

# COVID-19-DRIVEN SOCIETAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE APPAREL SUPPLY CHAIN: INSIGHT FROM MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 epidemic unveils the vulnerability in the apparel supply chain (ASC). Many workforces are facing future uncertainty due to pandemic-driven job losses. This study aims to comprehend the causes of societal sustainability deficiency in the ASC in Muslim-majority countries and propose strategies supporting a suitable improvement. Information gathered from experts using a qualitative research method reveals that the primary cause of the lack of societal sustainability is the dominating power of several brands in the ASC. The usage of contract workforce and illegal subcontracting of apparel production also disrupt the protocol of societal compliance. Besides, the lack of application of Islamic ethics in business operations leads to poor labor conditions causing disruption in labor-societal security. The study proposes risk alleviation strategies such as adopting a sustainable procurement framework that integrates the sharing of disturbance risks among suppliers and brands post-COVID-19 crisis and applying Islamic ethics in supply chain practices

**Keywords:** Supply chain, COVID-19, social sustainability, apparel, Muslim-majority countries

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## INTRODUCTION

Some events that have a small likelihood of happening but a high effect, such as natural disasters (tsunamis, earthquakes, floods), cause global supply chain (SC) disturbances, so does the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike operative risks that include demand fluctuations, machine failure, and usual delays in supplies, disturbance risks possess a ripple effect as the outcomes infiltrate across the whole SCs, influence industry activities, and affect humanity. Eltarabily and Elghezanwy (2020) argues that the current global pandemic of COVID-19 is possibly this century's worst epidemic. It has infected approximately 242 million people on the planet and caused almost 5 million deaths (Hadj Hassine, 2022). SC disturbances caused by COVID-19 have afflicted more than 94 percent of the Fortune-1000 firms (Sumarliah et al., 2021a). Hence, many firms must take substantial attempts to reorganize their SCs to alleviate the pandemic-driven disruption risks, especially for apparel industry which has been problematic even before the COVID-

19 outbreak (Sumarliah et al., 2021a).

Unlike healthcare products which increase in demands during the COVID-19 outbreak, apparel and textile are among the worst industries affected by the global epidemic (Yu et al., 2020). Nations impacted by the epidemic apply lockdown, community quarantining, and societal distancing to avoid the virus spread; at the same time, economic distress causes extensive joblessness and triggers societal sustainability issues. The global job losses due to the COVID-19 crisis are predicted 114 million jobs in 2020, which accounts for 50 percent of total working-hour losses (Verick et al., 2022).

For the past twenty years, academicians address numerous risk management practices in SCs, such as risk detection, evaluation, alleviation, and supervising. Scholars suggest that developing SC resilience is effective in managing SC risks (Sumarliah et al., 2021a; 2021e; Sturm et al., 2021). Besides, SC performance can be improved by SC practice (Usmanova et al., 2021) and SC orientation (Usmanova et al., 2022a; 2022b). However, the COVID-19 pandemic proves that even the best mixtures of conventional approaches such as redundant capacity, resilience, robustness, agility, and flexibility (Mackay et al., 2020; Sturm et al., 2021) are not adequate to tackle this unique epidemic. Many suppliers operate in different nations as the international SCs spread across geographical borders (Sumarliah et al., 2021a). Although the international system functions effectively in an unwavering commercial setting, SC disruptions can instigate chaos throughout the epidemic.

Many emerging markets globally depend on the apparel and textile industry due to its ease of talent sourcing and low entry barriers (Sumarliah et al., 2021a). It includes Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, UAE, and Indonesia, which rank no. 6, 8, 9 and 10, respectively, in the top 10 exporters of apparel and textile globally (see Table 1). Table 1 shows that these countries reach textile production in the international share of 3.8 percent, 2.9 percent, 2.3 percent, and 1.5 percent, respectively. Besides, Muslim-majority countries such as UAE, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Morocco have a position as the top producers of modest fashion globally, as shown in Table 1. Modest fashion is a kind of fashion products for all Muslims abide by the Islamic ethics on clothing such as both Muslim men and women must dress modestly, humbly, neatly, and cleanly (Sumarliah et al., 2022b). Modest fashion is also referred to as Islamic clothing (Sumarliah, 2021), hijab fashion (Sumarliah et al., 2020; 2021b), and halal fashion (Sumarliah et al., 2021c; 2021d; 2022a).

Table 1 also presents Bangladesh as a Muslim-majority country ranked the 7<sup>th</sup> top producers of global modest fashion after Singapore and Italy. The apparel and textile business subsidizes 82 percent and 10 percent of Bangladesh's export revenue and GDP, correspondingly, and it employs approximately four million workforces (Hasan & Leonas, 2018). Generally, the labor-intensive apparel and textile industry contribute significantly to the market and employment of Muslim-majority nations.

**Table 1.** World's Top Countries in Apparel and Textile Industries

Global Rank	Top 10 exporters of apparel and textile products <sup>1</sup>		Top producers of modest fashion <sup>2</sup>
	Country	Output global share (%)	
1	Western Europe	32.1	UAE*
2	China	29.8	Turkey*
3	USA	5	Indonesia*
4	India	4.1	Malaysia*
5	Korea	4.1	Singapore
6	Turkey*	3.8	Italy
7	Japan	2.9	Bangladesh*
8	Pakistan*	2.9	Morocco*
9	UAE*	2.3	India
10	Indonesia*	1.5	Sri Lanka

Note: \* Muslim-majority countries; <sup>1</sup>Alam and Islam (2020); <sup>2</sup>DinarStandard (2020)

In favor of the general sustainability in the apparel and textile SC (ASC), integrating three elements of sustainability, i.e., societal, environmental, and economical, is imperative to maintain the equilibrium of people, planet, and profit (Mellick et al., 2021). Societally sustainable ASC enhances companies' financial success and economic sustainability (Sudusinghe and Seuring, 2020). Nevertheless, societal sustainability receives insufficient consideration from managers and academicians, particularly in developing countries' perspectives (Munny et al., 2019). Some of the most typical societal sustainability challenges in SCs include female workers' safety, sexual harassment, poor health and safety, low wages, forced overtime, discrimination, forced labor, child labor, violations of labor rights and human rights (Govindan et al., 2021). Despite subsidizing significantly to the wealth of Muslim-majority nations, laborers in ASC remain disadvantaged because of low wages (daily salaries are below US\$5). The tremendously low wages are the focal trigger of the growth of apparel and textile businesses in emerging nations (Gazzola et al., 2020), especially in Muslim-majority countries. The COVID-19 crisis uncovers the susceptibility and absence of societal security for employees who participate in the apparel and textile business's impressive achievement.

A ripple effect in the ASC is driven by the COVID-19 crisis differently from other SC disturbances. For example, a disturbance in China's raw-material supply occurs due to a lockdown in Wuhan in early 2020. The apparel and textile producing companies in Muslim-majority countries try to tackle the disruption with local supply partners' procurement and applying surplus inventory. Nevertheless, demands for apparel and textile drop abruptly as some European countries practice lockdown restrictions in mid-March 2020. International apparel brands respond by delaying payment and canceling orders. When the Coronavirus disperses in Muslim-majority nations, countries such as Bangladesh apply lockdown restriction at the end of March 2020, taking the apparel and textile business to an absolute halt. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis causes an exclusive condition in the ASC where production, supply, and demand get disturbed and disconnected.

In 2020, Coronavirus-driven unemployment rates in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Turkey, Morocco, and Palestine (West Bank and Gaza) reached 8 percent,

14.6 percent, 12.5 percent, 32.2 percent of the labor force, respectively (Ventura, 2020). In the early months of the outbreak, 80 percent of Turkey's apparel and textile production activities discontinue (Cochrane, 2020). Manufacturers in Turkey suffer US\$3.5 billion in inventory and suspended orders as consumers abandon them via payment delays and contract cancellations (Cochrane, 2020). In Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) predicts that the COVID-19 outbreak has a direct effect on 1,150 manufacturing firms that inform US\$3.18 billion value of order withdrawals (Choudhury, 2020), disturbing approximately 2.3 million employees (Wright & Saeed, 2020).

The continuing argument emphasizes the harsh effect of the COVID-19 crisis on the societal sustainability of ASC working in Muslim-majority countries. This study intends to unveil the fundamental causes of the societal security absence in the ASC. This study also proposes effective strategies to enhance the societal security of employees in the ASC post-COVID-19 and the functions of many players. The study contributes to the literature by considering the particular subject of societal security in the ASC triggered by the COVID-19-driven disturbances and providing strategies to tackle the issue.

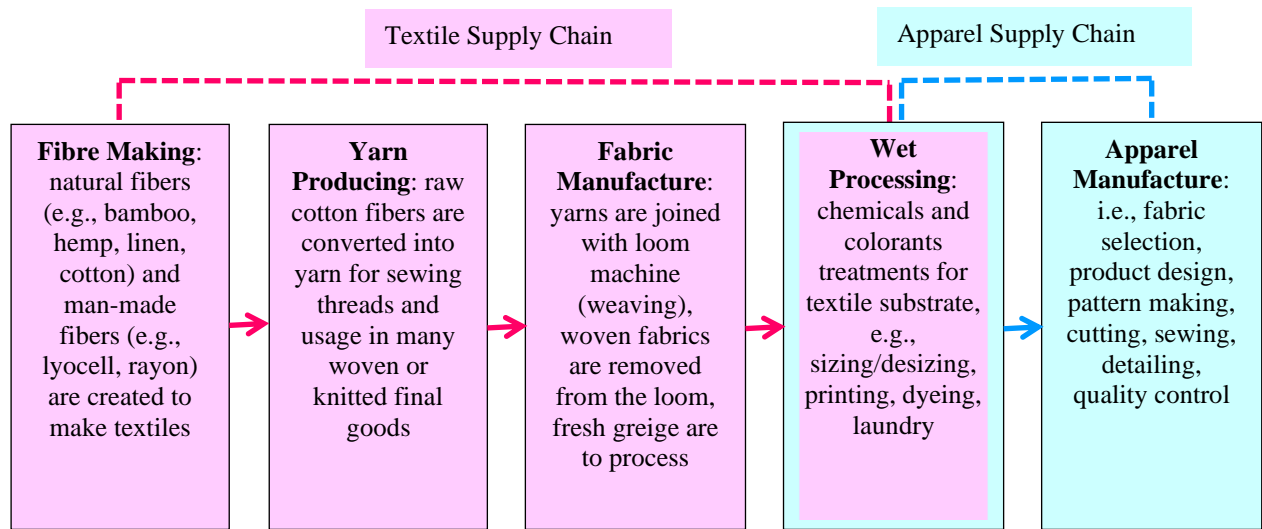
The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Part 2 explains the methodology, and Part 3 presents the findings and discussion. Lastly, Part 4 concludes the study and provides limitations and future studies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Figure 1 presents the ASC that consists of five elements, i.e., fiber making, yarn production, fabric manufacture, wet process (e.g., coloring, printing), and apparel manufacture. A qualitative study method is applied to identify why the societal security of workers lacks in the ASC. Qualitative interviewing is used in this study because it involves probing questions in data collection, providing broader understandings about complex spectacle from discovery-oriented and open-ended perspectives. A series of semi-structured in-depth interviews are directed to encapsulate the experts' perceptions and thoughtful comprehension. The topics of discussion are the social security systems that companies implement, power inequity amongst the ASC stakeholders, and strategies to enhance the societal security of employees in the ASC.

Simultaneously, a funnel method is employed to give the inquiries; that is, universal inquiries are questioned first, then the detailed inquiries that are significant for the discussion topics are asked. The authors contacted 50 experts via emails, WeChat, Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp, and Twitter for the interview. The sample size is based on Dworkin (2012), who recommends the sample size ranged from 5 to 50 respondents as sufficient for qualitative research. Of 50 experts contacted by the authors, only six experts agree to be interviewed. After using the recommendation from the six experts, a total of 11 experts are obtained and ready to participate in the survey, which still fulfills the sample size advised by Dworkin (2012). Eleven experts consist of senior leaders functioning in production (brands), procurement (suppliers), and sustainability audit (third parties) of the ASC are comprehensively interviewed. All experts have more than ten years of working experience in the ASC.

Table 2 presents the profile of the experts. Besides, the authors use secondary data such as business reports and research articles to collect information associated with societal sustainability elements of the ASC throughout the COVID-19 epidemic.



**Figure 1:** Apparel and Textile Supply Chain (ASC)

Table 2: Details of Experts

Expert	Description	SC station	Operational scope	Experience (years)	Income (million US\$)
1	Chief executive officer	Supplier	International	26	-
2	Production manager	Brand	International	15	15700
3	Production & quality controller	Brand	International	11	11600
4	Chief auditor	Auditing	International	18	7500
5	Senior general manager	Supplier	International	17	3700
6	Procurement head	Brand	Indonesia	21	360
7	Manager	Brand	Turkey	16	2500
8	Sales manager	Brand	International	17	2700
9	Head of quality assurance	Brand	Bangladesh, China	21	350
10	Senior manager	Brand	Pakistan	15	310
11	Regional manager	Supplier	Indonesia	19	55

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### SC Disruptions

Some experts view China as an imperative gear in the ASC; thus, epidemics in this ‘bamboo curtain’ nation drive a flowing impact on the whole SC. China is the leading

supplier for chemicals, dyes, nonwoven roll goods, clothing accessories, polyurethane tapes, footwear, winterwear fabrics, synthetic fibers, and artificial fabrics for many countries, including Muslim-majority nations. The experts state that the COVID-19 pandemic is an exclusive circumstance. They never imagine how overwhelming an interruption in operations, demand, and supply can be, but they must see such disturbances occurring concurrently in this condition.

*“This pandemic has caused low demand for our products, half-done manufacturing, and scarce supply. Many offline retailers here in Turkey work only a few hours daily. Our last month's earnings declined to 85 percent.”* Expert 7

The experts also feel that the ASC needs no less than half a year to get better after lockdowns because the manufacturing process starts gradually; thus, there will be a lower necessity for labor.

*“Although the lockdowns are eased, our company cannot begin the manufacture because no less than 50 percent of our apparel products are retailed in local marketplaces. There is no need to produce clothes when consumers are scarce; except if the malls and stores operate in metropolitan areas, it may be a different story.”* Expert 1

### **Brands' Dominating Force**

Experts support the idea that brands have the dominating force in the ASC. Thus, brands can dictate prices, delivery conditions, and terms. In the past few decades, brands sustain profits by handing over budget reductions to their supply partners. After the 2013 Dhaka garment factory collapse in Bangladesh, labor wages, prices paid to suppliers, and lead times reduce by 6 percent, 13 percent, and 8 percent, correspondingly (Saxena, 2020). Hence, severe low-cost competition amongst supply partners causes inadequate payment of labor, giving no room for societal security of workers. Brands usually compensate once the products are delivered, pushing the supply partners to compensate for overhead costs, labor, and raw materials; thus, supply partners bear nearly all industry risks.

*Our company pays suppliers every twelve weeks after the products are received. Our company also makes agreements with the material producers to facilitate the apparel suppliers get paid every eight weeks after the receipt of fabrics.”* Expert 9

Partnerships amongst the SC members are valuable approaches for alleviating the risks, but it has an inadequate implementation in the ASCs. There is low bargaining power in suppliers; thus, brands use their dominating force for order delays or cancellations for the products that have been finalized or are in the manufacturing process. Brands impose the supply partners to propose harsh price-cuts and refuse the on-time payment. An enormous 91 percent and 72 percent of the purchasers refuse to afford production costs (e.g., manufacturing overhead, labor) and fabric cost, correspondingly, to Bangladeshi suppliers (Stammarnäs, 2021). Experts from the suppliers' part feel that several brands unfairly invoke the *force majeure* for their license. Nevertheless, with threatening fear of

failing business, supply partners frequently have no option but to obey.

*“Our company requires suppliers to retain their orders for procurement of materials entirely. We also instruct them to discontinue the ongoing manufacture. They have no option but to agree with our choices.”* Expert 7

### **Unethical Subcontracting of Labor and Manufacture**

Experts agree that many suppliers extensively implement unprincipled subcontracting of apparel production. The societal sustainability protocols are developed by the brands and are usually evaluated by the third-party auditor.

*“Our company has an extended relationship with supply partners. We obey external auditors and our societal responsibility principle. Supply partners are trained in the fields of noncompliance.”* Expert 2

Nevertheless, supply partners think that financial concerns are more emphasized than the other sustainability factors (i.e., societal concerns and environmental concerns); thus, they are often pushed to apply to subcontract of apparel manufacture.

*“When choosing supply partners, first our company sees the financial sustainability. Societal sustainability is the next, and the supply partners must follow our rules which comply with ethical business audits.”* Expert 3

Many practices of counterfeit compliance occur with the support of brands to meet demanding deadlines. Reports are dishonestly kept meeting the compliance, although on paper. An expert from a leading company admits the presence of counterfeit compliance.

*“Our company provides three kinds of audits regarding sustainability for suppliers, i.e., announced, semi-announced, and unannounced. Many suppliers show lowly compliance in subcontracting and overtime in which reports are dubious or missing.”* Expert 8

Although the plant provided to the supplier is subject to inspection and oversight for compliance, the subcontractors are still unseen. As a result, subcontracted units face widespread disruptions of societal sustainability standards. The mere monitoring by external auditors has failed to serve the purpose as the compliance process is more concerned with box-ticking rather than redressal of the real issue. Besides, unethical practices like bribing are often used by suppliers to cloak the occurrence of malpractices further.

Another significant factor emphasized by the experts is the extensive usage of contract labor in apparel manufacture. Generally, supply partners employ 80 to 90 percent of the workforce contracted via intermediaries. Brokers supply many factories with labor according to different requirements based on the size of the order. Thus, the suppliers' salaries do not include the workers. Despite commercial law, suppliers are still in charge of the workers' safety in the industrial unit locations.

Nevertheless, the supplier has no legal or moral obligation to guarantee the workers'

societal security in the event of dismissal. Most apparel makers are based on spring-summer demands; thus, the number of orders from the brands differs from season to season. Another difference in demand arises in every season. Thus, the experts think it is not efficiently feasible for suppliers to uphold a stable workforce below their salaries. Since intermediaries' supply contract labor to many industrial units, they benefit from pooling resources by taking advantage of the discontinuous demand of the units. Because brokers work individually, unethical layoff practices and reckless neglect of workers' societal security are overlooked.

### **Lack of Application of Islamic Ethics**

Due to the significance of Islam in Muslims' everyday life, it is reasonable if Islamic values appear significantly in employment and labor laws in Muslim-majority countries. Most Islamic nations' constitutions include Islam as the national religion and an essential foundation for law-making (Ahmad, 2011). Islamic labor rights requirements are also very harmonious with international labor standards; thus, Islamic values are of great potential as the essential source of information and implementation of labor codes in Muslim countries (Ahmad, 2011). However, Islamic requirements concerning employment and labor dealings infrequently appear in Muslim countries' labor codes (Ahmad, 2011). An expert from the auditor's side argues that Islam puts tremendous importance on societal justice as the Quran (i.e., words of God, life guidance for Muslims) mentions two words: "Adl" which means to perform equalized manner, and "Qist" which signifies to realize that every human being has several rights and providing them their rights is justice.

*"Quran sees salaries as a right, not a generosity from the employers. It complies with the concepts of Adl and Qist where Islamic law speaks not only concerning minimum payments but also fair or "living" wages. Unfortunately, many firms in Muslim countries act against this concept. "Expert 4*

Most interviewed experts agree that the apparel and textile industries face main problems especially related to working conditions, i.e., health and safety, child labor, formation of unions, overtime work, and low wages caused by their buyers (Köksal et al., 2018). Since decades ago, companies have realized these labor conditions that most of their apparel is manufactured in nations where laborers' rights are restricted or absent. Besides, manufacturing units are frequently changing locations for finding low-cost labor (Charpail, 2017).

One of the Islamic rules regarding labor wage is that it has to be adequate in providing workers basic needs of life as Quran states in chapter 2, verse 233, that a "family leader (man) must provide woman (after divorce, via children allowances) and dress them appropriately" (Ahmad, 2011). The term "appropriate" here means "compliant with the standards of space and time." Thus, wages must fulfill no less than the costs of foods and clothes suitable for the standards of the period (Ahmad, 2011). Further, Ahmad (2011) reports several statements given by the Islamic Prophet regarding the obligations of providing sufficient labor wages:



- “A worker, either female or male, has a right to no less than reasonably good food and clothes and not being loaded but what they can shoulder,”
- “Satisfy them regarding their necessities,” and
- “People who work for you are similar to your brothers whom God has made your dependents; thus, those who have a brother work for him should feed him what they feed themselves and dress him what they clothe themselves with.”

However, the apparel industry in Muslim-majority countries shows inadequate application of the abovementioned Islamic teachings. For example, in most producing nations such as Bangladesh, the minimum salary is only 20 percent to 50 percent of the living wages (Charpail, 2017). It means that apparel companies pay their workers five times lower than a minimum wage for primary necessities such as food, rents, healthcare, and education (Charpail, 2017). One expert says that inadequate application of Islamic ethics has caused poor societal sustainability practices in the ASC in Muslim-majority countries, even before the COVID-19 outbreak.

### **Risk Alleviation Strategies**

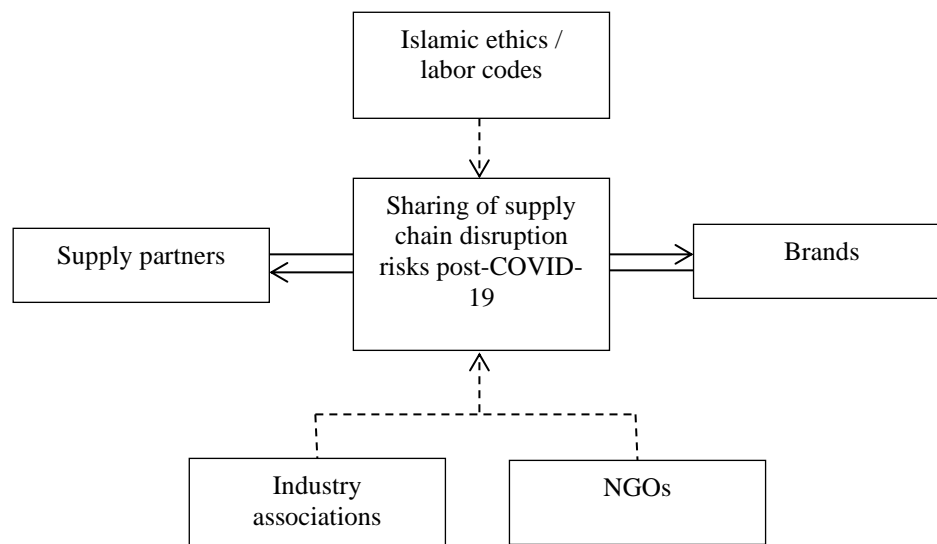
Scholars have examined the risk management of ASC in the COVID-19 time such as changing the lean SC, in which employee engagement is maintained, to agile system where the usage of e-commerce and modern technologies like blockchain is focused (Sumarliah et al., 2021a; 2021e). Blockchain is believed to improve SC transparency and thereby SC performance (Sumarliah et al., 2022a); e-commerce usage in the ASC grows rapidly during and post-COVID-19 as many people work from home due to the pandemic (Sumarliah et al., 2022c).

However, from the interviews, it became clear that the risk alleviation strategy should be more focused on employee engagement than technology adoption. Apparel suppliers must be proactive in assuring the societal security of the unemployed as they possess no liquidity to maintain in the event of a long-term economic crisis. In Bangladesh, full-time employees are allowed a 60-day wage upon dismissal following labor laws. Several experts suggest that this feature must also apply to employment contracts. Experts have presented that due to factory closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Turkish government offers financial aid until 30 percent of salaries for the unemployed workforce (Cochrane, 2020). The Bangladeshi government also promises a stimulus package of as much as 2.5 percent of the country’s GDP or US\$8 billion (Riaz, 2020). Experts believe that the demand for apparel can increase post-pandemic. Nevertheless, cash-hungry apparel firms, particularly SMEs, will struggle to reopen because of a shortage of skilled workforce, lots of whom have already gone back to their hometowns.

*“The trauma leaves an enduring wound on the minds of migrant workers; some chose never to leave their hometowns, but others have no choice but to come back for work.”* Expert 9

Consequently, worker-friendly disturbance risk management policies are of the utmost significance to lessen the migrant workers’ suffering. The experts also recommend the

government assist apparel makers in some other ways, i.e., reducing bank interest, waiving anti-dumping obligations, and halting bank interest and capital payments to help the apparel industry quickly recover and reduce workers' shocks. Most experts think that post-Coronavirus crisis, human rights groups, industry associations, and NGOs will pressure brands to ensure that employees get a stipend to pay their basic needs such as food, clothes, house, education, and emergency costs. Brands must stop paying low wages to workers, making them forever reliant on the public welfare system. Thus, as presented in Figure 2, new procurement frameworks are necessary for which suppliers and brands are included in sustainable partnership with mediation from NGOs or industry associations. The procurement framework should involve risk-sharing agreements between parties to ensure the fair distribution of losses during unforeseen disturbances. NGOs or industry associations' task refers to societal challenges (e.g., emergency savings, fair wages, health and safety, discrimination, excessive overtime, involuntary work, forced labor, child labor) and their practices in all members of the ASC.



**Figure 2:** Procurement framework for sharing risks in the apparel SC of Muslim-majority countries

Interviewed experts also propose that if suppliers have purchased raw materials but have not yet produced apparel, the brand will need partial compensation for, e.g., fabric costs when the order is canceled. Brands will have to pay a portion of the weaving costs, producing costs, and labor costs, if the apparel is on producing stage (stitch and cut). The brands must disburse extra inventory costs to delay shipping.

Brands should be responsible for paying the additional cost of sharing risk. Nevertheless, it can be involved in the pricing framework as a societal sustainability spending that can be combined with corporate social responsibility expense. By adopting this procurement framework, brands can improve their images as sustainable organizations. Some interviewed experts suggest that suppliers with a full-time workforce should be prioritized by the brands when selecting suppliers and allocating orders. It allows suppliers to evade contract workforce, at least in part, and improve worker employment security. Besides, to reduce the risk of future disruptions, brands must combine “globalization” and “localization” for the new “glocalization” as a novel procurement approach to lessen their

reliance on one country or one resource. Experts from the suppliers' side feel that after the COVID-19 crisis, Muslim-majority countries will see this chance as a reliable alternative to the novel brand.

*“During this COVID-19 pandemic, we receive many questions from new international purchasers about our producing capabilities and lead times.”* Expert 5

The interviewed experts also suggest that workers should be more responsible for the societal security of workers, as they are mainly related to suppliers. The interviews lead to daycare centers, providing access to emergency savings, and offering compulsory savings plans. Brands should encourage the active and constructive participation of trade unions by suppliers even if they identify third-party auditors as good at ensuring the societal sustainability of the SC,

Furthermore, one of the interviewed experts suggests that brands in Muslim-majority countries should be more aware of Islamic teachings to create fairer working conditions; otherwise, societal sustainability in their SCs will remain lacking.

*“Coronavirus is a living proof that there is a power over human power, that is, the greatness and infinite power of Allah (God). Thus, now is the right time to follow the balanced way (i.e., social justice) and obey His commands in our daily life as Muslims, including in our business practices. Allah will not change our conditions unless we change ourselves.”* Expert 4

Islam emphasizes social justice that must be applied in business operations to improve societal sustainability in the ASC. Ahmed (2011) explains several Islamic teachings from the Quran regarding the requirements of maintaining social justice, for example: God commands people not to mislead justice and act injustice (chapter 4 verse 135); God loves people who do justice and act justly to others (chapter 5, verse 42); and God orders human to perform justice (chapter 16, verse 90). Besides, there are six Islamic ethics concerning labor wages (Ahmed, 2011):

- The Quran says that wages are a right, not generosity of the employers; thus, workers must be clearly informed, either written or spoken, regarding the salaries that they are going to receive after their works finish.
- Compensation must be enough to pay the basic needs of workers' life. Salaries must fulfill “living” wages instead of minimum wage to provide workers at least the costs of food and clothes according to the standards of the place and time.
- Salaries must be set keeping in view the existing circumstances, e.g., needs, regional price disparities, and inflation.
- The timely and punctual payment of salaries is a must, as the Prophet said, “Give employees their wages before the sweats are dry on them,” and “The rich, regardless of his wealth, cannot postpone of payment to the workers, because it is a corruption.”
- Full payment of wages is a must. This prophetic narration reveals that not only workers must get full salaries for their work, but also it forbids forced labor.

- Equal pay is for equal work. Islam requires workers to be paid for their work without any under or overvaluation. Discrimination based on, e.g., gender, origin, race, ethnicity, and region is prohibited.

Practicing these six Islamic labor codes in the business operation can be an effective solution to improve societal sustainability in the ASC of Muslim-majority countries.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Conclusion**

This paper presents an illustrative study based on semi-structured expert interviews to explain the root causes of the absence of societal sustainability in the ASC during the COVID-19 crisis. It is proved that the leading causes include the supremacy of apparel brands in power, unauthorized subcontracting of apparel manufacture, and the usage of contracted labor by suppliers, which disturb the societal security of the ASCs working in Muslim-dominated countries. As an alleviation approach, suppliers, brands, NGOs, and industry associations should work together to tackle the societal security shortfall for the ASC driven by the COVID-19 crisis. There is a necessity to adopt a new procurement form that can involve contracts that share disruption risk and societal safety benefits. Brands and external auditors need to guarantee that unauthorized subcontracting of apparel production is excluded. Brands must also motivate supply partners to employ full-time labor by coordinating their order allocation and supplier selection policies. Interviewees think that the “glocalization” approach can make Muslim-majority countries an endpoint for a significant number of new apparel brands, so suppliers can access workers’ emergency savings and implement compulsory savings plans to increase societal sustainability. This paper concentrates mainly on the apparel SCs, but the results and benefits have broad implications for numerous businesses that rely on the unskilled workforce.

### **Limitations and Future Studies**

This study presents a new insight into societal sustainability challenges in the ASC of Muslim-majority countries incorporating the COVID-19 pandemic. The results are mainly obtained from semi-structured in-depth interviews of business specialists. The whole process of interviews is directed online due to societal distancing. It will be more satisfying to do face-to-face interviews with the entire expert members of the ASC. Thus, the authors suggest two research inquiries for future studies as follows:

- In what manner the power domination among suppliers and brands will transform in the ASC post-COVID-19 crisis?
- How will the pricing frameworks and procurement strategies of the apparel and textile industry transform post-COVID-19 crisis?
- Can Islamic ethic-based SC management be a novel, practical framework to lessen the societal sustainability risks in the ASC post-pandemic?

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