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Enhancing Decent Employment Opportunities for Women and Youth in the West Bank

Situational Assessment Report

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Enhancing Decent Employment Opportunities for Women and Youth in the West Bank

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Labor Market Trends in the West Bank amidst Escalating Restrictions and the War's Repercussions	3
3. Decent Work for Women and Youth in the West Bank: Situation Analysis	5
3.1 Employment Opportunities	5
3.2 Rights at Work	6
3.3 Social Protection	8
3.4 Social Dialogue	9
3.5 Decent Work Conditions in Creative Industries	10
3.5.1 <i>Handicrafts Sector</i>	10
3.5.2 <i>Furniture Sector</i>	11
3.5.3 <i>Footwear and Leather Sector</i>	12
4. Policies, Strategies, Laws and Legislative Frameworks	13
5. Policy Recommendations	15
References	17

1. Introduction

The concept of “Decent Work” has gained widespread global recognition and popularity in recent years. First articulated by International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1999 (EU, n.d.), it has since become a key component of the United Nations’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030, specifically Goal No.8: “Decent Work and Economic Growth”. This Goal advocates for promoting steady, inclusive and sustainable economic growth; full and productive employment; and decent work for all (UN, n.d.).

Decent work, as defined by ILO, refers to employment that is productive, provides a fair income, ensures workplace security and social protection for families, offers better prospects for personal development and social integration, and allows workers the freedom to express concerns, to organize, and participate in decisions that affect their lives (ILO, n.d.). According to ILO (2019), decent work encompasses four interrelated pillars:

1. **Employment opportunities** – Jobs that are productive and adequately paid
2. **Rights at work** – Including non-discrimination, freedom of association and safe working conditions
3. **Social protection** – Such as pensions, health coverage, maternity protection and efforts to combat child labor
4. **Social dialogue** – Ensuring workers have a voice through unions and collective bargaining.

In the West Bank, many employment conditions fall short of these international standards. Unemployment and underemployment¹ are high, particularly among women and youth. Wages are low by regional standards and many workers lack formal contracts, social insurance, or labor protection. Gender-based norms and conflict-related constraints further restrict women’s participation in the labor force (PCBS, 2020). Like many emerging economies, the Palestinian government faces significant challenges in achieving decent work. Efforts to provide quality employment are hindered by a range of external factors, including Israeli-imposed restrictions on trade, mobility, access to land and natural resources, and access limitations in Area C. Repeated conflicts also contribute to ongoing economic, social and political instability. Internal challenges further exacerbate the situation, including burdensome regulations, weak governance, limited access to financing for small firms, and inadequate infrastructure (ILO, 2018a). Meanwhile, the private sector struggles to generate decent employment, producing few opportunities in mostly low-productivity² sectors (World Bank, 2019).

Despite the clear legal framework governing the labor market, the Palestinian Authority (PA) suffers considerably from Israel’s withholding of clearance revenues, often used as a tool of political pressure. This practice undermines the public sector’s ability to restore and rehabilitate the economy’s productive capacity and to deliver essential public services, leading to lower labor force participation and a persistent shortage of decent employment opportunities.

¹ The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines unemployment as individuals aged 15 and over who are not employed, actively seek work, and are available for employment in the reference week. Underemployment, on the other hand, refers to individuals who are employed but are not fully utilizing their productive capacity, such as those working part-time but willing and able to work more hours.

² Labor productivity refers to the amount of goods or services produced by each unit of labor input, typically measured as output per hour worked, or per employed person.

The war launched by Israel on the Gaza Strip in October 2023 further worsened the situation, resulting not only in a humanitarian catastrophe, but also in a systemic breakdown of the labor economy across both Gaza and the West Bank. The war's repercussions have extended to the West Bank, placing its economy under severe strain.

This situational assessment examines the state of decent employment and working conditions for women and youth in the West Bank, with a particular focus on creative industries: namely, the furniture, handicrafts, and footwear and leather industries. These sectors have recently been analyzed using the Market System Development (MSD) approach, given their potential for inclusive economic growth. The paper provides a comprehensive analysis of labor market dynamics in the West Bank, both before and after Israel's military aggression on the Gaza Strip in October 2023. It also identifies key gaps within regulatory and legislative frameworks, assessing recent, active labor market programs. It also offers evidence-based recommendations to improve decent employment opportunities, enhance working conditions and support resilience and economic recovery, within the context of the current crisis.

This assessment's methodology includes a desk review of the most recent policy reports, labor market data and sectoral studies, as primary secondary data sources. This is supplemented by a series of key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with representatives from the Ministry of Labor (specifically the Directorate of Employment and the Directorate of Labor Inspection), as well as the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). These qualitative insights offer a nuanced understanding of decent employment conditions in the West Bank.

2. Labor Market Trends in the West Bank amidst Escalating Restrictions and the War's Repercussions

The labor market in the West Bank experienced significant setbacks between late 2023 and early 2024. According to official estimates from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2025c), the unemployment rate among those participating in the labor force in the West Bank increased to about 31% in 2024, up from 18% in 2023. Unemployment rose for both males and females in 2024, reaching 29.1% and 27.7% respectively. The estimates also show a decline in the number of employed individuals in the West Bank, from **685,000 in 2023 to approximately 650,000 in 2024, or a decrease of 5%**. This decline was primarily driven by significant job losses in the construction sector, followed by reductions in other services, trade and manufacturing. This reflects the compounded effects of movement restrictions (approximately 900 checkpoints and roadblocks established post-war) (WAFA, 2025), declining investment and reduced economic activity. Notably, total employment in the West Bank fell from 868,000 in Q3 2023 to 665,000 in Q4 2023, a 23% drop (PCBS, 2025). This decline can be attributed largely to the Israeli ban on the entry of West Bank workers to their place of employment in Israel, in effect since the start of the war. According to ILO and PCBS (2024), an estimated 306,000 jobs (over one-third of total employment) were lost in the West Bank.

Table 1: Wage comparison between Palestinian workers in the occupied West Bank; in Israel and settlements with valid work permits; and Israeli workers (USD, 2019)

Worker Category	Minimum Wage	Average Monthly Wage	Average Monthly Wage – Construction	Average Monthly Wage – Agricultural	Average Monthly Wage – Manufacturing	Average Monthly Wage – Commerce and Hotels
Workers in the occupied West Bank	\$428.79	\$860.74	\$952.19	\$542.95	\$732.04	\$762.43
Palestinian workers in Israel and settlements with permit	\$1,567.31	\$1,787.78	\$1,872.09	\$928.60	\$1,332.12	\$928.60
Israeli workers	\$1,567.31	\$3,198.02	\$2,962.56	\$2,242.42	\$4,396.92	\$1,540.62

Source: International Trade Union Confederation, 2021

Before the war, a prominent feature of the West Bank's labor market was a heavy reliance on the Israeli labor market, where 193,000 Palestinians were employed (PCBS, 2023b), seeking higher wages but often facing dire and worsening employment conditions, particularly in construction. Despite the wage differences between the West Bank and Israel, there is significant wage discrimination between Palestinian workers and their Israeli counterparts, according to the International Trade Union Confederation (2021). Table 1 highlights stark wage disparities: Palestinian workers in the occupied West Bank earn significantly less than their counterparts working in Israel or the settlements, and all Palestinian workers earn much less than Israeli workers across all sectors. According to ILO (2020), only 15.8% of Palestinian workers holding permits received paid sick leave, while approximately 21.3% were granted paid annual leave. Just over 40% of workers received written pay slips, with the remainder paid in cash. There is widespread fabrication in reporting by employers, regarding working hours and

wages. This practice undermines workers' access to social entitlements, typically calculated based on these records.

This dependence increases the vulnerability of workers without permits and negatively affects employment sustainability. Meanwhile, domestic labor market dynamics offer little relief, as labor growth remains concentrated in low-productivity sectors such as services, while the industrial base remains underdeveloped (Ridao-Cano et al., 2019; World Bank, 2019; IMF, 2023). As a result, the labor market is characterized by a profound systemic decline, driven by prolonged political instability.

In terms of gender, the situation before the war was equally dire; female unemployment stood at a staggering 22.4%, double the 9.7% rate for males in the fourth Quarter of 2022 (PCBS, 2022). However, after the war, these gender gaps narrowed, not due to discernible improvements, but because of widespread job losses, particularly for those employed in the Israeli labor market, where the male unemployment rate reached 29.1%, compared to 27.7% for females for the same quarter (PCBS, 2025a). Evident gender disparities can be attributed to several structural factors, most notably high unemployment rates and increased labor supply, particularly after the October 2023 escalation in Gaza. These dynamics have significantly weakened the private sector's incentive to improve working conditions.

In line with employment trends, the youth unemployment rate is another pressing concern for policymakers. Young graduates in the West Bank face severe difficulties in securing employment, with unemployment rates reaching 36.1% for those aged 19–29 and holding a diploma or higher. The situation is particularly alarming for young women: their unemployment rate stands at 44.4%, significantly higher than the 33.8% for males (PCBS, 2025a).

3. Decent Work for Women and Youth in the West Bank: Situation Analysis

“Decent work” is a comprehensive concept adopted by ILO, summarizing the aspirations of people in their working lives. It consists of four mutually reinforcing objectives: full employment (or productive work opportunities), rights at work, social protection and social dialogue. The global community, through the 2030 Agenda, emphasizes that promoting jobs and enterprises, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection and encouraging social dialogue are the four key pillars of the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda, shaping labor policies and workplace conditions (ILO, 2017b). In this section, we will examine the current state of decent work for women and youth in the West Bank, as it relates to the ILO’s four pillars. The analysis draws on the most recent data, including labor force surveys, institutional reports and national policies. Particular attention is paid to structural and socio-economic challenges that prevent young people and women from accessing decent employment opportunities.

3.1 Employment Opportunities

In the West Bank, youth unemployment in 2024 stood at approximately 47%, with 34% among males and 61% among females (PCBS, 2024a). Despite this, young women face the greatest disadvantage in Palestine. The female unemployment rate more than tripled between 2000 and 2021, rising from 12.4% in 2000 to 43% in 2021. Female labor force participation is among the lowest in the world, averaging just 15.5% over the past two decades, with only 1 in 10 women aged 15 and over employed. In contrast, male unemployment increased by 50% during the same period: from 14.6% in 2000 to 22.4% in 2021 (IMF, 2023). This gender gap is one of the widest in the world (IMF, 2023). Social norms, the lack of suitable job opportunities, and safety concerns (especially regarding travel to work) all contribute to women’s low participation in the workforce.

Recent estimates from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2024a) show that nearly half of all West Bank youth (ages 18–29) are not engaged in employment, education, or training (NEET), with young women being significantly more likely to be idle.

At the educational level, many women who enter the labor force are highly educated—about 93% of unemployed women have at least 13 years of schooling—but they struggle to find positions that match their qualifications. Low female labor force participation is attributed to social norms, a scarcity of suitable jobs, a lack of childcare facilities, safety concerns (especially regarding travel to work), and household responsibilities (IMF, 2023). Additionally, most working women are employed in the healthcare and education sectors, which require a bachelor’s degree, such as teaching and public service jobs. These fields offer stability, regular hours and societal acceptance, while women with lower education levels often find employment in precarious conditions, mainly in low-wage and low-value-added sectors (IMF, 2023; UNCTAD, 2023). By February 2023, women made up 48% of all public-sector employees (a notable achievement in gender inclusion), yet they held only 14% of top civil service positions (Director General or higher) (PCBS, 2023a). Moreover, women are often forced to work in informal economic activities (such as unpaid family labor) to compensate for declining household incomes (ILO, 2018b).

Most importantly, overall job creation in the West Bank has not kept pace with the growing labor force, particularly among youth. Data from PCBS (2024b) show a sharp contraction in 2020 due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, with GDP falling by 12%. This was followed by a 7% growth in 2021, and a recent contraction in 2024, driven by the aggression on the Gaza Strip, which caused GDP to decline by 19%. This level of growth is insufficient to absorb the thousands of new entrants (particularly young graduates) each year (ILO, 2024a).

Youth of both genders also face mismatches in skills, as the education system produces many university graduates whose qualifications do not meet labor market demands. As a result, many end up taking jobs below their qualifications or remain unemployed for extended periods (on average, women remain unemployed for 20 months, compared to 10 months for men) (IMF, 2023).

The situation in the post-October 2023 war is dire. A survey by ILO (2024b) and the Federation of Palestinian Chambers of Commerce, Industry, and Agriculture found that 98.8% of businesses in the West Bank were impacted by the ongoing war, leading to operational disruptions and reduced profits. Workforce reductions were reported by 65.3% of enterprises, with 73.3% cutting employee working hours. Among current employees, 51.0% faced reduced hours, and 62.8% experienced wage cuts. Only 31.4% of dismissed workers received end-of-service benefits. At the household level, 87.2% reported income losses, prompting coping strategies such as cutting essential spending and sending children to work. These figures collectively reflect the profound and far-reaching repercussions of the Gaza war on the West Bank economy, revealing how the situation has destabilized business continuity, undermined labor standards, and deepened household vulnerability across the territory.

3.2 Rights at Work

Significant deficits in “rights at work” persist in the West Bank, with many women and young workers employed in jobs that fail to meet basic labor standards. Labor law in Palestine guarantees rights such as a minimum wage, limited working hours, paid leave (including maternity leave) and social benefits. However, in practice, enforcement is weak in the private sector, and a large portion of workers—particularly those in informal or small enterprises—lack formal job contracts and protection. Recent data from PCBS (2025b) shows that only 33.7% of private sector workers have formal contracts, while 38.8% work without contracts and 29.2% are employed based on verbal agreements. Informal arrangements are the norm in many businesses, leading to exploitation, such as excessive work hours or denial of benefits. For instance, only about one-third of employees (38.5%) receive contributions to a pension or end-of-service fund, meaning the vast majority have no secure retirement or severance savings being built by their employer (PCBS, 2025a). The situation is even more precarious for young and female workers. Approximately 40% of female employees in the private sector lack contracts entirely (PCBS, 2023a), as many of these women work informally or seasonally, often without written terms.

The right to work also includes the right to a **fair wage**. However, the right to a fair wage is frequently violated. It is worth mentioning that there is a National Wage Committee and 11 wage subcommittees operating at the governorate level (ILO, 2023). Yet, compliance with the minimum wage law remains poor, despite a recent update. In August 2021, the PA’s Cabinet raised the official minimum wage from NIS 1,450 to NIS 1,880 per month (approximately \$500), effective as of January 2022. However, 16% of salaried employees in the private sector in the West Bank still earn less than the minimum wage of NIS 1,880 (PCBS, 2025a). Women are disproportionately affected by sub-minimum wages; 50% of female wage employees in Palestine earn less than the minimum wage, compared to 38% of male wage employees (PCBS, 2023a). This not only indicates non-compliance but also highlights a gender pay gap

in low-wage jobs. On average, according to IMF (2023), Palestinian women earn about one-third less than men with the same education levels, across nearly all sectors.

Beyond wages, other labor rights and standards are often unmet, particularly in informal enterprises where jobs are prevalent. Informal hiring also occurs in formal firms (World Bank, 2019). Legal provisions exist for paid sick leave, overtime compensation and safe working conditions, however many workers do not receive these benefits. For example, 72% of private sector workers receive no paid sick leave, paid holidays or pension contributions, according to ILO estimates (2024a). Young workers in informal jobs (e.g., in agriculture, construction or street vending) are often beyond the reach of labor inspectors. In 2019, the total number of inspectors was approximately 82, and this rose to 105 in 2025 (MAS, 2019; ILO, 2025). Occupational safety and health (OSH) is a concern, with regular reports of construction accidents and poor safety practices. However, enforcement capacity remains limited. The ILO (2018a) notes that compliance with labor laws and OSH standards in Palestine needs improvement to ensure a safe and healthy work environment. Ensuring employer compliance remains a significant challenge (Ministry of Labor, n.d.). The Ministry of Labor (MoL) struggles with limited capacity to enforce laws, lacking the appropriate mechanisms for effective inspection due to insufficient human resources (inspectors), while penalties outlined in the labor law are inadequate to deter non-compliant employers or ensure comprehensive access to social protection benefits (MAS, 2023b).

Women, in particular, have specific rights, such as maternity leave. The law guarantees paid maternity leave, but only those working in the formal sector consistently benefit. According to PCBS estimates (2025a), only 44.7% of female employees in the private sector received paid maternity leave when they needed it, meaning more than half of pregnant, working women lacked income security at childbirth. Young mothers often face pressure to quit their jobs due to the absence of maternity protection or childcare, which further drives them out of the labor force.

Child labor remains a critical issue within the broader context of rights at work. Although Palestinian labor law prohibits employment under the age of 15, economic hardship continues to push some families to send their children to work. In the West Bank, approximately 5% of children aged 10–17 were engaged in some form of labor as of 2022, often on family farms or in shops (PCBS, 2023). These children face heightened risks of exploitation and educational disruption. While the percentage may seem modest, it highlights gaps in the enforcement of child labor laws and the persistent impact of poverty on youth rights. At the same time, school enrollment in Palestine remains relatively high at 94.6%, with about 70% of students attending government schools, 23% enrolled in UNRWA schools, and less than 3% in private schools (PCBS, 2017). Research on Palestine, including studies by Di Maio and Nandi (2013), Di Maio and Nisticò (2019) and Hallaq and Khalifa (2023), highlights how economic hardship—exacerbated by conflict and reduced decent work opportunities for parents (such as wage reductions and job losses)—directly correlates with increased child labor and decreased school attendance. This underscores the critical role of decent work in safeguarding children from exploitative labor and ensuring their access to education.

Overall, legal frameworks for workers' rights do exist. The Palestinian Labor Law (2000) and its amendments outline protection mechanisms, but implementation is lax. Labor inspectors face resource constraints, limiting the number of workplace visits they can conduct. Young workers and women often lack awareness of their rights - or fear job loss - if they speak up. Institutional reforms are being pursued to address these gaps. The Labor Sector Strategy 2021–2023 emphasizes aligning laws with international standards (e.g., extending maternity leave, introducing anti-discrimination clauses), and strengthening the compliance mechanism.

3.3 Social Protection

Social protection for workers and vulnerable groups in the West Bank is fragmented and limited, leaving many women and young people without a safety net. Perhaps the most significant gap is the absence of a comprehensive social insurance system for private-sector workers. Unlike public sector employees (who contribute to, and receive, a pension from the government), private-sector employees currently have no pension or unemployment insurance program in place. A new social security law to create a pension fund for private-sector workers was passed in 2016 but faced public opposition and has been on hold since 2018 (Woolacott, 2018). As a result, in 2022–2023, coverage of contributory social insurance remained extremely limited, with only a small minority of private-sector workers having any formal retirement or insurance plans (ILO, n.d.). Most rely solely on the end-of-service gratuity mandated by labor law (a lump sum that an employer should pay when a worker leaves). However, since many employers do not escrow these funds, workers risk not receiving them if a business closes or if enforcement is weak.

In 2024, only 38.5% of salaried employees in the Palestinian private sector received contributions toward a pension or end-of-service benefit (PCBS, 2025c), meaning roughly two-thirds lack contributory social protection. This situation disproportionately impacts young workers (who often undertake short-term jobs without benefits) and women, concentrated in sectors like agriculture or small-scale services where formal benefits are rare.

On a positive note, recent steps have been taken to expand basic social protection in the West Bank. In late 2023, the PA's Cabinet adopted a decision to introduce new individual, rights-based social allowances for specific, vulnerable groups, particularly persons with severe disabilities and the elderly. These categorical allowances represent a shift toward a rights-based approach (entitling all persons above a certain age, or with certified disabilities, to some form of benefits). In August 2024, the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) launched these old-age pensions and disability allowances in the West Bank, initially reaching thousands of beneficiaries (ILO, n.d.). This is seen as a pivotal step in building a more comprehensive social protection system, as it moves beyond purely poverty-based targeting, and towards broader coverage.

Health insurance is another key aspect of social protection. The PA does offer government health insurance (either through voluntary enrollment or for public servants and certain others), and UNRWA provides health services to registered refugees only. However, out-of-pocket costs remain high, and not all youth or women are insured. Jobs in the informal sector typically do not offer medical coverage. As a result, young families often face catastrophic health expenses, highlighting the gap in protection.

The study by MAS (2023c) found that the inspection activities conducted by MoL lack optimal efficiency, and the penalties do not effectively compel non-compliant employers or ensure full and comprehensive access to social protection benefits, as they are perceived as a heavy burden. Furthermore, the judicial system lacks specialized labor courts for resolving disputes, which hinders workers' access to legal and social protection.

In summary, social protection for women and youth in the West Bank remains insufficient. The existing system heavily relies on social assistance for the poorest and public pensions for government workers, leaving the majority of private-sector workers excluded from formal schemes. Institutional strategies,

such as the Social Development Sector Strategy (2021–2023),³ emphasize expanding both contributory and non-contributory coverage. Progress made in 2023–2024 on disability and old-age allowances is a notable improvement. However, until a fully functional social security law is implemented for all workers, most women and young employees will continue to lack unemployment protection, maternity support, and retirement pensions—key elements of decent work within the ILO framework.

3.4 Social Dialogue

The mechanisms for social dialogue between the government, employers and workers on labor issues exist, but face challenges in terms of effectiveness and inclusivity. The primary platform is a tripartite structure involving the MoL (government), the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU, representing workers), and the Palestinian Federation of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, and Agriculture (PFCCIA, representing employers). These key players are meant to collaborate on labor legislation, policies and dispute resolution. For example, the 2021 minimum wage adjustment resulted from such tripartite negotiations. For years, unions had advocated for an increase and employers' groups were consulted. Ultimately, a compromise was reached and endorsed by the PA's Cabinet (ILO, 2023). Another example of tripartite engagement is the development of the National Employment Strategy for 2021–2025, where all parties agreed on priorities for job creation and emphasized the promotion of youth and women's employment. Additionally, a National Wage Committee meets periodically to review wage policies.

Despite these structures, institutional social dialogue in Palestine faces several challenges. One of these is the limited capacity of labor organizations, given the political and economic context. The PGFTU, the main federation of unions, has a presence in the West Bank and has advocated for workers' rights, yet its reach among young workers and those in the informal sector is limited. Union membership is relatively low in the private sector, and workers' voices remain largely marginalized. According to PCBS (2025) estimates, only 14% of salaried employees in the West Bank are affiliated with workers' unions or vocational ones. While female affiliation (23.8%) exceeds male affiliation (11.7%), union representation remains weak and often ineffective, due to the inadequate enforcement of women's participation quotas, a lack of programs tailored to women's needs, fear of employer retaliation, and a shortage of female volunteers, all of which further hinder engagement and the emergence of new women leaders. Additionally, many trade unions in Palestine suffer from structural and human resource weaknesses that significantly limit their effectiveness. A key challenge is the fragility of their executive bodies, often characterized by a lack of qualified and dedicated staff. This shortage of human capital results in weak internal communication, preventing important information and decisions from flowing efficiently across different levels of the union. As a result, grassroots membership is often disconnected from the union's operations, leading to a growing sense of disillusionment and disengagement (Palestine Economy Portal, 2025).

Another core issue is collective bargaining at the enterprise or sector level, which is not widespread. Some larger employers (e.g., in telecommunications or utilities) have collective agreements with their unions, but most private businesses are small and lack union representation. This limits the scope for social dialogue to mostly the national policy sphere, rather than on-the-ground negotiations for better working conditions. According to ILO (2023), in 2022, MoL, in collaboration with social partners, continued to use collective bargaining agreements as a mechanism to address enterprise-level disputes,

³ <https://www.mosd.gov.ps/en/page/the-strategic>

mostly related to wages. At the request of trade unions, MoL facilitated dialogue processes that led to the signing of 14 collective agreements, benefiting approximately 3,700 workers.

It is also worth mentioning that PGFTU is affiliated with the International Trade Union Confederation, signaling a commitment to international labor standards in principle. However, the legal framework for unionization is outdated. A draft Trade Union Organization Law has been under discussion, to modernize how unions are formed and to regulate collective bargaining. Work on the draft Trade Union Organization Law has been on hold since 2019 (ILO, 2025). Passing such legislation, with input from both unions and employers, would represent progress in social dialogue.

However, the effectiveness of these dialogues is hindered by political fragmentation, weak enforcement of agreements, and the underrepresentation of women and youth in decision-making. Strengthening social dialogue will require capacity building for unions and employer groups, ensuring that all voices (including those of marginalized young workers) are heard, and fostering trust so that negotiated policies, such as wage standards or social security reforms, are respected in practice.

3.5 Decent Work Conditions in Creative Industries

3.5.1 Handicrafts Sector

The handicrafts sector in the West Bank includes a variety of traditional crafts and artisan trades, such as embroidery and textile arts, olive wood and mother-of-pearl carving (particularly in Bethlehem), ceramics and glassblowing (in Hebron), basket weaving and soap-making (in Nablus), jewelry and other heritage crafts. This sector is predominantly made up of micro-enterprises and informal work. Accurate employment figures are difficult to determine, as much of the work is home-based or part-time. A 2023 study by MAS found that there are approximately 447 establishments specializing in ceramic production, embroidery, olive wood carving and glassblowing. These establishments represent around 34% of the total 1,295 businesses in the handicrafts industry. The majority of these entities (80%) are small, informal, family-run businesses passed down through generations (MAS, 2023a).

Since much of handicraft production is informal, **labor rights** are generally not protected. Most artisans are technically self-employed or unpaid family workers, meaning they fall outside the standard employer-employee relationship that labor laws typically cover. As a result, rights such as minimum wage, limits on working hours, or paid leave, are usually not applicable or enforced. The ILO (2017a) has examined how strengthening handicraft cooperatives could create decent employment opportunities for both women and men. In general, **trade unions** are absent in this sector, as there are no large craft factories. The **right to organize** is exercised in innovative ways; for example, informal networks of women artisans share information and sometimes collectively negotiate with buyers (setting common price floors for embroidery pieces). **Social dialogue** at the national level concerning handicrafts is minimal, and these workers' issues are often represented indirectly through NGOs or women's organizations rather than labor unions (MAS, 2023a).

Workers in this sector **lack social protection** through their work. Since they are not formal employees, they are not enrolled in pension or unemployment insurance programs. Many artisans rely on other household members for social insurance coverage. For example, a woman doing embroidery at home

might be covered as a dependent under her husband's public-sector health insurance, but not through her income from her craft (MAS, 2023a).

Working conditions in this sector vary by trade, but generally involve long hours for modest earnings. Many artisans work from home or small workshops without formal schedules. **Wages** also tend to be low. Artisans are usually paid per piece or by wholesale buyers. For instance, women embroiderers may spend days working on intricate dresses and receive only a small fee from middlemen, which is far below the minimum wage on an hourly basis (ITC, n.d.).

3.5.2 Furniture Sector

The furniture industry in the West Bank is a major manufacturing sector, known for producing household and office furniture (wooden furniture, metal furniture, upholstery, etc.). It has a stronger formal presence than handicrafts, with small-to-medium-sized factories, particularly in areas like Salbit, Nablus and Hebron. According to PCBS (2020) estimates, the sector comprised 4,254 firms in 2019 (defined as firms with more than five workers) - a notable increase from 2,945 firms in 2011. This represents a growth of approximately 44% in the number of firms over the eight-year period. The growth in the West Bank can be attributed to the economic and political instability triggered by the Second Intifada, followed by the imposition of blockades on Gaza, which led to a significant decline in this sector's performance. Given that the furniture industry had traditionally been centered in Gaza, the blockade dealt a particularly severe blow to its operations (Palestine Trade Center, 2013). Of these firms, 78% were in the West Bank, and 22% in Gaza. Most establishments are small-to-medium-sized (55% small-scale, 35% medium-scale, and 10% large-scale). These establishments are mostly family owned and managed. The sector employs 13,123 people across various stages in its value chain. Most workers are men, while women are primarily involved in management, sewing and upholstery roles (OXFAM, 2021), reflecting wider gender gaps in Palestine's manufacturing employment. The **decent work** deficiencies in this sector mirror several broader labor issues in the West Bank: low wages, informal employment, safety hazards, long hours and weak social protection.

Local furniture workshops often struggle to retain talent, which can further depress productivity and wages. Overall, low pay and slow wage growth remain serious concerns related to decent work, contributing to in-work poverty and driving workers to longer hours, or additional (side) jobs to make ends meet (MAS, 2023a).

Occupational safety and health are significant concerns in this sector. Workers face a variety of hazards inherent to woodworking, such as physical injuries from machinery (saws, cutters, presses), exposure to wood dust and chemical fumes (from glues, paints and varnishes), and strains from heavy lifting. Unfortunately, many workshops lack robust safety measures. Protective gear (such as masks, goggles and earplugs) is not consistently used, and small family-run shops often lack formal safety training or protocols. This results in a high incidence of workplace accidents and illnesses. A recent study by Oxfam (2021) shows that labor insurance regulations require employers to provide coverage, but the rules are vague and lack clarity on key aspects, such as types, duration, terms and conditions. Additionally, insurance often legally protects employers while offering only basic medical care for work-related injuries, without addressing serious or permanent disabilities. In practice, **social protection** for these workers are minimal, as formal contracts and insurance coverage are the exception rather than the norm (OXFAM, 2021).

The sector falls under Palestinian labor law, so workers theoretically have certain rights such as end-of-service benefits and safe workplaces, but in practice, enforcement is limited. In terms of **social dialogue**, the furniture industry is represented through the **Palestine Federation of Industries (PFI)** and sector-specific associations, including a wood and furniture industry association under PFI. These organizations primarily represent employers, working to enhance competitiveness and lobby for easier access to materials and markets. **On the workers' side**, general trade unions (under the umbrella of PGFTU) cover workers in manufacturing sectors, including those in wood and furniture. However, unionization rates in the private sector are low. Workers in smaller furniture workshops are typically not union members, while those in larger firms, or in certain regions, may have some union presence. Overall, **collective bargaining** agreements in this sector are rare, and there is no sector-wide standard that sets wages or conditions.

Therefore, working conditions in the West Bank's furniture manufacturing sector present a mixed picture of skilled craftsmanship under strain. **Wages** are low and have not kept pace with the cost of living, forcing workers to seek opportunities in Israel, or take on excessive workloads.

3.5.3 Footwear and Leather Sector

The footwear and leather sector consists of 80% footwear factories, 13% luggage and handbag producers, and 7% tanneries, with most businesses located in the Hebron governorate. According to data from PCBS (2020), there are 299 factories employing approximately 1,700 workers, with an average of six workers per factory. The sector has experienced a sharp decline, as the number of active shoe-making firms in Hebron and the surrounding areas dropped from around 1,000 in 2000, to roughly 230 workshops today. Correspondingly, employment has fallen from an estimated 30,000 workers in 2000 to fewer than 2,500 workers currently across the entire West Bank (Hoja & Yu, 2022).

Working conditions in footwear and leather workshops are generally challenging. Production is labor-intensive and takes place in small workshops with limited, modern machinery, resulting in long hours of manual labor. Many workplaces operate **informally**, lacking written contracts or formal work hours (Oxfam, 2021).

The footwear and leather industry is male-dominated, with women typically occupying ancillary roles such as stitching uppers, or performing home-based finishing work, though such instances are rare. Youth involvement varies. Younger generations are less likely to enter the shoe trade due to its instability and low pay, with skilled, young workers seeking better paying jobs elsewhere.

Concerning **rights at work**, informality is widespread in the local economy, therefore most workers lack formal recognition and basic rights. Minimum wage violations are common, and legal standards regarding working hours, overtime and benefits are poorly enforced. The prevalence of informal work means many employees have no grievance mechanism or union representation. Child labor is also a risk when teenagers assist in family workshops, blurring the lines between apprenticeships and circumventing labor regulations. Additionally, workers in the footwear industry typically **lack pensions or insurance**, leaving them vulnerable to illness, injury or poverty in old age. The absence of an effective social security system for private-sector workers means this workforce has little to no safety net.

4. Policies, Strategies, Laws and Legislative Frameworks

Palestinian Labor Law No.7 of 2000 is the principal law regulating employment in the West Bank. It covers employment contracts, working hours, occupational safety and workers' benefits (Maqam Al-Najah, n.d). Significantly, the Labor Law includes a non-discrimination clause stating that employers may not discriminate on the basis of gender in terms of work conditions or opportunities. Over 30 bylaws and regulations have been issued since 2000 to operationalize this Law. For instance, a minimum wage regulation was introduced in 2012, setting a floor of NIS 1,450 per month (raised to NIS 1,880 as of 2022) (ETF, 2024).

The PA has developed several strategies to enhance employment opportunities, with a specific focus on women and youth. The National Employment Strategy (NES) 2021–2025 is a key policy framework in the West Bank, aimed at stimulating the creation of “more and better jobs” for Palestinians, particularly youth (MoL, n.d.). **The Labor Sector Strategy for 2021–2023** prioritized employment and skills' development as drivers of socio-economic progress, in line with the NES.

Additionally, a new, National TVET Commission (NTC) was established in 2021 to coordinate technical and vocational education and training (TVET) policy across ministries and industry. The NTC now oversees the implementation of TVET strategies and collaborates with donors and businesses to ensure that training aligns with labor market needs (ETF, 2024).

However, implementation gaps significantly undermine these legal protections. Resource and capacity constraints within the Labor Inspectorate result in uneven enforcement. The MoL currently has only about 105 labor inspectors for the entire West Bank and Gaza (ILO, 2025), who are expected to cover tens of thousands of workplaces.

Another challenge is that certain categories of workers remain outside the scope of the Labor Law or face weaker protection. Civil servants in the public sector are governed by a distinct Civil Service Law, yet domestic workers and unpaid family workers are explicitly exempt from the Labor Law. As a result, domestic workers (who are predominantly women) lack the same legal protection regarding wages or working conditions. Furthermore, while legal protection for parental leave furthers women's rights, these also have unintended consequences. Employers in the private sector, particularly small businesses, may be reluctant to hire or promote women of childbearing age, due to the feared costs of maternity benefits.

Labor market policies, including active labor market policies (ALMPs), are likely to influence market prospects for youth labor (Kugler & Kugler, 2009). Limited resources for these programs hinder the scalability necessary to support young people, particularly those in the NEET category, who may be disconnected from both education and employment opportunities (as shown by Kluve et al., 2019). Chaaban et al. (2016) found that concerns over restrictions on Palestinian employment are leading young people to disengage from education, as they believe their skills do not translate into job opportunities.

Within the current social security system, there is no **social security law** in effect that covers private-sector employees, leaving most Palestinian workers without formal pensions or unemployment insurance. While the Palestinian Labor Law mandates severance pay (end-of-service benefits), this provides only limited social protection, paid as a lump sum by employers, rather than through a pooled

fund. Workers in the public sector, on the other hand, have access to a government pension scheme and health insurance, yet, these benefits do not extend to the majority employed in the private and informal sectors. Recognizing this gap, for years the PA has been working to establish a contributory social security system. An initial **Social Security Law** was passed in 2016, but it faced significant public backlash (from both workers and employers) over transparency issues, and its implementation was suspended (ILO, n.d.).

Alongside contributory social insurance, the PA operates **social assistance programs** as part of a social protection threshold (minimum) for the most vulnerable. The MoSD oversees cash transfer programs for households in extreme poverty. In September 2023, the PA's Cabinet made a decision to introduce *individual, rights-based, social allowances* for people with severe disabilities, and for the elderly without pension coverage.

Beyond the social security system, improving access to quality skills' training is a key strategy for boosting youth employment in Palestine. The legislative framework for **TVET** has been evolving to better match the needs of the labor market. Historically, Palestine's TVET system was managed by multiple entities (such as MoL for vocational training centers and the Ministry of Education for vocational schools) and lacked a unified legal foundation, which limited its effectiveness (ETF, 2024). To address this, the government developed the TVET Law (drafted in recent years) and established coordinating structures. In 2021, **NTC** was created as a central body to streamline the governance of vocational education and training. The NTC brings together relevant ministries, the private sector and donors to develop policies and standards for TVET.

Another significant challenge to the functionality of the labor market in the West Bank is the mismatch between the skills acquired through the education system and those demanded by employers. This is evidenced by the findings of a study of creative industries, which revealed that obtaining skills is mainly limited to practical training and internship opportunities, preventing workers from learning skills necessary for modern production techniques (MAS, 2023b). The lack of contemporary knowledge and competencies restricts their ability to meet industry advancements and demands. The Palestinian TVET system faces profound challenges: its rigid structure limits the ability to align training programs with labor market needs, while high levels of informality make it nearly impossible to track young people's transition from education to employment.

Trade unions are essential to ensuring workers' rights, freedom of association and collective bargaining, which are central to the Decent Work Agenda. In the West Bank, there are legal provisions supporting these rights, though they are sometimes limited in practice. The 2000 Labor Law affirms workers' right to organize and engage in union activity. Palestinian workers have established several trade unions and federations, with **PGFTU** being the largest, historically representing workers across various sectors. There is no separate, modern Trade Union Law; instead, unions operate under the provisions of the Labor Law. Additionally, due to the large size of the informal sector, many workers are outside the reach of unions, especially youth in 'gig' or casual jobs, and women engaged in home-based work. This limits the role of social dialogue in improving working conditions. Nevertheless, unions have been active in certain areas. For example, public sector unions (such as those for teachers, doctors and engineers) have negotiated wage increases and resisted unfavorable reforms. In 2022, the PA negotiated substantial wage hikes following pressure from unions, demonstrating that when mobilized, unions can influence labor policies (IMF, 2023).

5. Policy Recommendations

This assessment provided an in-depth, analytical reading of the reality of working conditions in Palestine, with a focus on the availability of decent work conditions, particularly the extent to which women and youth benefit from opportunities in the creative sectors. This report also highlights key gaps and challenges, presenting these practical recommendations to support decision-makers and partners in designing interventions that promote a fair and sustainable work environment.

To address the substantial deficits in decent employment opportunities for women and youth in the West Bank, a series of integrated and sustained policy reforms are essential. One of the areas for reform is the **legal and institutional framework governing labor rights and workers' protection**. Although the current Labor Law provides a foundational structure for minimum wage, paid leave and occupational safety, its implementation is weak due to limited enforcement capabilities. More importantly, the law **excludes certain categories of workers** including domestic workers, unpaid family laborers, and others in informal employment from its protection, consequently affecting women and youth. It is therefore essential to **revise the Labor Law** to ensure it covers workers without formal rights. This should be complemented by strengthening the labor inspectorate through increased staffing, targeted training and more robust penalties for non-compliant employers.

Another critical area is to expand **active labor market programs (ALMPs)** that can facilitate direct job creation for vulnerable groups through offering apprenticeships, subsidized job placements and practical upskilling, as well as re-skilling opportunities to keep abreast of changing job requirements. For instance, various sectors integrating AI into their operations require a higher level of digital literacy.

Most importantly, the **lack of a functioning social security system for private-sector workers** is another major gap in labor rights. The 2016 Social Security Law, designed to introduce a contributory system covering pensions, unemployment benefits and maternity protection, remains suspended due to public opposition and concerns over governance. Great emphasis should be placed on developing a **new, inclusive and transparent social security law** based on equitable governance, public oversight and fiscal sustainability, to ensure that all workers (including those in informal work) are protected against income loss, illness and old age.

Reforms must also **promote gender-responsive work environments**. This includes expanding access to affordable childcare services and enforcing anti-discrimination policies, which are vital to increasing women's labor force participation. At the same time, incentives such as tax breaks should be directed to promoting the formalization of employment, encouraging compliance by employers within labor laws.

On the supply side of the labor market, **closing the gap between educational outcomes and employment opportunities** remains a major challenge. The skills' mismatch between graduates and market needs leaves many young people - particularly women - unemployed or underemployed for extended periods. Established in 2021, the NTC must be further empowered to lead a comprehensive transformation of TVET. This includes updating curricula, embedding digital and entrepreneurial skills, and ensuring that training options align with market needs.

In terms of institutional engagement, **revitalizing social dialogue** is essential for inclusive policy-making. Tripartite structures involving the government, employers and trade unions exist, but their

functionality remains limited. The **long-delayed Trade Union Law** should be passed, to modernize collective bargaining practices and to ensure that workers in all sectors - especially informal workers, youth and women - can organize and advocate for their rights.

In sum, achieving decent work for women and youth in the West Bank requires a dual approach: **reforming outdated legal frameworks**, including the labor and social security laws, and **implementing practical programs** that improve employability, expand protection and formalize economic activities where informality dominates.

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