" operates in lieu of unions

## Labor protests

Ongoing for decades

Occur across sectors

e.g. sugar, heavy equipment, steel, oil and petrochemicals, teachers, truck/bus drivers, railway workers, nurses, farmers, bazaar merchants



## There are labor laws—but they're ignored

- Iranian labor laws **not enforced**
- **Loopholes** leave many workers **unprotected**

- **Exempt** from most regulations:

Workplaces with less than 10 employees

Family-owned/run businesses

Many agricultural sectors

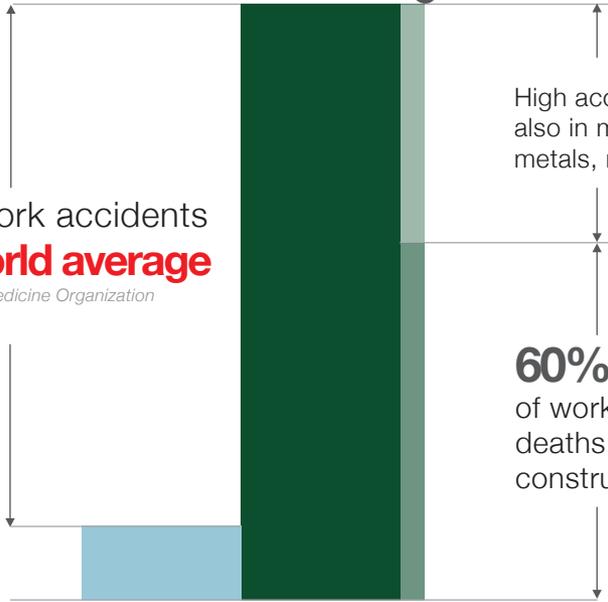
<https://survey.ituc-csi.org/iran.html?lang=en#tabs-2>

# Workers not protected



Fatal work accidents  
**8X world average**

*Iran's Legal Medicine Organization (ILMO), 2014*



High accident rates also in mining, metals, machinery

**60%** of workplace deaths in construction



Iran average annual workplace deaths (2000 deaths from March 2015–March 2016)

*Iran's Minister of Health, Head of Iran's Construction Workers' Center*



World average annual workplace deaths

## Why so unsafe?

### Insufficient monitoring/enforcement

800 occupational health & safety (OHS) auditors for 12 million registered workers

*Iran's National Institutes of Health Research, Ministry of Labour Department of Social Affairs*



1 auditor per **15,000** workers



### Opaque subcontracting

Companies/municipalities subcontract work to private sector without contracts

### Labor law loopholes exempt many workplaces from oversight

### Insurance

One in three workers has none; remainder often under-insured  
*Iranian government reports*



Workers don't report or treat work accidents/illnesses

**90%** of workers employed under temporary contracts

Lack of job security means workers do not demand the required insurance or report OHS violations

**1 out of 3 workers are in informal sector with no protections**

*Urban Economics Association of Iran, Financial Tribune*



## WOMEN'S UNEMPLOYMENT

**2X** MEN'S

National unemployment rate 11%, but unemployment rate 10% for men; 19% for women

*World Bank, 2019  
(pre-COVID-19 pandemic)*

Women disproportionately hired under temporary contracts

Women can be prevented from hiring or dismissed at husband's behest

Sexual harassment largely unreported due to stigma and inadequate laws



# Discrimination is rife



Discriminated in hiring and pay

Applicants often required to state religion

Baha'is routinely refused employment

**60% UNEMPLOYMENT RATE**  
**5X NATIONAL AVERAGE**

Inaccessible roads, transportation and buildings prevent employment

Same-sex relations illegal; LGBTQ community must hide identity

● Estimates: **3 million\* to 7 million\*\* child laborers**

\*UNICEF  
\*\*Scientific Association of Urban Economics of Iran

● Law banning children under 15 from work not enforced

● Used in small and other workplaces exempt from regulations

● High-risk sectors: textiles, waste disposal, mining, agriculture, construction, domestic work, street vending



● Estimated **2 million** Afghan migrants in workforce  
UNHCR (pre-COVID-19)

● Exploited through:

Dangerous work without safety procedures

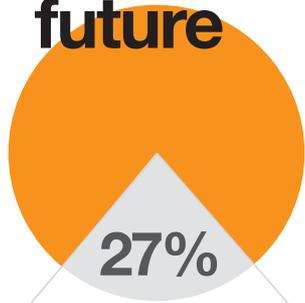
Unpaid or underpaid work

Squalid living conditions near work sites



# Exploitation is widespread

# An uncertain future



## Youth unemployment rate

(ages 15-24)

*World Bank, 2019  
(pre-COVID-19 pandemic)*

Iran's **45%** labor participation rate\* well below the **61%** global rate\*\*

\* World Bank, 2018  
\*\* World Bank, 2019

Mass **protests**, fueled by economic grievances and met with violent state suppression, are **increasing**

# International commitments

Founding member of International Labour Organization (ILO) but hasn't ratified Conventions on right to organise, collective bargaining or work safety

State Party to International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) but violates Article 22 on right to join trade unions

State Party to International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESC) but violates Article 8 on right to join trade unions and strike and Article 7 on work safety

# The **cost** of labor rights activism



## **ESMAIL BAKHSHI**

is a founding member of the Workers Union of Haft Tappeh Sugarcane Agro Industrial Company. He was detained for several months in 2018 and 2019 for peacefully protesting unpaid worker wages. Bakhshi publicly reported he was tortured during his detention and was sentenced to five years in prison. He was pardoned in May 2020.



## **SEPIDEH QOLIYAN**

is a freelance labor reporter serving a five-year prison sentence for participating in peaceful rallies by striking sugar mill workers in 2018, and for publicly reporting that she and fellow detainees were tortured while in the Intelligence Ministry's custody. On furlough since February 2020, she was returned to prison in June 2020.



## **ESMAIL ABDI**

is a high school teacher and former Iranian Teachers' Trade Association secretary general. He was issued a six-year prison sentence in 2016 for his peaceful advocacy of teachers' rights. Abdi is facing additional years in prison with the June 2020 enforcement of an older suspended 10-year sentence.



## **JAFAR AZIMZADEH**

is the chairman of the Free Union of Iranian Workers. He is serving a six-year prison sentence on various national security-related charges for peacefully defending workers' rights and fair wages and protesting the persecution of labor leaders. Azimzadeh was sentenced to an additional 13 months in prison in June 2020.