

## First ever study in Israel on the occupational health of Palestinian construction workers uncovers neglect and abuse

**January 2023**

Employment in Israel offers Palestinian workers an income double what they can earn in the West Bank. The need to support their families leads many educated Palestinians to forgo finding work in their profession in the Palestinian Authority and instead look for employment in those sectors open to them in Israel, particularly the construction, agriculture, and industry sectors.

The International Labor Organization estimated that about 1,200 workers in Israel die every year because of occupational diseases (diseases caused by working conditions). Construction workers in Israel are constantly exposed to dust, noise, chemical materials, and work in awkward postures, which require prolonged bending, repetitive motion, and other risk factors that can lead to illnesses and death. Occupational health is vastly neglected in Israel and construction workers are particularly at risk<sup>1</sup>. As of June 2022, the Israeli quota in the construction sector for Palestinian workers stood at 80,000.

Kav LaOved released a new study on the state of occupational health among Palestinian workers employed in construction in Israel. The study [\*Roadmap to Health: Palestinian Workers in Israel's Construction Sector\*](#) reviews the extent to which the health of Palestinian workers is protected at work in Israel. The report includes analysis of a survey administered to 256 workers as well as interviews with 10 workers and with 5 Israeli occupational health experts.

### Report highlights:

- Among survey respondents, 63.9% stated that safety procedures to protect their health are rarely followed in their workplace (e.g., taking breaks, using protective gear, following restrictions on lifting heavy items, and having inspectors regularly on site to monitor safety).
- All 256 Palestinian workers who participated to the survey said that their health has been directly or indirectly harmed by working in Israel and reported suffering from the following problems: orthopedic problems such as joint, hand, leg or knee problems (100%); headaches (75%); back problems (36.3%); eye problems (23.8%); breathing problems (17.6%); chronic pain (14.8%); heart problems (7.8%); and skin problems (3.5%).
- Workers who are injured or do not feel well often continue working for fear of losing their payment for that day. About half of the 256 survey respondents reported that they pay brokerage fees to find an employer with a work permit, often paying between 2,000 and 3,000 NIS per month. *"I have an obligation—I pay about NIS 120 a day for my permit, [and] I have to pay for it whether I work or not"* a worker said.
- Most Palestinian construction workers suffer from stress and mental health problems. Workers pointed to several issues that greatly affect their mood and mental state: daily crossings at crowded checkpoints where workers stand for hours; lack of sleep due to leaving home daily at 3:00-3:30 am; commuting two to four hours to work in each direction; and abusive work environments. A worker told KLO that the sight of thousands of workers standing together at the checkpoint causes *"high blood pressure and the feeling that you are going to be squeezed."* Another said, *"I felt that my bones would break."* In the survey workers reported suffering from insomnia (70.1%), breathing difficulties (35.8%), chest pressure (27.6%), or rapid pulse rate (12.2%).

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<sup>1</sup> KLO's report [The Occupational Health Crisis in Israel](#), 2021.

## **Authorities' role**

Israel's Occupational Health and Safety Administration in the Ministry of the Economy does not deal with occupational health. Their main emphasis is on work accidents and protective equipment related to work accidents (helmet, harness etc.). The construction sector in Israel has the largest number of work accidents of all labour market sectors. In European Union countries, fatal construction accidents in 2019 amounted to 22% of total work fatal accidents while in Israel these were 56%. Sanctions exist in cases where occupational health risk factors are identified, including issuing safety orders, imposing legal sanctions, and criminal sanctions in extreme cases of negligence. Supervisors and instructors however are not familiar with occupational health legal requirements (e.g., provision of protective equipment, protection against harmful risks, permissible decibel levels, periodic medical examinations for those who work with dust or noise, etc.); and do not receive appropriate monitoring equipment.

Despite regulations allowing Palestinian workers to receive occupational health services in Israel, workers hardly ever take advantage of this opportunity: they are either not aware of their rights, can't afford to take days off for medical tests or can't access the too few occupational physicians available in Israel. In addition, there is no connection between the medical information collected by the Palestinian health services and the information found in Israeli institutions (occupational physicians, National Insurance Institute [Bituach Leumi], or employers). Medical neglect causes a chain of problems that get worse over time, but follow up on a Palestinian worker's health is practically impossible at present.

## **Main Recommendations**

- Workers must undergo periodic medical examinations. The focus needs to be placed on early detection and prevention of disease. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's inspectors should sanction employers who violate existing regulatory obligations to send workers to medical examinations. The Ministry of Health should organize a mobile testing van which can arrive at workplaces and perform basic tests, such as vision and hearing, while maintaining the privacy of workers and guaranteeing medical confidentiality.
- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration in the Ministry of Economy should raise awareness about occupational safety and health among workers and employers to prevent harm to workers. Awareness raising efforts on occupational health should include dissemination of information through social media as well as educational videos and billboards displayed also at checkpoints where workers pass.
- Information about occupational health must be collected in the West Bank and the interface between both the Israeli Ministry of Health and the Occupational Safety Administration with the Palestinian Ministry of Labor must be improved.
- As indicated in KLO's previous report [The Occupational Health Crisis in Israel](#), Israel must establish an Occupational Safety and Health National Authority as well as fill the gaps left by insufficient regulation in the fields of hygiene, instruction, data collection, registration of occupational diseases, research, etc.

Kav LaOved is currently taking a leading role among civil society organizations and advocating for Israel's occupational health regulations and practices to rise to the level of international standards.

*Kav LaOved - Worker's Hotline is an Israeli civil society organization defending the rights of all workers in Israel irrespective of nationality, religion, gender, and legal status. For more information about Kav LaOved see [www.kavlaoved.org.il](http://www.kavlaoved.org.il).*

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