



# Temiz Giysi Kampanyası

Adil ve sürdürülebilir bir tekstil sektörü için



A RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE TEXTILE  
INDUSTRY WORKFORCE









# I Put Your Mask On and Keep Working!

## A Research on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Textile Industry Workforce

### Introduction

*A Research on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Textile Industry Workforce* looks into the effects of the global pandemic that started in January 2020 and swept the whole world, on the textile industry workforce in Turkey. It is known that the pandemic has staggering consequences in the labor market. The ILO (2021) report titled *COVID-19* and the *World of Work* points out workplace closures have affected 93% of the world workforce and that working hours have decreased significantly. Naturally, these circumstances have given way to different results for different industries. The purpose of this report is to discuss the changes in the working conditions in the textile industry in Turkey due to COVID-19 by asking several questions such as how the measures taken have affected textile workers. The report also addresses the risks and right violations encountered by workers, within the context of existing structural conditions in the industry. The data was collected through face-to-face interviews conducted with workers who work actively in the industry and a desk research including the relevant news in the media, supported by a literature review.

With the transition to neoliberal economic policy practices, the garment and apparel industries in Turkey became one of the most important manufacturing industries in the early 1980s. With its production and export capacity, the industry has had a prominent place both in employment and exports of Turkey for many years. As a matter of fact, textile was the largest export industry until the early 2000s; in 2019, it was the third most exporting industry with a share of 17.7%. Based on the results of the Household Labor Force Survey of Turkish Statistical Institute (TSI), 1,5 million people were working in the textile and clothing industries in 2018. In addition to having a high potential for employment, the industry has been one of the manufacturing industries where women work the most. The industry is also known for the high number of unregistered (informal) employees. The production capacity has further spread to many other cities in Turkey in recent years although the city of Istanbul alone employs 60% of the employees in the whole industry and performs a very important role in the production. In these respects, investigating the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on employees in the industry, addressing labour rights and examining the violations of rights is crucial.



Various measures have been taken both in the world and in Turkey to organize the working life and protect the health of the employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among such measures is the dismissal ban, which is a restriction on the termination of the employment contract by the employers, some of whom were reported to lay workers off by using the pandemic as an excuse, imposed on April 17, 2020. However, the employers were also given the authority to make the worker go on unpaid leave throughout the ban. Meanwhile, workers on unpaid leave were provided with cash support<sup>1</sup>. The cash support has been provided to workers not as unemployment insurance, but as a

short-time working allowance, a lower amount than the unemployment insurance<sup>2</sup>. With the data obtained from the field, the extent of such practices and how they changed the working conditions in the textile industry were also sought. The report also interrogates to what extent these measures keep workers away from production lines and protect them against health risks.

The findings presented in this report, which aims to understand the changes in working conditions in terms of their impacts on employees, are based on the experiences of workers in the textile industry in Istanbul.

## Research Method and Field Work

*A Research on the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Textile Industry Workforce* relies on data obtained from interviews conducted with 60 textile workers employed in the textile sector in Istanbul. The field study started in August 2020 but was paused due to the increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. The field work was resumed after four months, therefore, the majority of the interviews were carried out in January and February, 2021. Interviews conducted were in the form of face-to-face correspondence.

The interviews were conducted with 60 textile workers living/working in Bağcılar and Güngören districts of Istanbul. During the interviews, social distancing and hygiene rules were followed, and the risk of infection both for the interviewee and the interviewer was tried to be minimized. The interviews were done outside the workplaces, on the streets or in the parks as the cafes and restaurants were closed at the time.

For the sampling, snowball sampling method was used. Due to COVID-19 and the measures taken encountered in the conduct of the fieldwork, the number, gender and regional distribution of the interviewees did not come up as planned. Therefore, the sample and the findings of the study do not have the claim of representing the textile workers in Istanbul. However, the employment status of the

interviewed workers, the size of the workplace, and the type of work reflects the diversity in the industry and thus is comprehensive enough.

Due to the effects of the pandemic, interviews were held with workers working in relatively small-scale enterprises, namely in the supply chains of the textile industry that can be called Tier-2 and Tier-3. In these enterprises unregistered employment is more common. Furthermore, it became more difficult for women to participate in the interviews due to the curfew imposed after 21.00 on weekdays and at the weekends. The ease of accessibility caused a higher rate of representation of male interviewees in the sample. As a result, 20 female and 40 male textile workers were interviewed within the scope of the research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study at the beginning of the interviews, and were told that all personal information would be kept confidential. The interviewees were asked for their verbal consent confirming that they would like to participate in the interview.

During the data collection process, a desk study, which included media research was also conducted. The desk study was carried out by compiling and examining the news published throughout the quarantine process in Turkey, the statements and demands made by national and international

<sup>1</sup>Cash support is a governmental policy that provides income support by the Unemployment Insurance Fund and ISKUR (Turkish Employment Agency) for the period of unpaid leave or unemployment for those within the scope of temporary article 24 of the Law No. 4447 in order to reduce the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and social life (<https://www.iskur.gov.tr/is-arayan/issizlik-sigortasi/nakdi-ucret-destegi/>. Date of access: 24.04.2021).

<sup>2</sup>Short-time working allowance is a policy that provides income support to workers with social insurance. It is a subsidy paid to employees in cases where the working hours of their workplace is temporarily reduced by at least one-third of the weekly operation time, or where the workplace is suspended for at least four weeks permanently or temporarily due to general economic, industrial, regional crisis or because of the force majeure. In order for the employee to benefit from this application, the employer must have applied to ISKUR until June 30, 2020. During the unpaid leave, short-time working allowance cannot be received. If the short-time working practice is less than 30 days a month, there is no obstacle for the employer to terminate the short work and take the employee on unpaid leave (<https://www.iskur.gov.tr/isveren/kisa-calisma-odeneği/genel-bilgiler/>. Date of access: 24.04.2021).



unions and organizations regarding labor rights, and the statements and practices in the press and social media about the working conditions in the industry.

The findings obtained from the research are presented in the following sections of the report. The first part gives the profiles of the workers in the textile industry in İstanbul while the second part focuses on the working conditions of the workers. The third part introduces the structural characteristics of the

industry such as the size of the enterprise and product variety, discussing occupational health and safety hazards faced by workers as well. The next part discusses the wage levels and payment systems prevalent in the industry, it also sheds light on the decline of wage levels of workers during COVID-19. In the fifth part and afterwards, the findings gathered from the field study and the effects of COVID-19 on the workforce are presented under different headings.

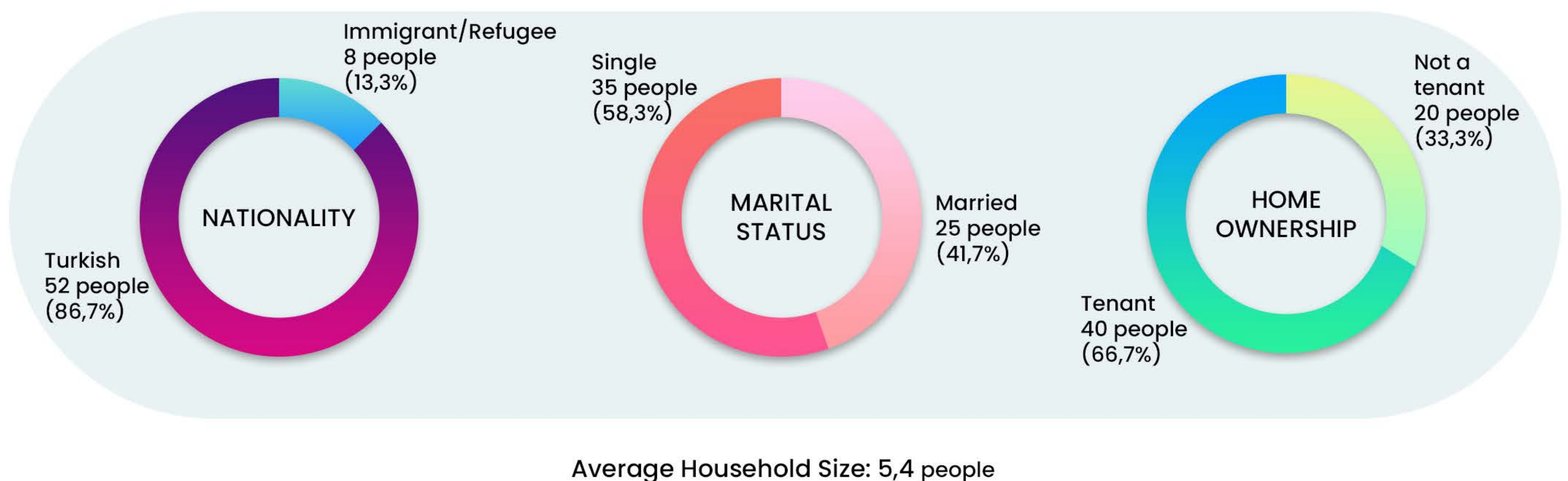
## 1. The Profile of Workers in the Textile Industry in İstanbul: Demographic Characteristics

The textile and clothing industries have an important employment volume in the Turkish labor market. Women, making up almost half of the industry's labor force, have an essential place within the employment in the manufacturing industry. The Household Labor Force Survey (2018) of TurkStat showed that those working in the industry are predominantly with an education of high school or less, and young (20-39 age range) especially those working in the cloth making industry. As textile industry is labor-intensive, women as well as young employees are concentrated in the sector. Unregistered employment is also common in the industry: the same data set of TurkStat reveals this rate as one-third of all employees (TurkStat, 2018).

Although the field study carried out in İstanbul has focused on the outer links of İstanbul textile supply

chain, characterized by small-scale enterprises and widespread form of unregistered employment, the sample reflects the features listed above. Most of the workers interviewed in the field study were Turkish citizens while eight were immigrant/refugee workers<sup>3</sup>. 20 of the interviewees (33,3%) were female, and 40 (66,7%) were male. Based on the industry average stated above, the workers interviewed reflect the profile of a fairly young segment. The average age of the sample was 28,7. Approximately 42% of the interviewees were married and 45% had children. The average number of children of those with children (27 people) was roughly 2. The average household size of the employees was 5,4 indicating almost 6 people were sharing the same house. It was also assessed that majority of the interviewees were tenants (nearly 67%) in the residences they lived in.

### General profile of Interviewees (N:60)



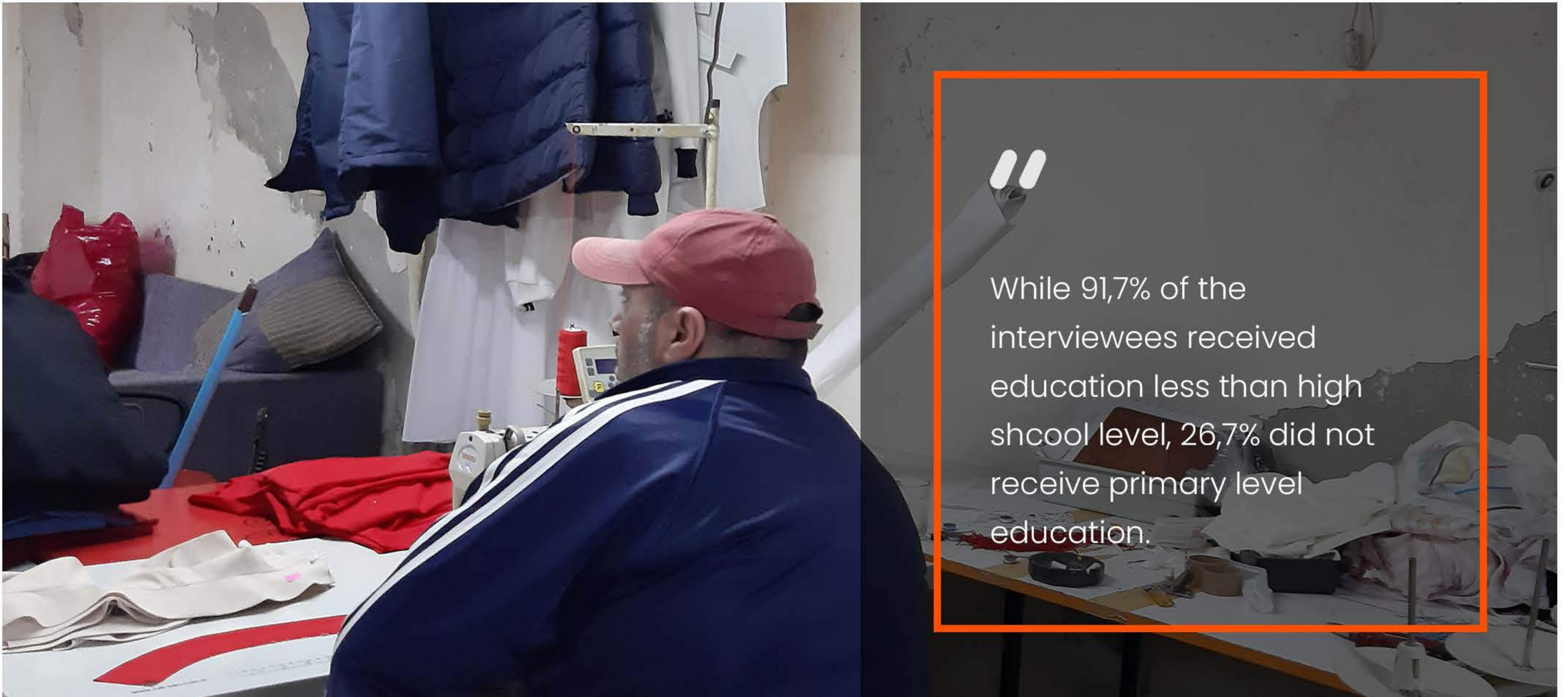
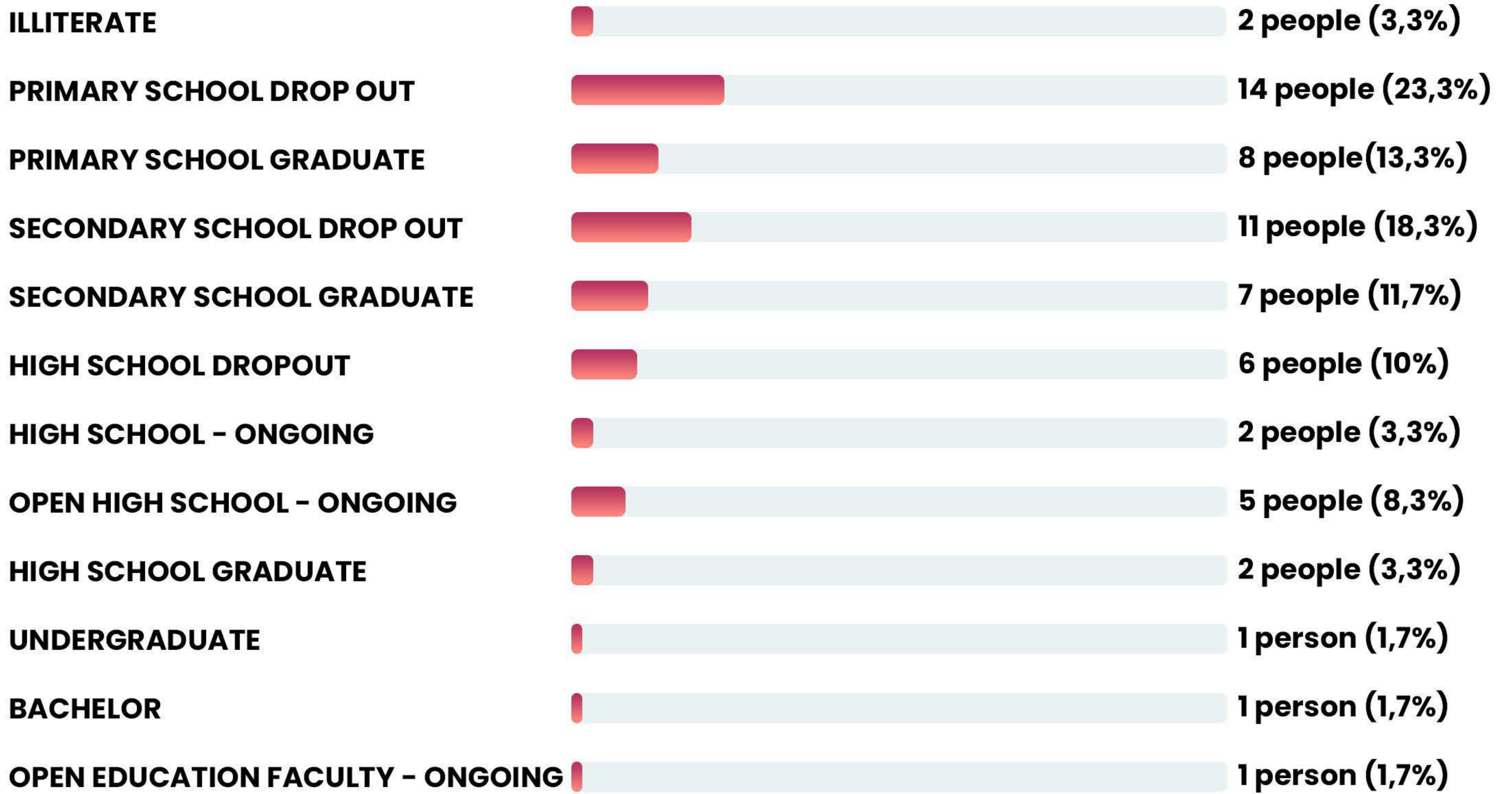
<sup>3</sup>Three of the immigrant workers interviewed were from Syria, one from Pakistan, one from Afghanistan, one from Georgia, one from Uzbekistan and one from Azerbaijan.



Apart from the young age composition, the education level of the interviewees working in İstanbul textile industry is also assessed to be low. While 91,7% of the interviewees were with education less than high school, 26,7% did not even have a primary school degree. The number of those who dropped out during primary, secondary or high school education was also quite high. Nearly 23% (14 people) of all the interviewees reported that they had dropped out of primary school, nearly 18% (11 people) had dropped out of secondary school, and

10% (6 people) had dropped out of high school. The rate of the interviewees with a high school education was very low (5%). One of the interviewees had a bachelor's degree, one was an undergraduate student and one was a student at an open education faculty. It was also determined that university and high school students started to work in the textile industry with the distant education practice that started to be implemented during the COVID-19.

## Education Levels of Employees



While 91,7% of the interviewees received education less than high school level, 26,7% did not receive primary level education.



**Case 1: 'I have thought about the future! There are no job opportunities in the field of Communication, so I started to work in a textile workshop...'**

At the age of 21, Sedat, a student at the Faculty of Communication, started working in textile workshops when online education began. Since his family has been in the textile business for a while, he is an experienced worker and has been working in the place where he is currently working for five months. Tired of sitting at home, he decided to make money to avoid the uncertainty of the future. He is currently working between the hours 08.30 and 19.00, in a textile workshop near where he lives so he goes to work on foot. He receives a daily wage and is paid every two weeks. He states that there is no overtime during the pandemic and that he earns about 3200 TL per month except for overtime hours. He states that the wage is generally paid regularly, but there has been problems from time to time:

I received my wage regularly, until now. I was told I will get my wage a week late because there are problems in these casual works. When I ask what the problem is, the boss says the market is stagnant these days. Therefore, subcontractors reduce the price to get the job. He says that even though they work, the workplace does not earn money, and they are paid late because the bosses do not earn money.

He says that the textile business is very difficult, 'They want quality and quantity at the same time.' He follows, *"You have to produce 2000 pieces a day and produce them flawlessly as well. To do this, the job requires a physical and mental devotion"*.

He says that no precaution has been taken regarding COVID-19 where he works. Social distance rule is not obeyed, and no masks are worn. The employers do not provide masks to the employees in the workplace, nor do they disinfect the place.

His whole family was infected with the virus by his father who works in a hospital. He stayed at home when he was sick, but did not receive his pay during that time. Besides, he says that he does not know if his workplace was closed when he was infected with COVID-19.



## 2. Working Conditions, Informal Employment, Child Labor and Unionization

As mentioned earlier, the textile industry is one of the industries where unregistered employment is almost a norm. The overall rate of unregistered employment is 32,9% in the industry indicating that one out of every three employees is unregistered (TurkStat, 2018). Field research findings also confirm this statistics; in fact, the unregistered employment rate of the sample is higher than the industry average. 66,7% of the workers interviewed were employed without insurance, i.e. informally. Financial concerns may cause some workers to feel obliged to work for low wages and without insurance. Erol, (age, 27) an industrial sewer employed in a workshop, said that he worked without insurance and proceeded as follows, *“I could not work with insurance because I have debts... I will get married.”* By working without insurance he could receive half of the cost (of the insurance premium, the employer was required to pay but would save) in addition to his wage.

High rates of unregistered employment mean a serious violation of rights in the industry. In the 34th article of the European Convention on Human Rights, regulating social security and social aids, it is stated that *“The Union recognizes and respects the entitlement to social security benefits and social services providing protection in cases such as maternity, illness, industrial accidents, dependency or old age and in case of loss of employment, in*

*accordance with the rules laid down by Community Law and national laws and practices”*. In Turkey, the right to have social security is guaranteed by Article No. 60 of the Constitution, which ensures and requires the Right to Have Social Security. In the mentioned article, it is stated that *“Everyone has the right to social security. The state shall take the necessary measures and establish the necessary organization for the provision of social security”*. In other words, employing workers without insurance/security is against human rights and is a violation of the Constitution. The state has to ensure the access and the enjoyment of the social security rights of employees. It is also responsible for preventing the violation of this right by making the necessary inspections and taking measures. The unregistered employment widespread in the industry shows that many workers are denied this right. In a study prepared by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV, 2020), it is stated that the rate of unregistered employment among wage earners decreased between the years of 2005 and 2015, and then came to a standstill. Although the reasons of this plateau are not known exactly, one of the potential reasons was indicated by the loosening of the monitoring mechanisms of the state for it was also emphasized combating unregistered employment means cutting the access of many Syrians to their sources of income (Uysal, 2020).

“

Child Labor: *“Which child would want to work...”*

Another phenomenon in the industry is child labor. The findings of the field research revealed that a considerable number of workers started to work in the industry at a young age. The interviewees stated that they have been working in the industry for 11,7 years on average. When their ages and experiences in the industry<sup>4</sup> is considered it is seen that 22<sup>5</sup> of the 60 workers interviewed have been in the textile industry since childhood. For example, Yusuf (24), who worked in a workshop in Bağcılar, said he had been in the textile industry since he was eight. When he was asked about how he started, he said, *“My dad was a watchman in the textile industry. I would*

*go to the place he worked after school. Then, I started to work there as it was my uncle’s place anyway”*. To the question *“What was it like to work in the textile industry?”* he answered *“Which child would like to work...”* Having had to enter the industry at the age of nine, Esra worked in a textile workshop in Bağcılar as well. When she was asked how it started for her, she said, *“I started to work as an apprentice to help my family after we moved to Istanbul”*. Next, she was asked *“What was it like to work at the age of nine?”* and she answered, *“It was difficult”* and added *“It was hard to reach the tables as I was not tall enough”*.

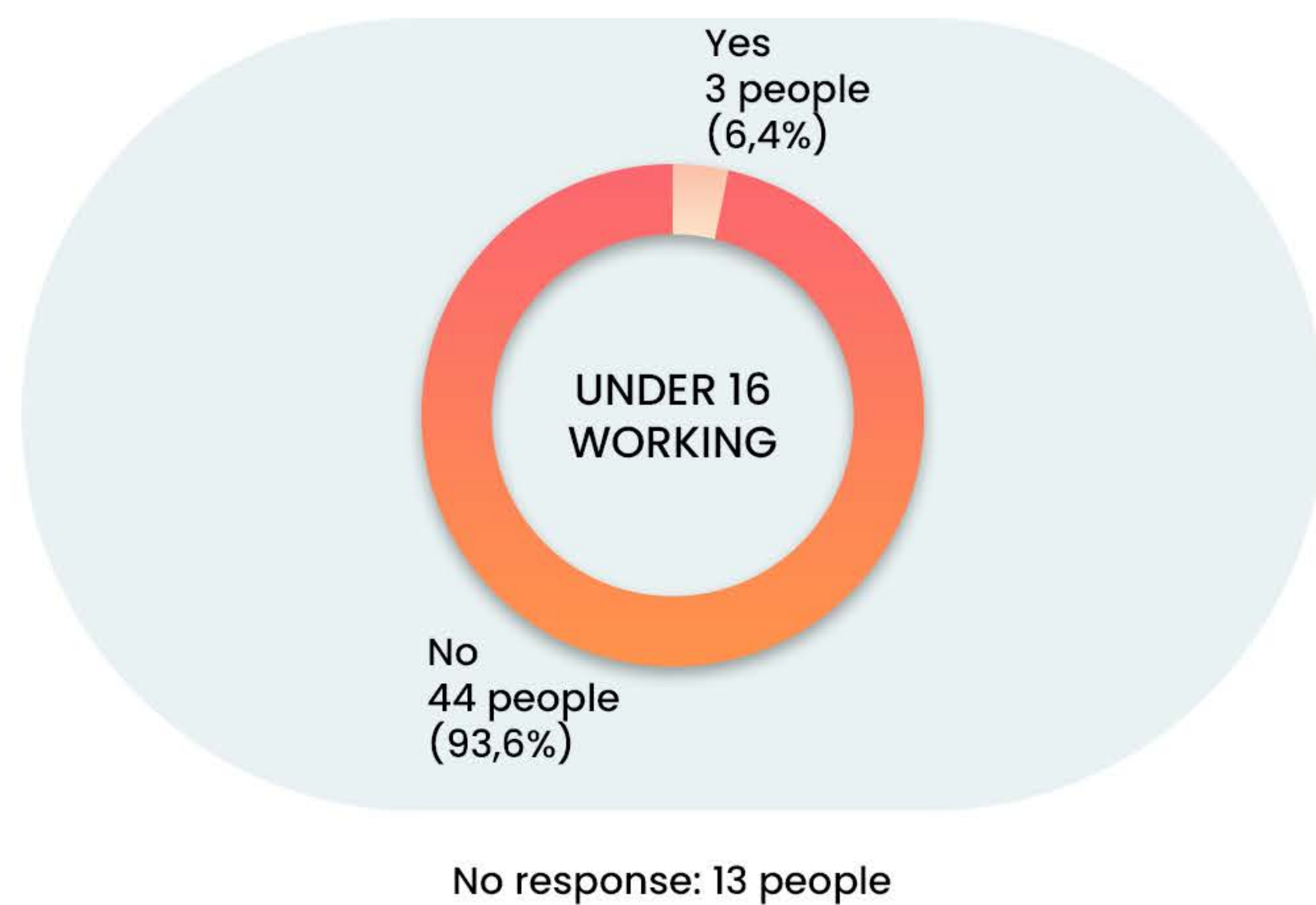
<sup>4</sup> They make up 36,1% of all the interviewees and 52,4% of the respondents.

<sup>5</sup> Two of the interviewees said they had been working in the textile industry since they were 8, one since the age of 11. There were three workers who have been in employment since the age of 12, seven since 13, six since 14, and three since they were 15.



The fact that children worked with their families to learn a profession in a social environment also points out how child labor is integrated into the industry. As a matter of fact, some of those who started to work in the industry at a young age stated that this was not due to poverty or financial difficulties, but rather because it was a family profession. These children entered the industry to learn about the family profession at a young age. Gülin (43) has been in the textile industry working as an industrial sewer in a textile workshop, doing weaving in Soğanlı/Akıncılar since she was 13. When asked about why she started to work at the age of 13, she replied *“Family pressure”*. Later she was asked whether it was because of financial problems, she answered *“No, my dad had his own shop. It was to teach the profession... He forced me to learn it, but now when I think about it, I say I was fortunate that he did”*. Then, she was asked *“Why do you think you were fortunate that he taught it?”* she answered, *“I can make a living as a woman”*.

## Whether there is an employee under 16 in the workplace



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

There is no employee under the age of 16 in the workplace where the majority of the interviewed workers work (93,6%). Only three interviewees (6,4%) stated that there were workers under 16 in their workplaces. Seher, who worked in a workshop in Bağcılar, mentioned two employees under the age of 16. *“The youngest is about 16 years old,”* she said. When she was asked about their names, she responded by saying, *“Halime and Julia”*, and added *“They are Syrians.”* Article 32 of the European Convention on Human Rights regulates the prohibition of child labor and the protection of working youth. In the Article, it is said that *“The employment of children is prohibited. The minimum age of admission to employment may not be lower than the minimum school-leaving age without prejudice to such rules as may be more favorable to young people and except for limited derogations”*. In the 71st article of Labor Law, it is said that *“Children who have turned 14 and completed*

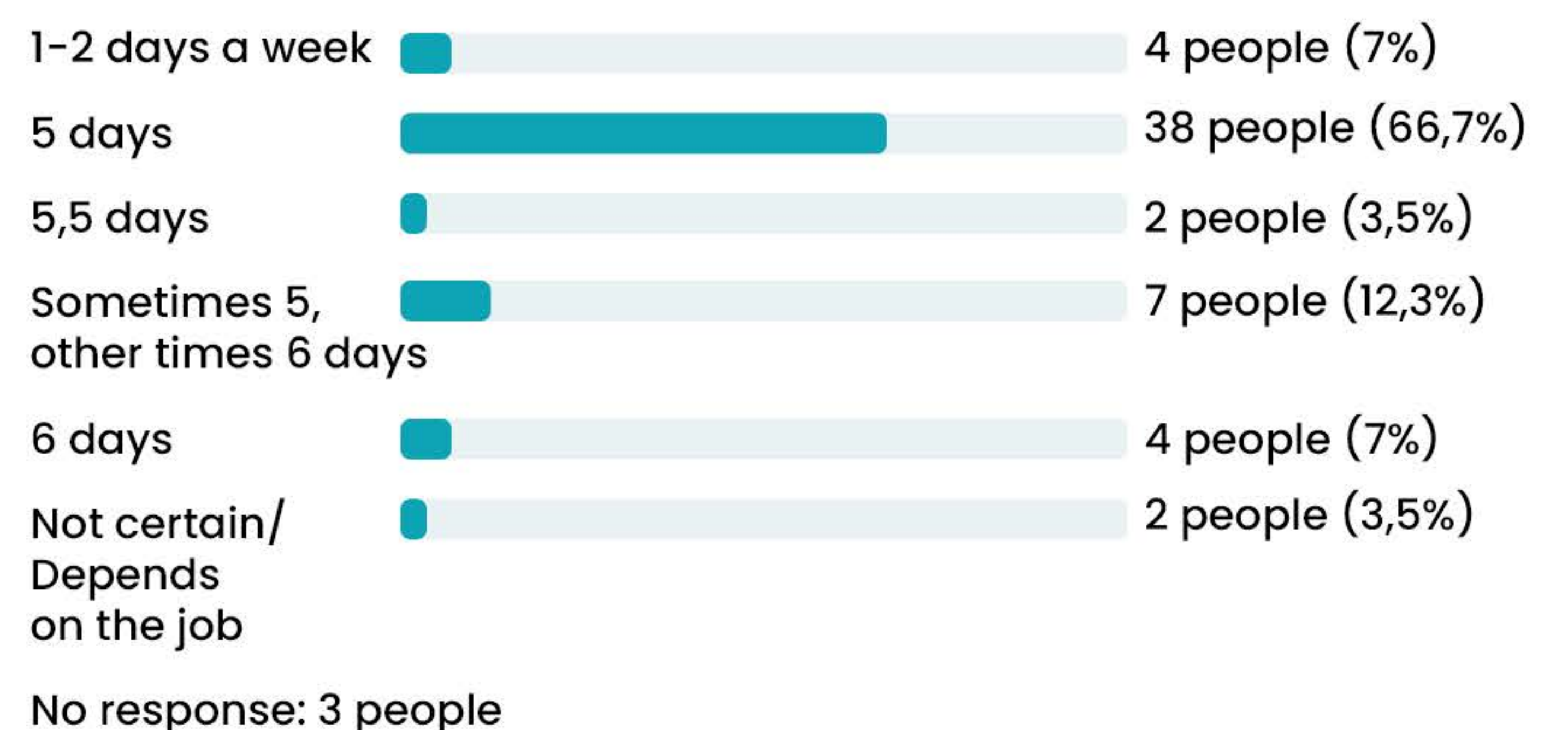
*their primary education can engage in light work (as defined under the Regulation) which does not hamper their physical, mental, social, and moral development and does not interfere with the education of those who continue to study after primary education”*. Although the number of workplaces with employees under 16 in the sample was extremely low, as stated before, a considerable part of the interviewees started to work in the industry at a young age. This is a situation that is contrary to both the fundamental human rights and the Labor Law, and violation of rights.

## Working Hours

According to the findings of the Household Labor Force Survey (2018) of TurkStat, men work 50,99 hours a week in the clothing industry, while women work 42,78 hours. Even if the provided data for the industry do not seem to be much above the legal limits, working hours are actually much longer due to the prevalence of unregistered working.

Most of the workers interviewed in the field study (66,7%) stated that they work five days a week. While the proportion of workers working more than five days was 22,8% (13 people), a small number of workers (4 people – 7%) also reported that they have started working only a few days a week during the COVID-19 pandemic. Apparently, the curfews imposed for the weekend during the pandemic affected the work on Saturday and Sunday. To the question *“How many days did you used to work before the pandemic?”* 11 of the 14 interviewees responded by saying they had to work on Saturdays as well, meaning for six days in total. The pandemic reduced the working hours of some workers: 8 workers reported a decrease to five days and 3 people to two days due to the stagnation of business and the weekend curfews. Yet, there was also a worker who stated that s/he worked for five days a week before the pandemic, and started working for six days a week during the pandemic period. It was seen that the pandemic resulted in a general shortening of working days for textile workers.

## Days of work during the week

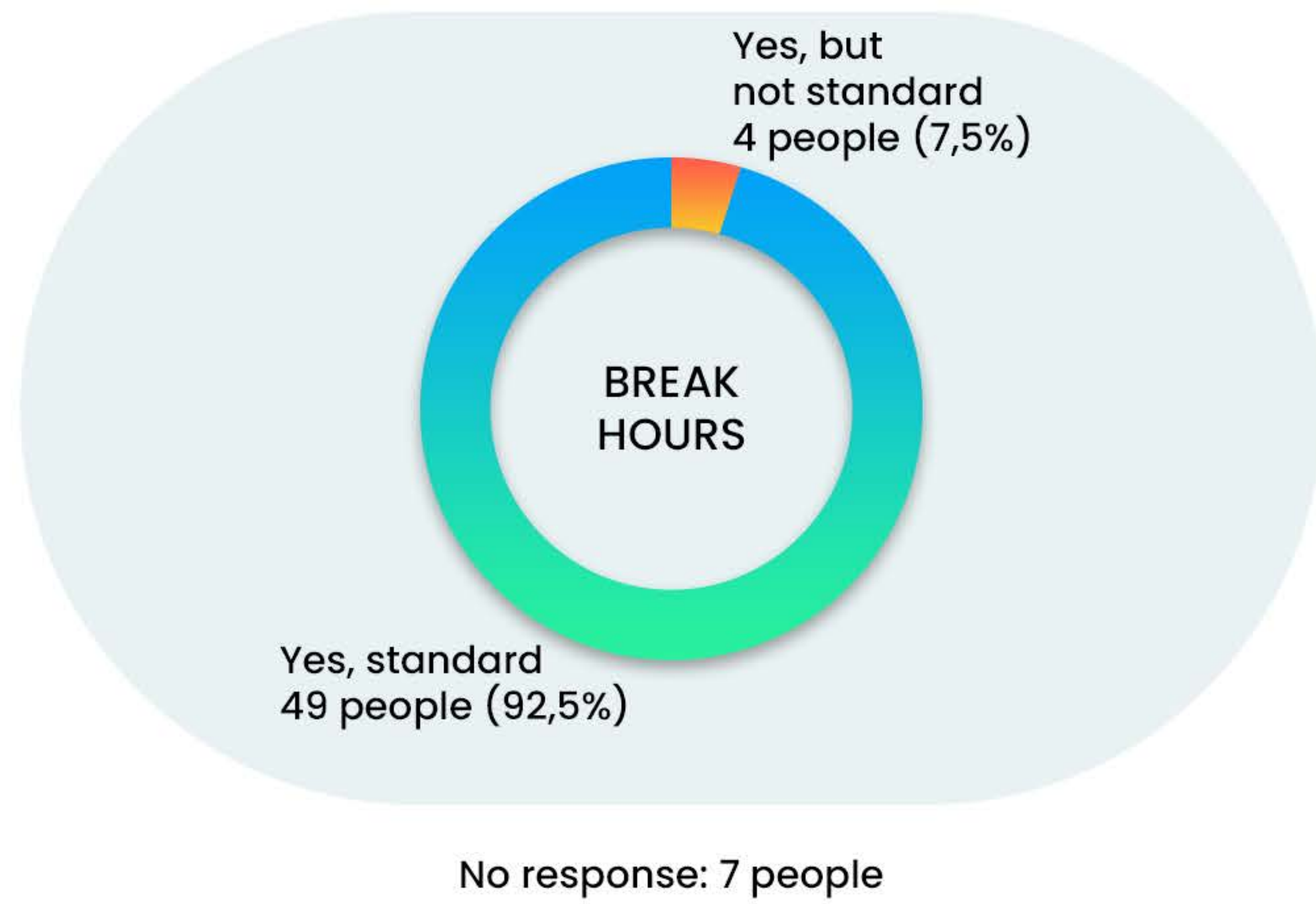


Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.



All of the workers interviewed in the field study stated that they had standard and non-standard breaks during working hours. The proportion of workers who stated that the breaks were standard was much higher (92,5%). Workplaces usually had two breaks during fixed hours. Additionally, protective equipment (mask) was used in most of the workplaces.

## Whether there is regular break hours in the workplace



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

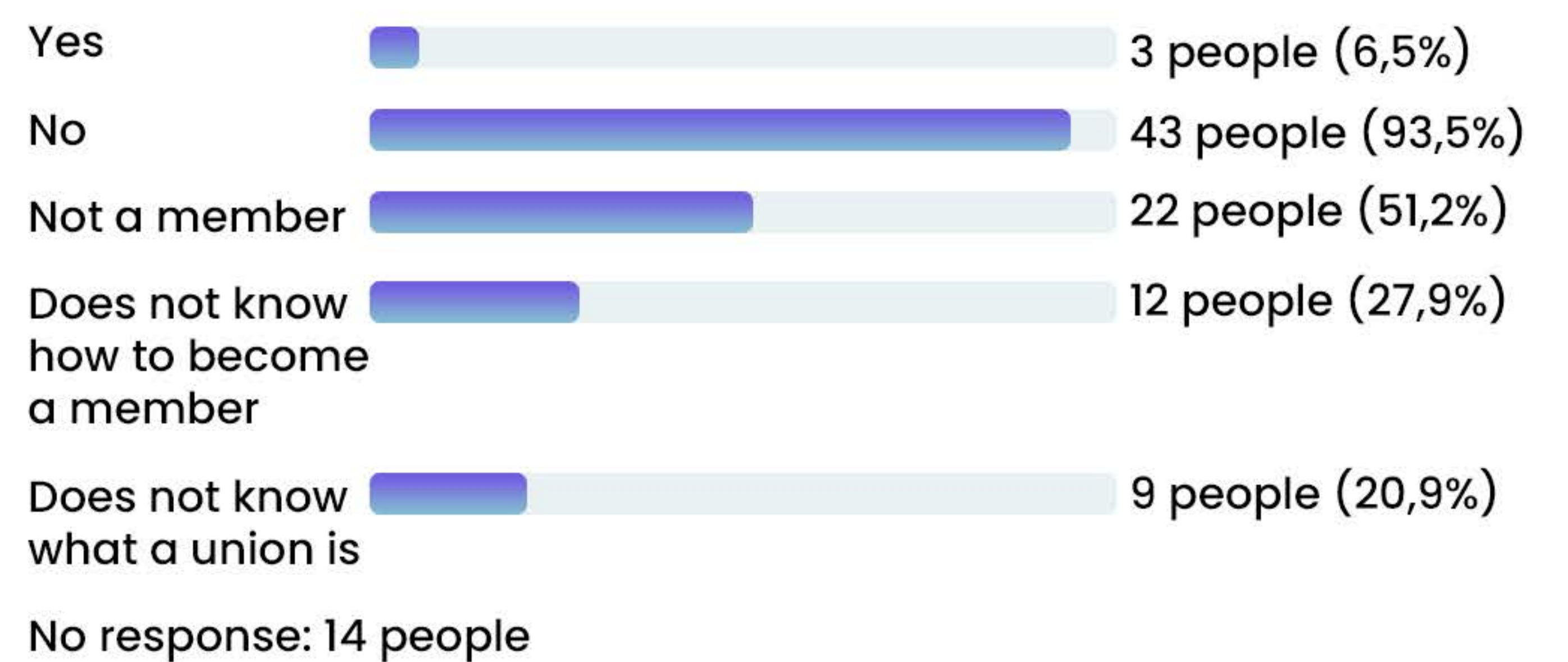
## Trade Union Membership

According to the statistics of the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services for July 2018, the rate of unionized in the textile, garment and leather business was 9,03%. Naturally, the traces of the prevalence of unregistered employment in the industry are also observed here because the figures for trade union membership only include the ones who are registered. Consequently, the vast majority of the workers interviewed (93,5%) in the field study were not members of any trade union. Of all the workers interviewed, only three (6,5%) were members of Deriteks union. In the group of unionized workers, there were people who did not know how to become a member of a trade union, or even what a trade union was. Approximately, 28% of the workers did not know how to apply for membership, and nearly 21% did not know the meaning of a trade union.

When 19-year-old textile worker Mehmet was asked "Do you have a trade union membership?", he answered "What do you mean? What is that?" Similarly, Hasan (17), who worked in a textile workshop in Bağcılar, replied to the question by asking: "A trade union?" Apparently, those who did not know what a trade union was were generally young, or even children. However, there was also a small middle-aged group who did not know what a trade union was.



## Union Membership



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.



### 3. Production Structure in the Textile Industry and Labor Relations

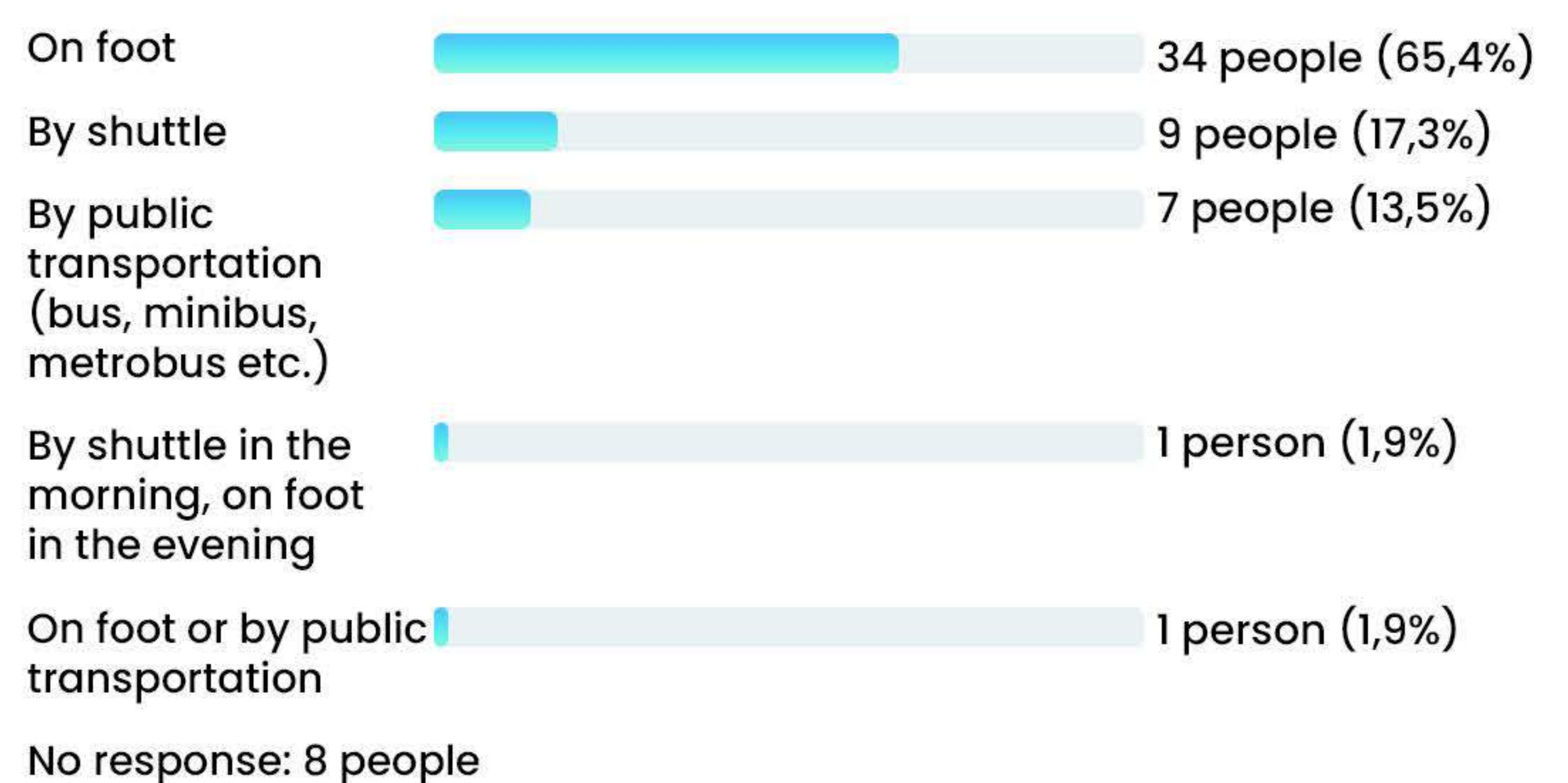
Istanbul has a central position in the textile industry in Turkey both in terms of its role in production and its function at trade stages. A significant number of small-scale textile workshops in Istanbul are established in residential areas. They are located in neighborhoods especially in the outskirts of the city and are operating in the basements of apartments. While this situation facilitates the access of the workforce to the workshops, it also causes the worker profile to be young women and men living in these neighborhoods (Dedeoğlu, 2012).

In the field study conducted in Istanbul, it was also observed that the majority of the workers went to work on foot. While 65,4% of the interviewees went to work on foot, 17,3% took the shuttle, and 17,3% used public transportation. As a result, it would not be wrong to assume that workers generally resided near their workplaces. This result may also be understood with the fact that as the workplaces were small workshops they did not provide their workers a shuttle service for transportation, and that the wages are low in general. Therefore, textile workers either work at workshops that are close to their abodes or choose to live in places that are close to their workshops to avoid commuting cost.

Most of the workers interviewed (44,8%) were industrial sewers. This group was followed by the

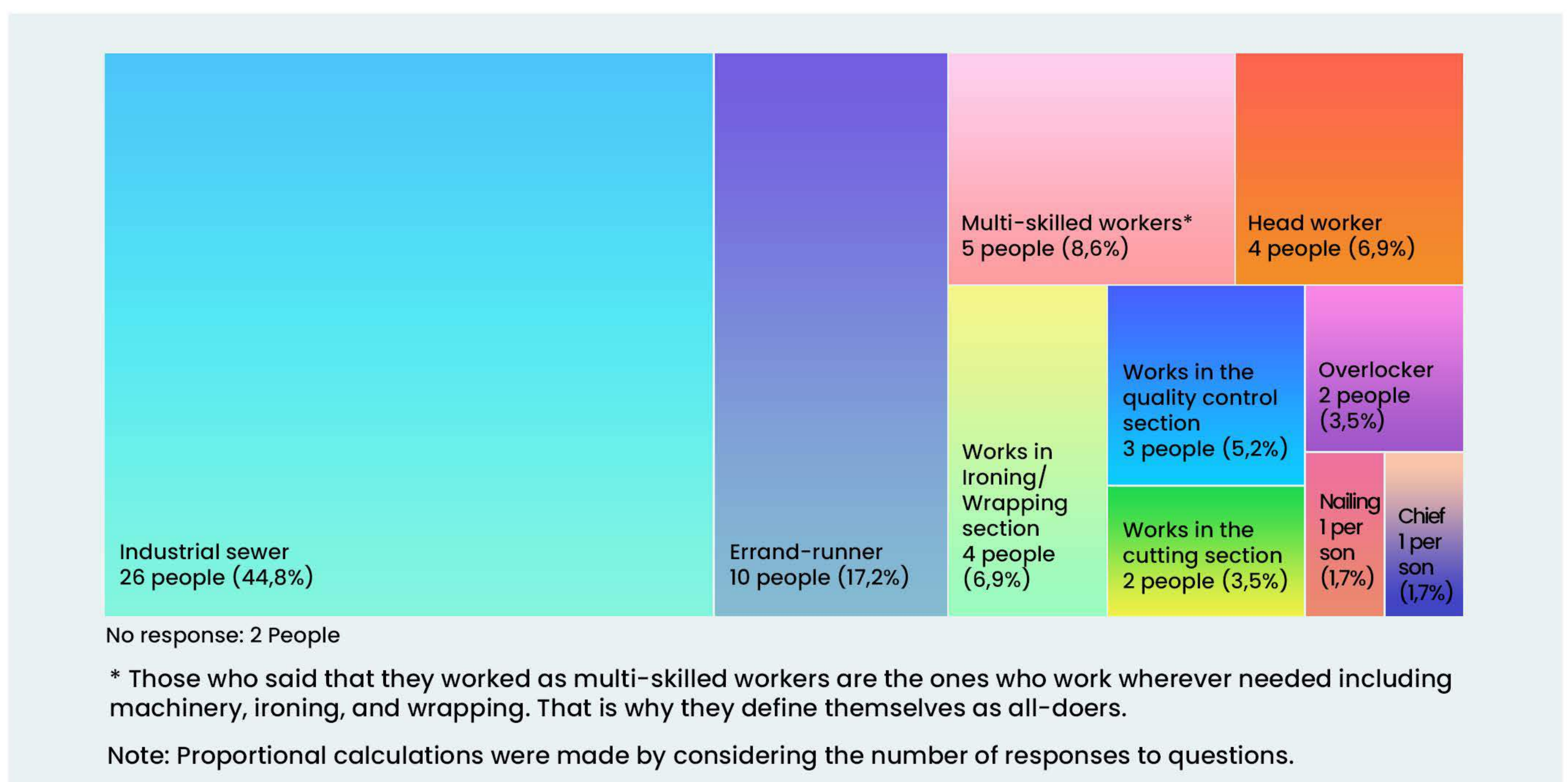
errand-runners (17,2%). Those working as industrial sewers were relatively more experienced in the industry, while the errand-runners were young and had entered the industry recently. A great majority of the interviewees (93,3%) stated that they did not take work home<sup>6</sup>. This significant home-based piecework is very common in the textile industry, and indicates that there is another army of workers doing home-based piecework and linked to the industry (Dedeoğlu, 2020).

#### Commuting to work



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

#### Job Position



<sup>6</sup> There were a total of three interviewees who said they took work home. While two of them worked as all-doers, one of them did not tell the position they worked in. When they were asked whether they received any help doing this work, they answered "No."



## The Size of the Workplace and Product Variety

In the field research, interviewees were asked several questions to determine the working conditions in their workplaces. Although the workers interviewed mainly worked in small and medium-sized workshops, some interviewees were working in large workplaces with over 100 employees. 32,7% of the interviewees worked in small workshops with less than 10 employees. The rate of those working in larger places with over 100 employees in the sample was 18,2%.

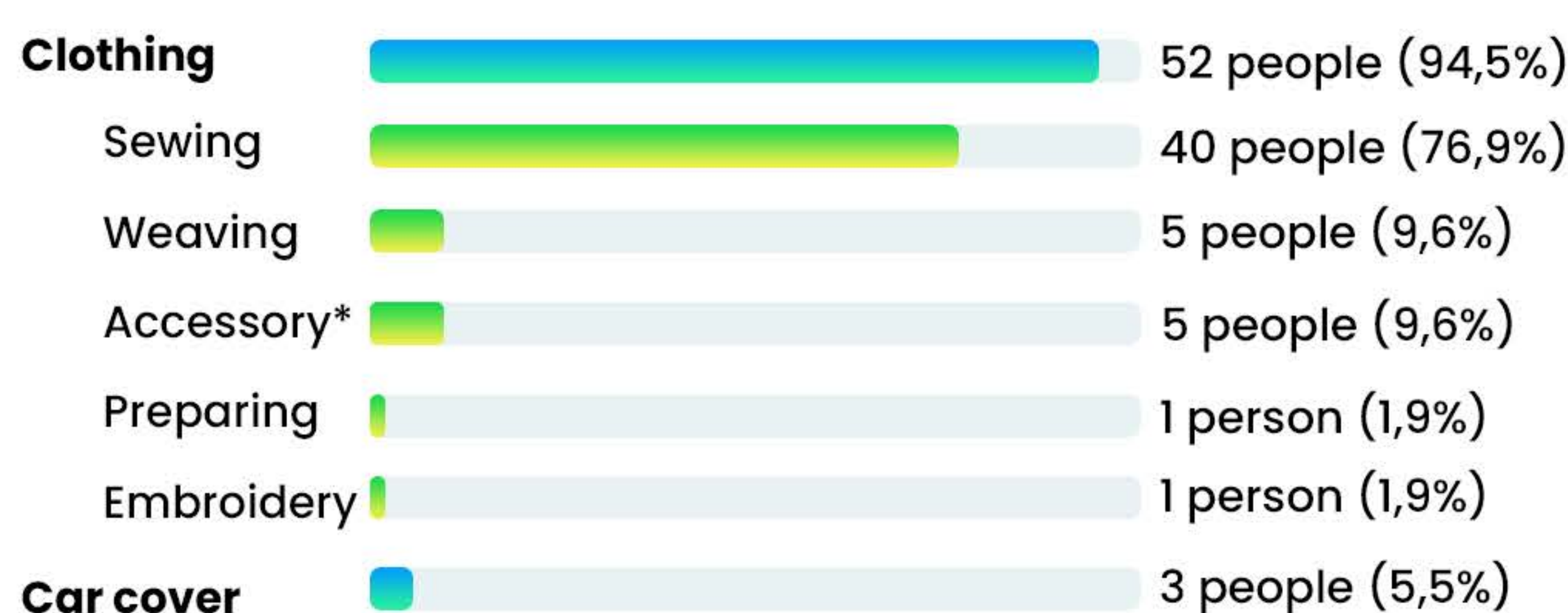
### Total number of Employees in Workplaces



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

The product type examined in the study shows that workers mainly worked on clothing. Only three of the workers (5,5%) interviewed worked in a factory which produced car covers. Apart from this, the interviewees worked in clothing workshops. It was clear in the interviews that sewing was the main job in the clothing workshops (76,9%). In addition, in a small number of workshops, preparation works (challenging parts of a work such as pocket sewing delivered from large workshops), weaving, embroidery, accessory (snap fasteners and nailing), ironing and wrapping works were carried out.

### What is Produced in the Workplace



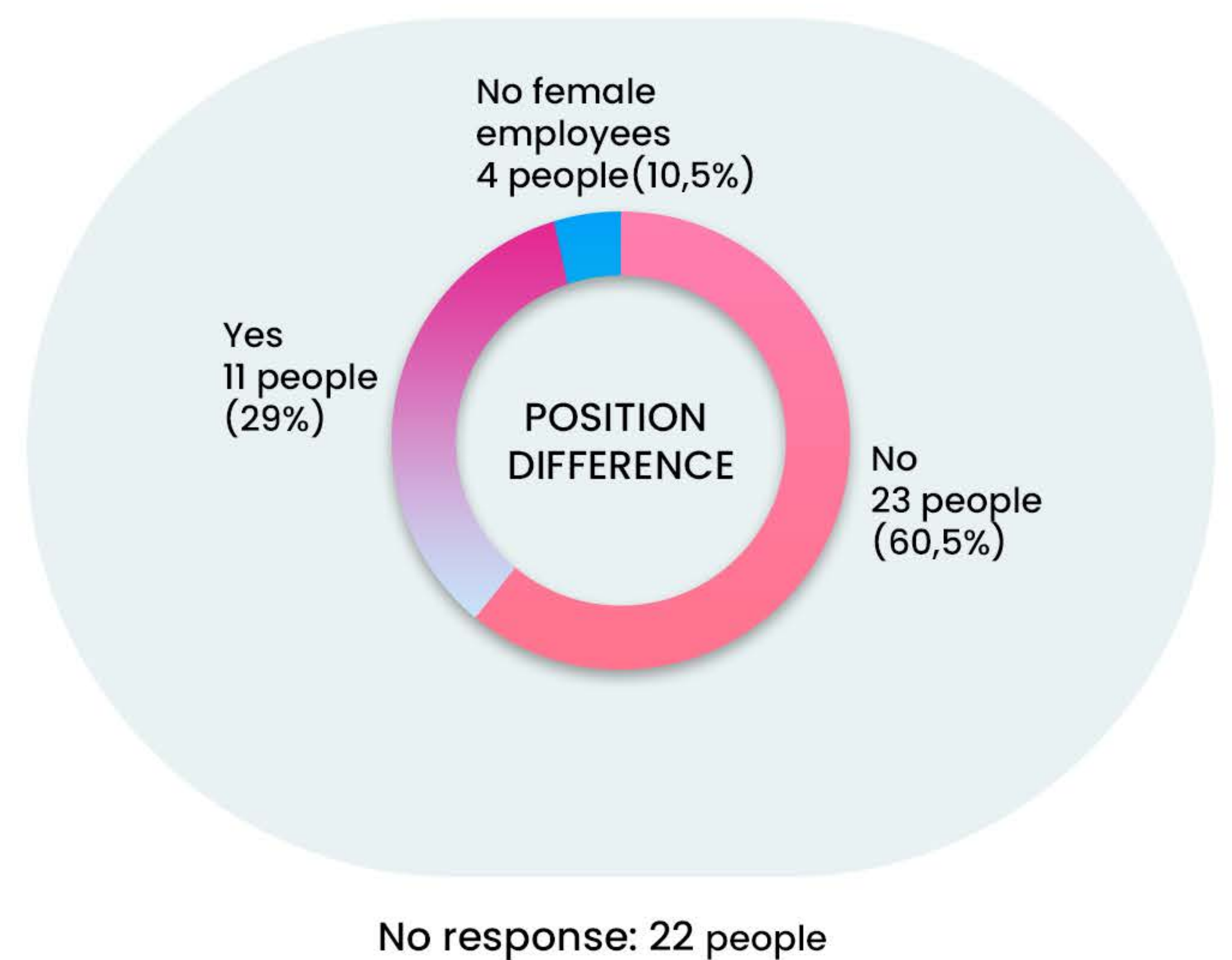
\* Sewing buttons and nailing/Wrapping and ironing

Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

## Gender-based Division of Labor

The interviews revealed that in some of the workplaces there is job-based gender discrimination. 23 of the workers (67,7%) stated that men and women worked in different positions in their workplaces. Those who made the statement of difference in positions between male and female employees further added that this difference generally depended on how much physical strength the work required. Accordingly, women worked in relatively lighter jobs (quality control, overlocking etc.), while men worked in heavier jobs (errand-runners, industrial sewers etc.) Cihan (38) said, *“Men do heavy work, and women do simple work”* about women and men working in different positions in the workplace. Unlike this common comment, Ali (21) stated that *“Lockstitch industrial sewers earn more; because lockstitch sewing machines are hard to use, women work as overlockers, it is a little easier. Employers also prefer this to pay women less”*. It would not be wrong to conclude that the wages in relatively simple jobs are lower and that the wages increase as the work gets harder. As women were mainly employed in simple jobs, they were paid lower wages.

## Whether there is a position difference between man and woman in the workplace



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.



## Occupational Health and Safety Risks

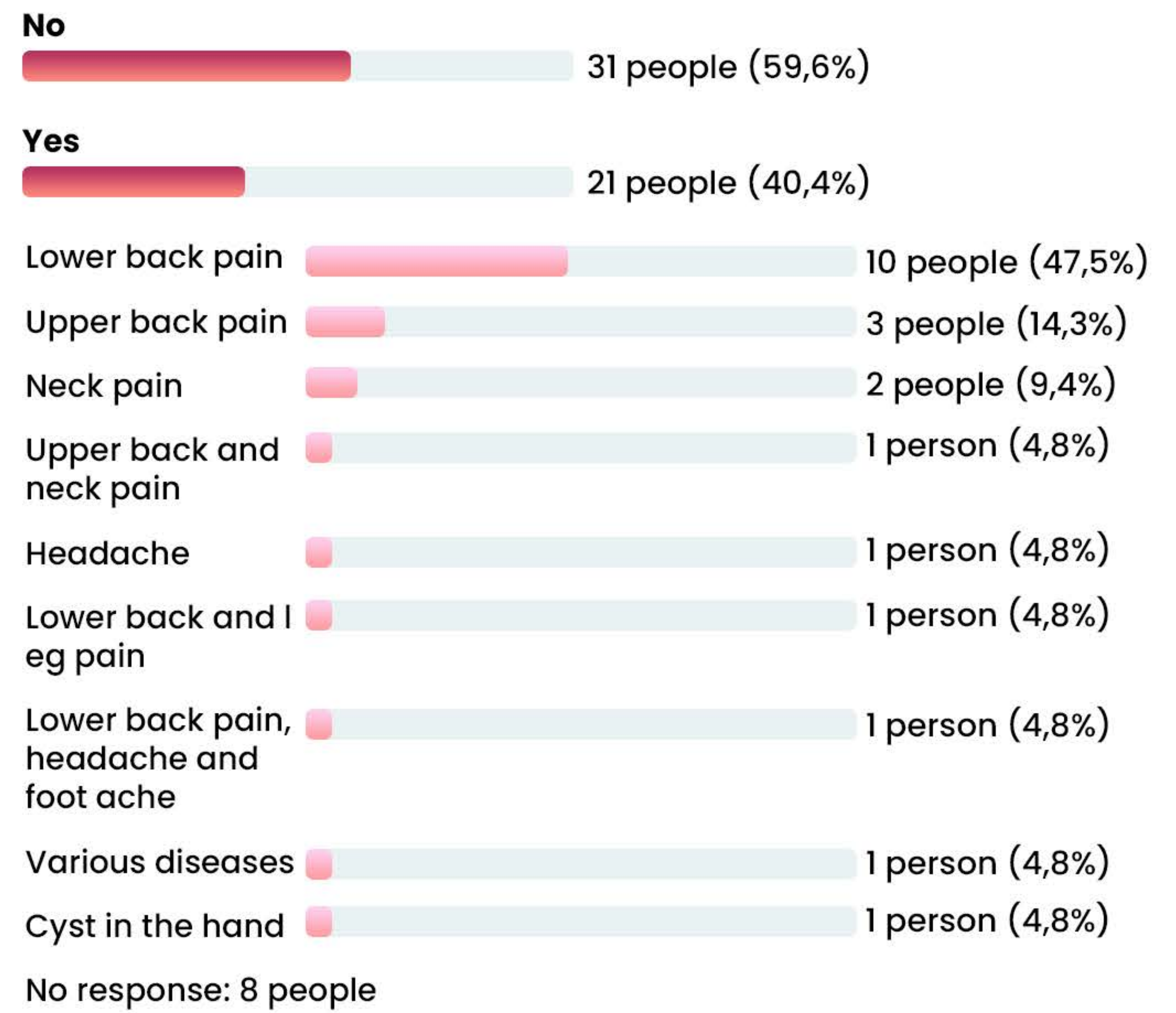
As a labor intensive sector, textile production requires long hours of work, has certain occupational health and safety risks, and threatens the health and safety of workers. Despite being so, the majority of the interviewees (about 60%) did not report any experience of physical problems/discomfort while doing their jobs. Yet, it was also observed that industrial sewers experienced certain physical discomfort such as lower and upper back pain, and neck pain because of sitting at the machine all day, while errand-runners had these problems as they had to stand up all day long. İlknur, (41) who worked in a textile factory as a rubber machine operator had a cyst in her wrist and had surgery in 2016. When she returned to the workplace after the operation, she was assigned to a lighter machine for 2-3 days, but as her replacement at the rubber machine had made a mistake, she had to return to her old job again. *“Still, I was doing my job fondly because I love working and I need to work”*, she said and added that she still was suffering from pains.

For some workers, the work they performed presented no difficulty. For some others doing different jobs there were particular difficulties. Sevda (18) who worked in the cutting department in a textile workshop in Bağcılar, said *“It is very busy”* when asked about the hardest part of her job. She added *“I cannot answer my mobile phone even if someone calls while I am working. It gets very busy, and answering the phone is forbidden”*. 18-year-old Ahmet, who worked as an errand-runner in a textile workshop in Bağcılar, said the hard part of his job was standing all day and the psychological pressure of the headworkers. He said his pay was cut in some circumstances and followed, *“When things backlog, they make us rush as if we had all the responsibility. It’s troublesome if we cannot finish the job before the deadline or if there is a mistake in the work”*. Sinan (25), an industrial sewer in a workshop in Güngören, said that the hardest part of his job was the danger that the machine he was operating was posing. He explained, *“You’re very likely to get your finger caught up in a high-pressure machine”*. He also stated he had his fingers caught in the machine three times before and resumed, *“If you get your finger caught, you won’t be able to work for 1-1,5 months”*.

Our field study includes findings which show that occupational health and safety risks are mostly associated with unregistered employment but evidently workers with trade union membership are better protected. For example, 48-year-old Mustafa (an industrial sewer, but works as a union representative now) worked in an automotive textile factory and was a union member. When asked about the most difficult part of his job, he said *“Actually, everything would be harder if we weren’t organized. It is almost impossible for a worker to get what s/he wants, but we know that we’ll achieve anything in this workplace because we are union members and organized. Organizational awareness has quite settled in this workplace. The awareness has quite settled in this workplace. The most difficult thing is*

*to ask for a day-off to take care of a business outside because the work is done on belts and the vacancy of a worker disrupts the production. That’s why they aren’t flexible about our day-offs.”*

## Any Physical Discomfort Experienced During Work



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

One of the important security measures in the textile industry is keeping doors unlocked while the workers are working as the locked doors pose a serious risk to workers’ life in a possible fire. When asked, the majority of workers interviewed (95,7%) stated that the doors were left open, or not locked even if they were closed. Two workers (Berkay 18 years old; Engin 19 years old) working in a shop with 70 people producing combed cotton (children’s wear) for a big brand in Bağcılar, said that the doors were closed while working. Apparently, 70 workers were working in life-threatening conditions in case of a fire. This condition does not comply with the fair and equitable working conditions specified in Article 31 of the European Convention on human rights. According to the Article in question, *“Every worker has the right to working conditions which respect his or her health, safety and dignity”*. The condition also means the violation of the provision that everyone has the right to life stated in the Article 2 of the same contract. Violations of rights in this regard may result in the termination of the right to life. In Article 4 of the Occupational Health and Safety Law No. 6331 it says that *“The employer has an obligation to ensure the occupational health and safety of the employees.”* The aforementioned condition also means that the condition also means that the employer’s duty of occupational safety requirement<sup>7</sup> was not fulfilled, thus is violating the Occupational Health and Safety Law.

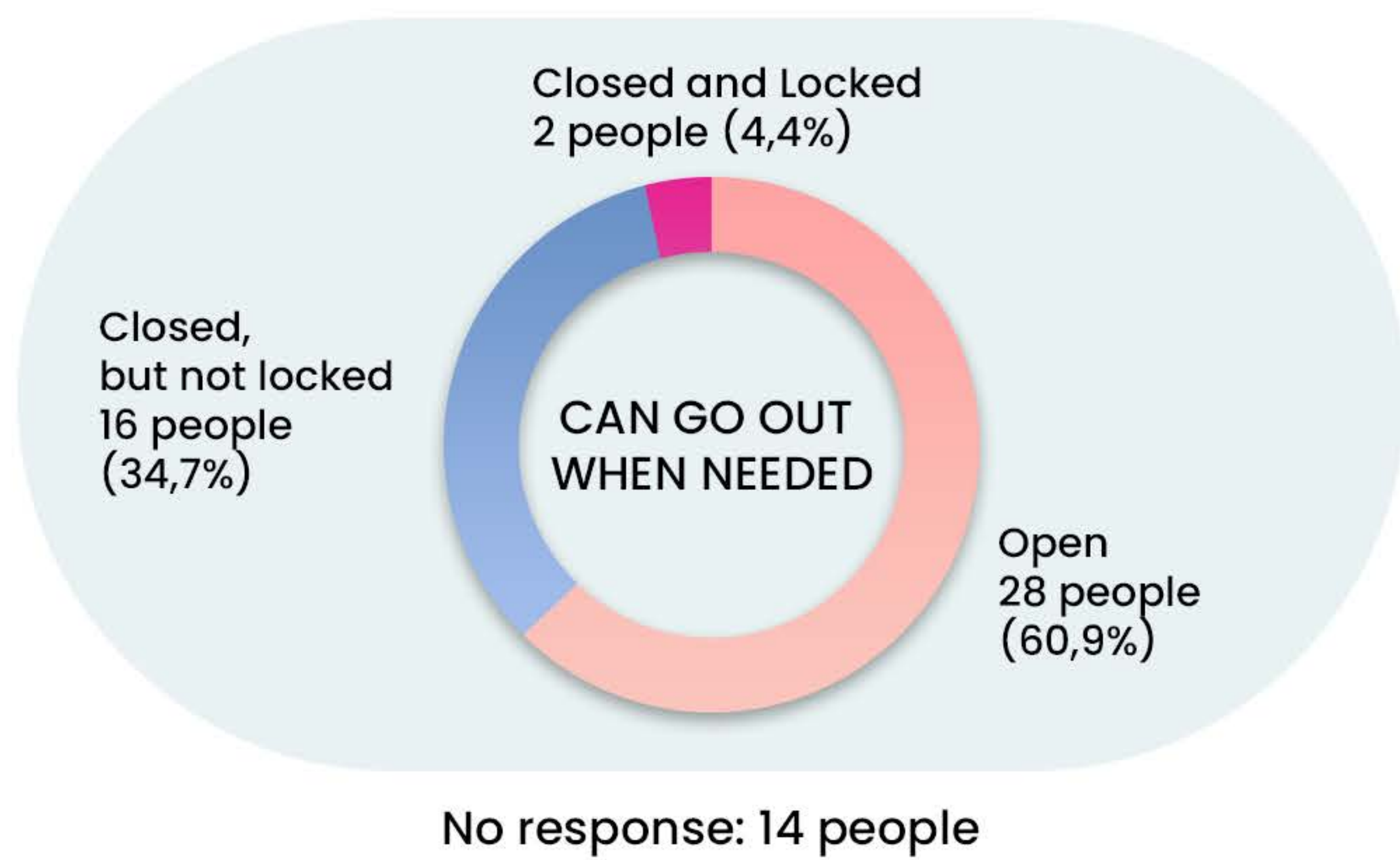
It is a legal obligation to provide Occupational Health and Safety Training to employees in the

<sup>7</sup> Job security denotes all of the planned work done to prevent risky and dangerous work conditions that might arise from various reasons and are harmful for health, work or the workplace.

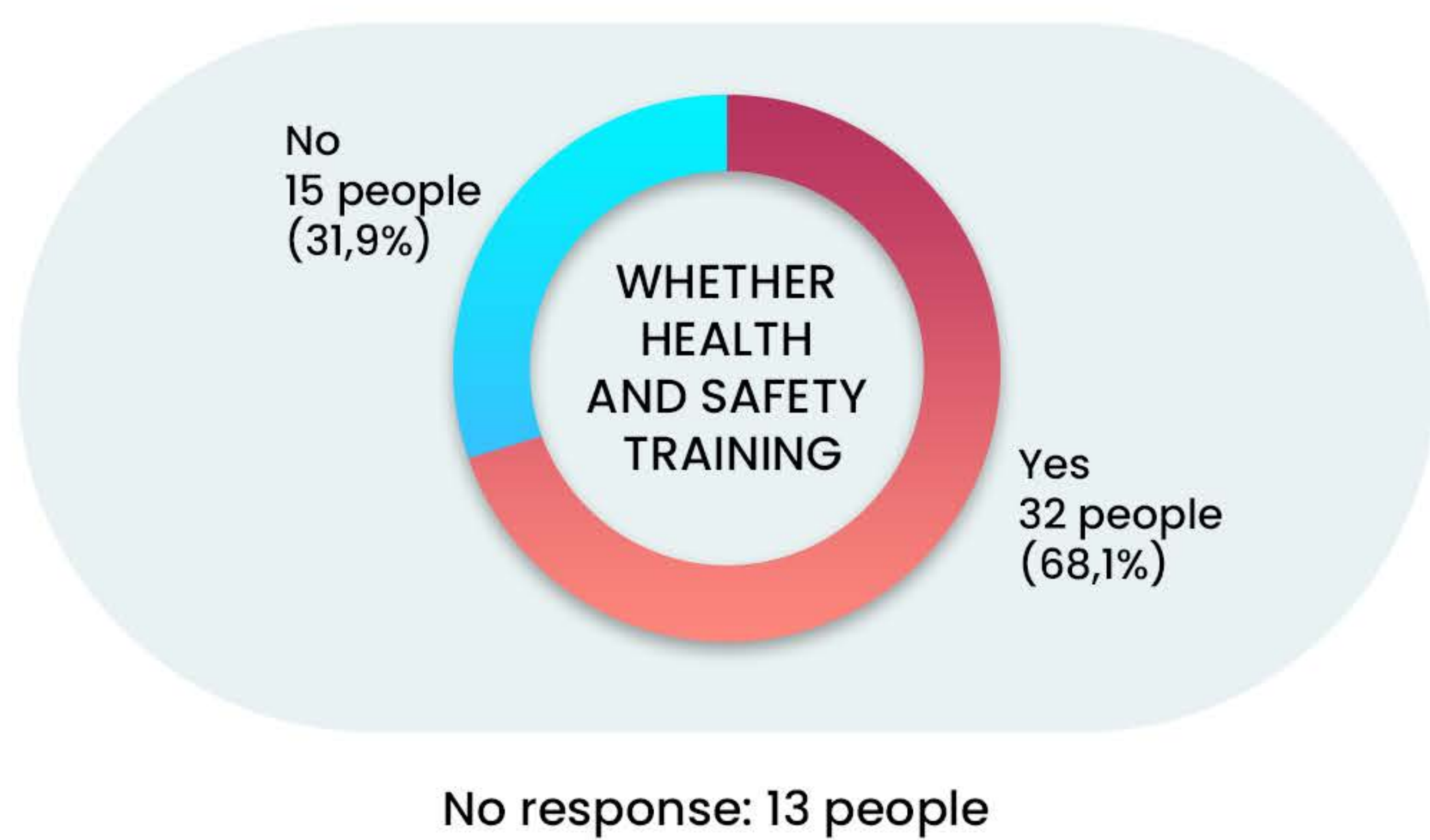


workplaces in accordance with provisions of the Occupational Health and Safety Law No. 6331, and the Regulation on the Procedures and Principles of Occupational Health and Safety Training of Employees published in the official Gazette on 15.05.2013. Employers are obliged to provide these training sessions. While 15 (31,9%) of the workers interviewed received Occupational Health and Safety Training in their workplaces, the rest reported that they did not. Tuna (18), who worked without insurance in a workshop that manufactures combed clothes for various brands in Bağcılar, stated that he did not receive training as follows: *"I didn't, but insured workers did"*. Uninsured workers are ignored and stripped of their rights here, as in every other field.

### Whether the doors are open at the workplace while working/Whether workers can go out when needed



### Whether Health and Safety Training was Received



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

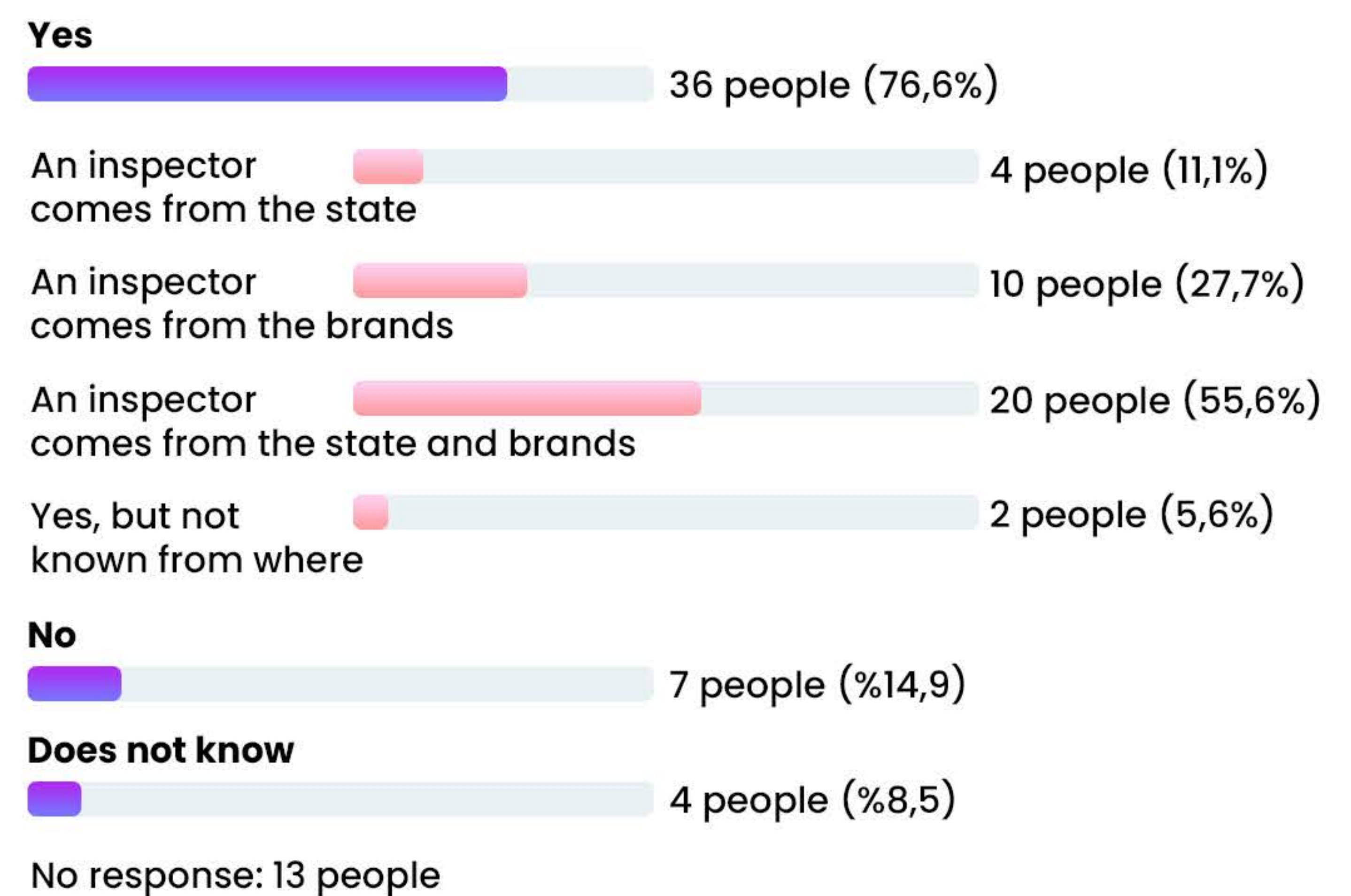
### Workplace Inspections

Another question asked to understand the conditions of the workplaces was whether there had been any state or brand inspections. Thirty-six (76,6%) of the interviewed workers stated that

inspectors from the state and/or brands came to their workplaces. However, as inspections are necessary to check the compliance of the working conditions with the standards and to make the workplaces improve the conditions if there are any insufficiencies, it was seen that this was hardly the case in practice. Some of the workers who said that the state sent inspectors to their workplaces mentioned that this was only a financial inspection. Sevgi said that the state inspector had gone to her workplace and followed, *"The inspector just checked the tax and left."* Gülay, who worked in a combed cotton-garment workshop in Bağcılar indicated that *"A state inspector comes to the workplace once a month, and there is a strict inspection at those times"*. When she was asked to elaborate on it, she said *"Masks are put on, tweezers and scissors are attached to machines, informal workers are taken out..."* When asked whether she, who worked without insurance, was taken out as well, she replied, *"No, I wasn't and that is because I got daily insurance. Actually, I don't have insurance, but they arranged a daily insurance on the day the inspector arrives. But then, they terminated my employment officially."*

Zehra, who worked in a factory that produces disposable seat covers for well-known brands, said, *"In the past, customers were coming... Before they arrived, the surrounding areas would be cleaned carefully, things that needed repair were repaired. When they arrived...and after getting the approval, everything would return to the old routine. We were working in the same way, with broken stuff, until the customer came back to visit again"*. These points expressed by the interviewees show that the inspections do not serve their purpose and are ineffective. The inefficiency of the inspections impedes the protection of workers and the improvement of working conditions in the industry.

### Whether an inspector from the state or brands comes to the workplace



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.



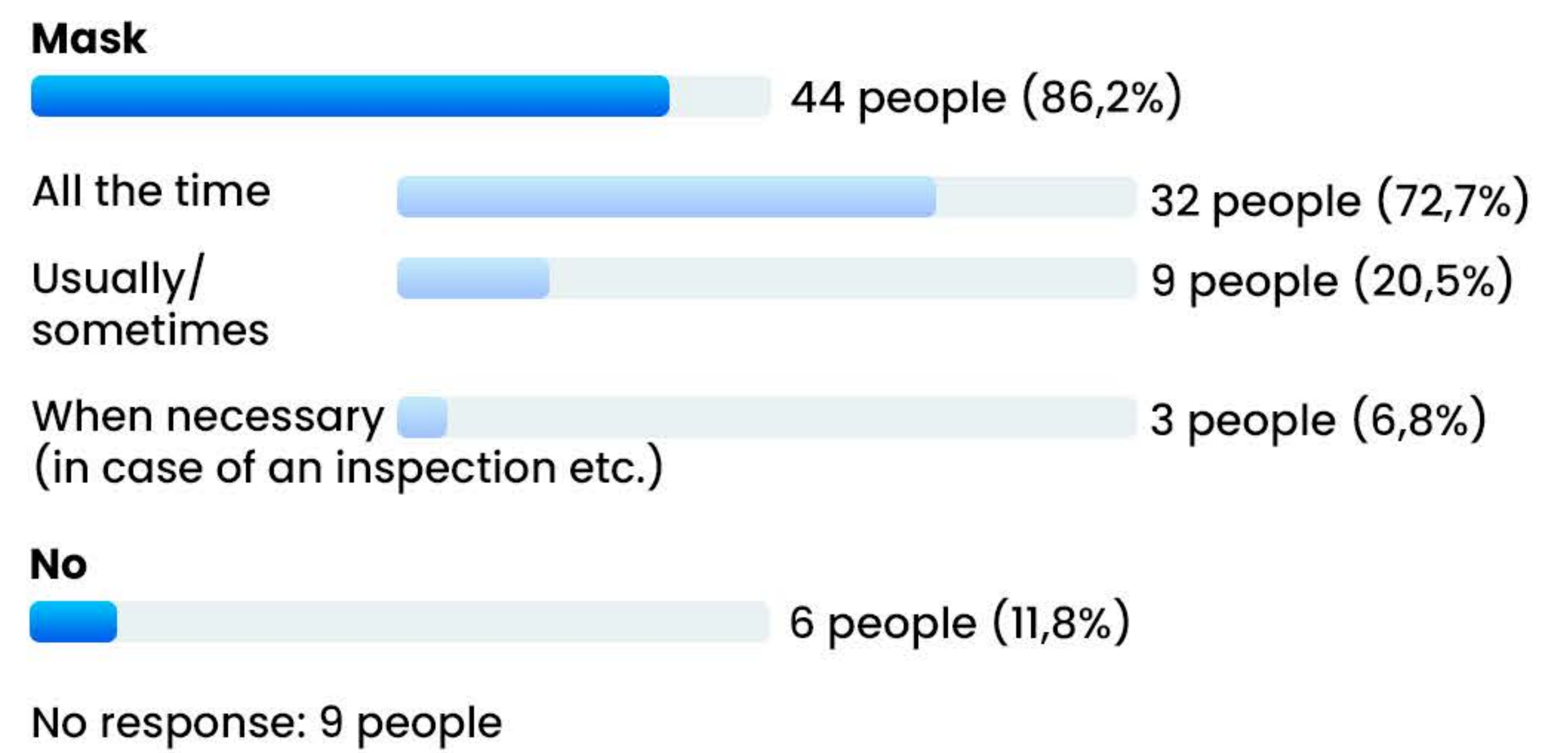
## Use of Protective Equipment and Masks

Most of the interviewees stated that they wore masks while working. Hasibe (46) said that she wore masks at the workplace but she had problems obtaining them. Hasibe said *"We wear masks at work. While the disposable masks have to be changed every 3-4 hours, we are provided with only one a day"*. She summarized the situation as follows: *"There were times when no masks were given as well... We are trying to get through the pandemic by buying additional masks by our own means"*.

Yet, both the observations in the field and the interviewee statements saying that they wore masks *"sometimes"* or *"when necessary"* reveal that the masks are not always worn. The rate of those who said that masks were constantly worn in the workplace was 62,8%. The interviewees who said that they did not wear a mask at all or not at all times listed excuses such as working with less people in the workplace, and the job being unsuitable for it. Ali (21), industrial sewer in a small workshop in Bağcılar said, *"We used to wear it when inspectors came in my previous workplace, but nobody wears one*

*where I work now"*. He added *"You can't wear it anyway. You can't breathe because we work very fast all the time"*. Nurten (38), who worked in a weaving workshop, stated that she could not always wear a mask due to health problems and added, *"I wear a mask once in a while, but I can't wear it much since I have asthma"*.

## Whether protective equipment is used in the workplace (mask, gloves etc.)



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

## 4. Wages and Wage Payment Systems

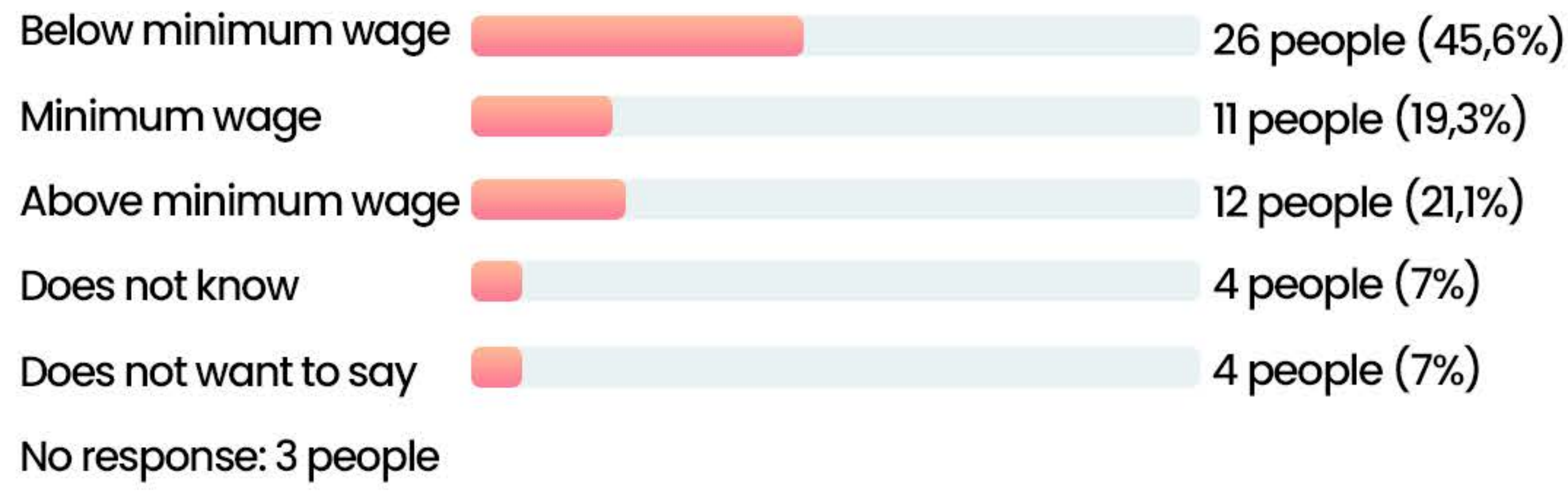
Low wages in the textile industry is a well-known phenomenon. Field research findings have also supported this. Nearly 46% of the workers interviewed stated that their wage was below the minimum wage (2943 TL; approximately 290 Euros). The wages could go down as low as 1600 or 1700 TL a month. 19,3% of interviewees said they earned the minimum wage, and 21,1% said they received above the minimum wage. Only two workers declared that they received 4000 TL a month, which was the highest amount encountered. Some interviewees declared that they received a higher wage before COVID-19, but their income decreased during the pandemic. Samet, a 25-year-old textile worker, earned 5000 TL before the pandemic, yet his monthly income dropped to 2500 TL. Some interviewees stated that their wages decreased because they benefited from the short-time work allowance that came in effect during the pandemic. Hüseyin (48), one of those workers receiving short-time work allowance, said, *"We were going to get a wage of 4300 TL, but we couldn't since we have started working part time since January 7. We received 3100 TL in December"*. His colleagues, Nazife (46) and Safiye (41) were in the same situation. Nazife said that her employer had applied for short-time work allowance for the fifth time, and she did not receive a full pay for the last 1,5-2 years. She followed, *"So, I can't tell you how much I earn because it changes. Of course, we were making good money when there was overtime, but unfortunately our wages have been very irregular for very long"*. She continued, *"We are both seriously*

*short of money, and we don't know how we'll end up"*. Safiye too says that the wage she received and the short time working allowance together was half her normal wage. Before part time work, she had been receiving minimum wage. She stated, *"With overtime work, we could get a little more than the minimum wage"*. After entering the partial work phase, half of her wage was paid by the state through short time work allowance practice and half by the employer on the basis of the days worked. However, at the time of our interview, she stated that she only received short time working allowance as a wage, as the production had stopped at the factory.

In the sample, there were three people who explicitly stated that they did not know how much they earned as they had started the work recently. 18-year-old Halil did not know the amount he would earn as he had started to work a few days ago. The head worker with him said *"His wage will be clear after two weeks at the latest. If the boss likes his job, he'll get 1700 TL"*. There was also an interviewer who was an immigrant and we think was not aware how much he earned. When asked about it, Ali who is 24 from Pakistan and married with two children, replied, *"A lot."* He said, *"The boss gives me as much as I need"*. Consequently, it was seen that four interviewees in total did not know how much they earned per month. This information shows us that the precarious and harsh nature of work accompanied with low wages in the textile industry aggravates the working conditions in the industry.



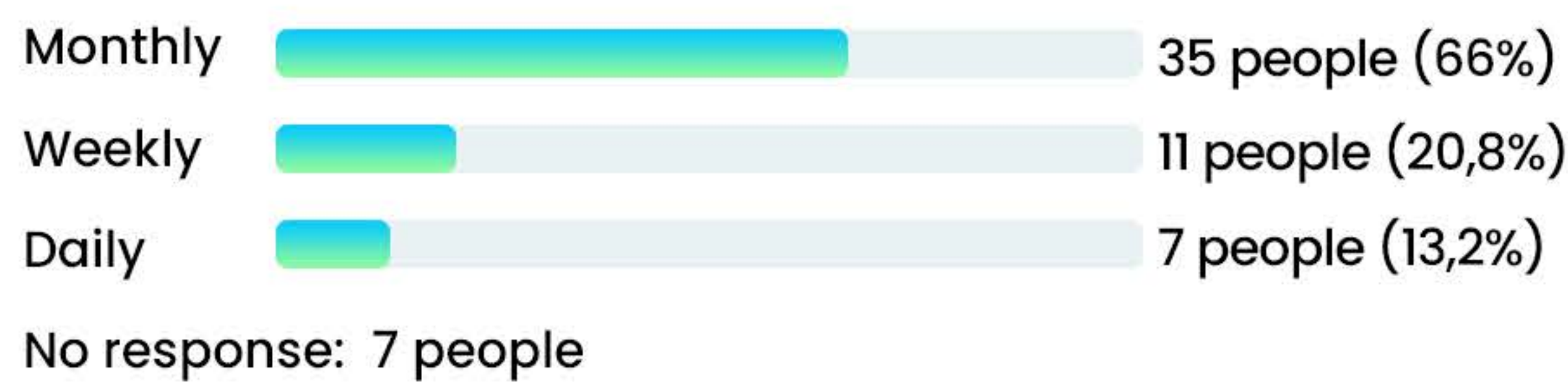
## Average wage rate



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

Most of the workers interviewed in the field study (66%) received their wage on a monthly basis. Similarly, most of the interviewees (about 80%) stated that they received their salaries regularly. Ten workers reported irregularity in payments and nine out of these expressed that they experienced a delay in their wage payments because of the pandemic. Hüseyin, who worked as an industrial sewer in a workshop conducting the preparation work for bigger workshops in Bağcılar, stated, *"I got my wage regularly until my last one, yet I will get it a week late this month because there have been problems with the job"*. When asked what the problem was, he said *"The market is stagnant these days. Therefore, subcontractors reduce their price to get the job. So, even if we work, the boss doesn't earn, and because he can't earn, he pays us late"*. Kerem also stated that he could not get his wage regularly although the money from the unemployment fund was paid on time. The amount the employer had to pay was delayed. Based on the contract, wages should be paid between the 5th and 10th of every month, but he said they were never paid on these days.

## Payment pattern

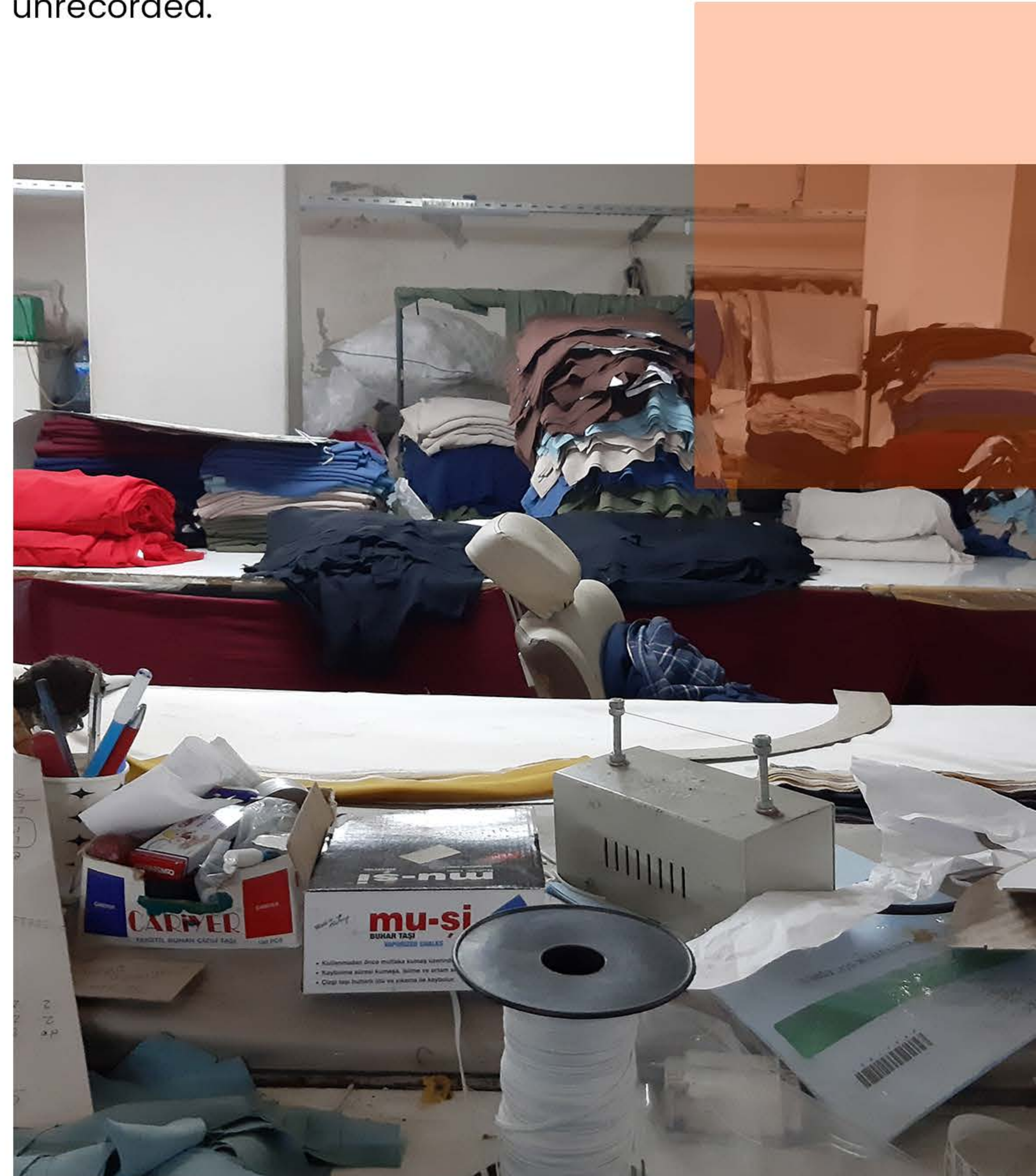


## Whether paid regularly



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

It was observed that approximately 74% of the interviewees received their wages cash-in-hand, not from the bank. This finding is consistent with the finding regarding being insured as an employee. As most of the workers were unregistered, they received cash-in-hand wages. In Article 10 of the "Regulation on Payment of Wages, Premiums, Bonuses and All Kinds of Benefits of This Quality through Banks", which was published in the Official Gazette and came into force on November 18, 2008 by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, it is stated that *"The employers, in which the provisions of the Labor Law are applied, who employ at least 10 workers, they are obliged to pay the net amount of any payments they will make to the employees through banks."* In other words, workplaces with 10 or more employees must transact wage and all other payments (such as premiums, bonuses etc.) through the bank. However, in the sample, regardless of the size of the enterprise, it was seen that workers were predominantly receiving their wages cash-in-hand. Ayfer (24), who worked in a workshop and had social security, stated that although she received her wage from the bank, she got her overtime paid in cash. In usual circumstances, the employer must be fined for the infraction of rules in accordance with the relevant regulation. However, workers did not have the opportunity to make a claim in this regard, as in many other issues, in order to bring in an income and/or because they already accepted unregistered employment. The fact was they were employed informally with low wages, and received their money unrecorded.





## The wage is received

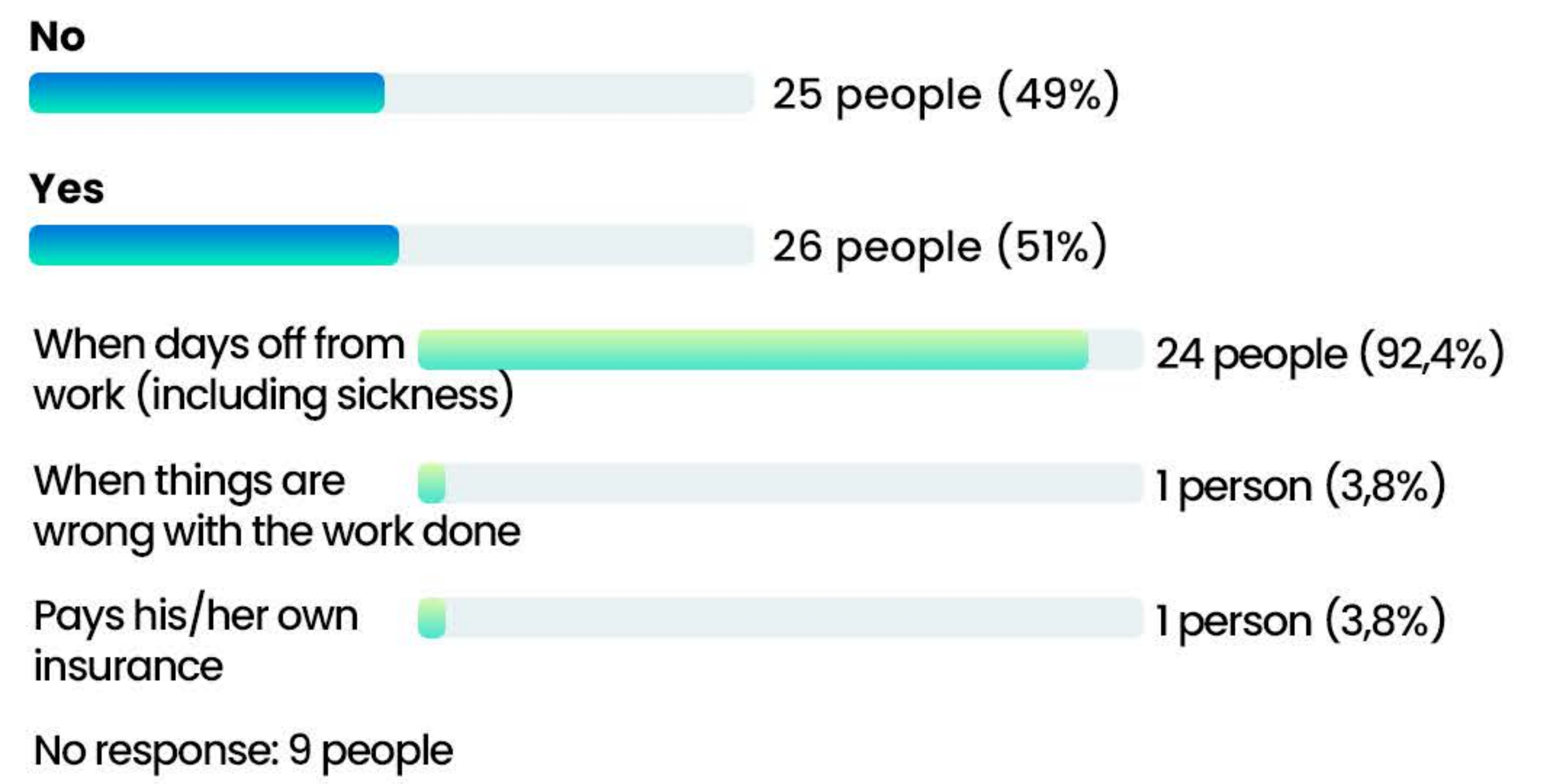


Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

In the sample, the proportion of those who said there was no deduction of wages was almost equal to those who said there was (49% and 51% respectively). The majority of those who said their wages were cut for the days they did not/could not go to work (including the days of illness and curfew). One of the interviewees, Suat (41), who worked as combed cotton worker for a well-known brand, stated that there was a deduction in his wage when he had to stay at home because of the curfew in the New Year's Eve and resumed, *"We have no social rights here"*. Serdar and Faruk (both 18 years old), who worked in the same textile workshop in Bağcılar, also said that the days they did not go to work were cut from their wages. Serdar added, *"Even if I'm missing for an hour, that hour will be deducted from my wage"*. Many other workers also stated that the employers cut their wages in case of illness, even if they got a medical report. In the relevant

articles of the Labor Law (Article 38), situations in which an employer can cut an employee's wage are specified and limited. The employer cannot deduct the employee's wage arbitrarily or lower the amount unilaterally. This situation gives the employee the right to terminate the employment justifiably. However, as mentioned before, since the majority of the workers work unregistered, they cannot have any claims regarding the issue. They have to agree with the employer's practice.

## Deduction from the wage



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.





## 5. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Textile Industry Workforce

With regards to the impact of the pandemic on the labor market, ILO's (2021) report titled *COVID-19 and the World of Work* lists the general effects as follows: workplace closures affected 93% of the workers in the world; working hours decreased by a loss of 8,8% in global working hours; the rates of unemployment and inactivity increased while participation in labor force decreased within the working population that are over the age of 15. Consequently, serious income losses have been experienced for a vast majority of workers. One of the most important consequences of the pandemic on the labor market has been the major shift to remote working in many sectors. Yet many jobs in the services and manufacturing industry cannot be carried out remotely; thus employees working in these areas have to continue their work by taking many risks. *The pandemic threatens not only the health of workers, but also their jobs and income, and increases workers' anxiety levels.*

Various sources confirmed the effects ILO assessed had also been experienced in the textile sector. Many workplaces were closed in the early days of the pandemic resulting in a standstill in the orders. In the first months of the outbreak, the textile industry increased its production by the shift of orders from China to Turkey. However, this shift was reversed and the sector was deeply affected in the following months. In other words, the negative effects of the pandemic were experienced on the textile industry at a later phase. The textile manufacturer, who makes 70% of the exports to Europe, stated that a loss of 9-15% was experienced in the sector after the virus affected Europe<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, there was news in the media pointing out the hard times textile industry was having due to the closure of the borders with many countries, difficulties experienced in customers' access to market and in the delivery of cargos, and underlining the need of government's support to the textile industry.<sup>9</sup>

**Mustafa Gültepe, President of İstanbul Apparel Exporters' Association (İHKİB) summarized the situation in the industry during the pandemic with the following words:<sup>10</sup>**

//

*'The customer said, 'Don't load the goods, keep them waiting'. The goods that we didn't start producing have been cancelled. Other orders are also on hold. Exports to Europe increased by 7% in January and February, but decreased by 9-15% in March. Our capacity utilization, which reached 85,6% in December, 2019, fell below 30% in April, 2020. If no solution is produced for the pandemic in a month, we expect a 15% decrease in April...The less consumption, the less export...'*

In its report in 2020, the Global Industrial Workers Union (IndustriALL) stated that major brands and retailers not only cancelled their orders, but also denied responsibility for the products that had already been produced. They used the emergency provisions in the contracts to stop shipments and avoid payment for the goods they had ordered. Accordingly, this situation causes the goods produced in the factories to go unsold. In addition, the factory could be unable to sell them to the customer who ordered them, and in most cases, the employer is unable to pay the wages of the workers.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the decision to

cease production or to suspend it for a certain period of time in some workplaces has been taken due to the shrinkage of production, not for workers' health and safety in general. Our findings have shown that this process affects the workers the most. Nine out of sixty textile workers interviewed during the field study in İstanbul textile industry continued to work nonstop during the pandemic. Fifty people, on the other hand, stated a cease of work for a period ranging from one week to five months. This situation should be considered as a compulsory break from work because it was mainly due to workplace closures. Workers cannot work. When employers stopped working due to the

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/tekstilde-virus-yangini-1727484>, Date of access:16.03.2020.

<sup>9</sup> <https://ilkha.com/ekonomi/tekstil-sektoru-corona-virusu-nedeniyle-zor-gunler-geciriyor-118488>, Date of access: 20.03.2020.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/tekstilde-virus-yangini-1727484>, Date of access: 16.03.2020.

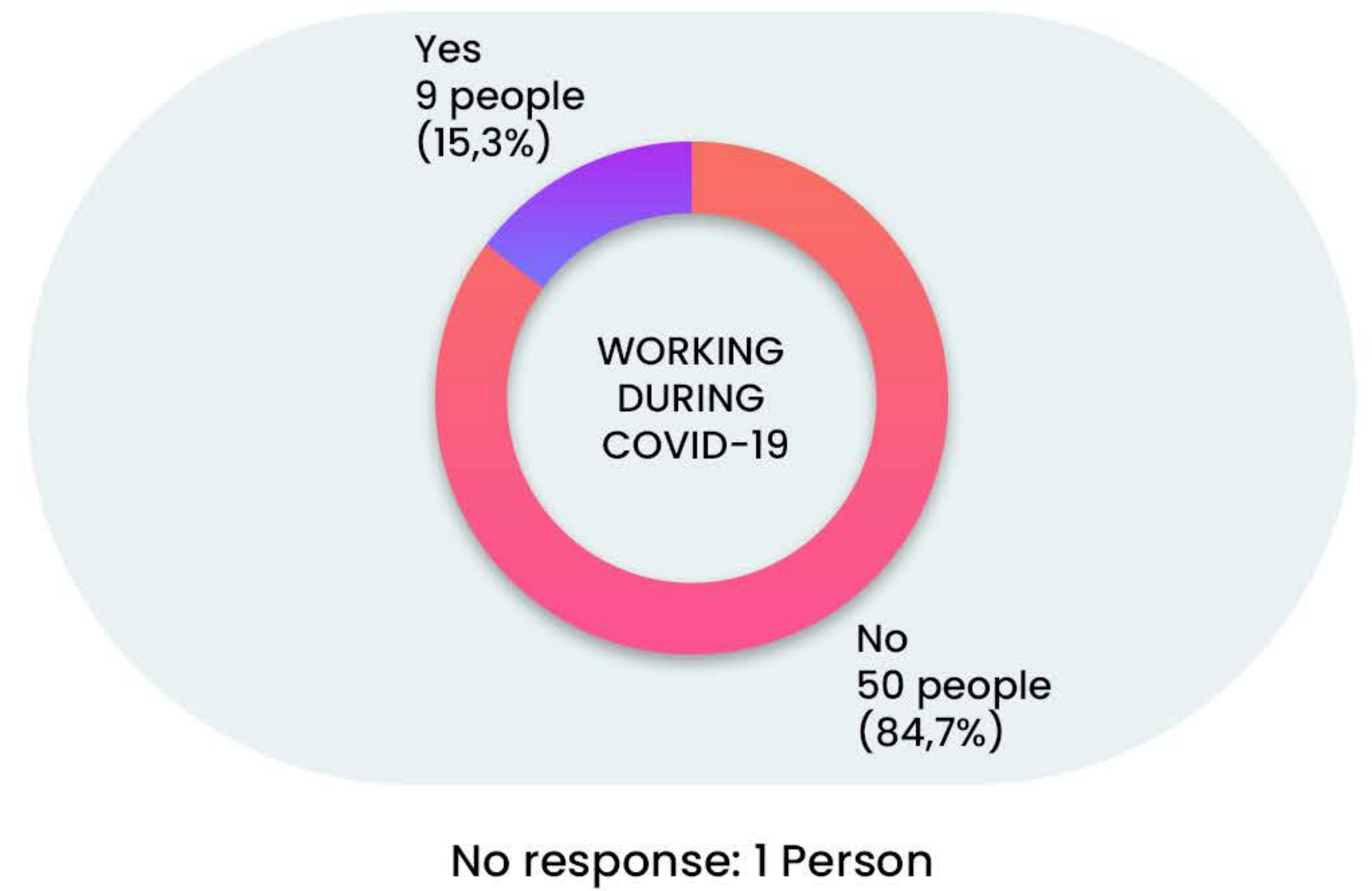


stagnation, employees had to take a break from work as well.

The closure of workplaces/interruption of production due to the stagnation increased the financial grievances of workers. Zehra (44), did not work for three months during the pandemic period. When she was asked about the reason, she said, "There was no work to do, so I didn't work." Serkan (25), who works in another workshop, said, "It wouldn't be a lie if I told you I almost did no work throughout the pandemic period." He worked two days a week because there was very little work to do. He followed, "On average, I worked for two days, but when one calculates it in terms of the wage I got, it's not even daily wage." Two of the five workshops he worked daily were closed during the pandemic period, and had been that way for four months. Because the other three have been running low on jobs, he said, "I can only work with one workshop." Similar to Serkan, Halim (42), an industrial sewer and a head worker, stated that the number of working days had decreased due to the decline in the volume of work.

wasn't much work after the pandemic started, the workplace reduced the working days to two days a week.

## Working during COVID-19



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

## 6. Unpaid Leaves, Short Time Working Allowance and Dismissals

Various measures have been taken to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on labor markets in the world and in Turkey. A number of programs ranging from the regulation of working hours to income supports to protect workers from income losses have been implemented. The governmental measures taken to ameliorate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic produced varying effects on the labor market. While all agents in the market (employers, the self-employed, home-based employees, wage earners etc.) have been affected in one way or another, wage earners were affected more negatively. The government took a clear stance on the side of the employers during the pandemic. With the introduction of the Short Time Work Allowance program it opened the Unemployment Fund to plunder. With the introduction of a law the unpaid leave, which was not included in the Labor Law, was legitimized. The government prohibited dismissals throughout the pandemic, yet at the same time forced the workers to live on a very low wage.

During the pandemic, the employment status and working conditions of many people have changed. Apart from dismissals, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, a group of people were forced to take unpaid leave, another group faced the deduction in their annual paid leave rights once they used leaves due to the pandemic. A large group of employees were made to benefit from short time work allowances and wages were reduced. As stated before, most of the workers interviewed in the field study (50 people) stated that they could not

work for a period ranging from one week to five months during the pandemic period. Half of these workers (25 people) stated that they did not receive any wage during that time. Except that, the wages of some workers (12 people – 24%) have been reduced, while some (2 people – 4%) only received payments from the state in this process. The number of those who did not experience any change in their wage was 11 (22%).

Zeynep (50), who worked in the quality control department in a textile workshop that produces for known brands, had to leave her job because her wage was tried to be reduced after the pandemic. She explained what she went through as follows: "Before the pandemic, I was paid 4000 TL, but later they wanted to pay 2800 TL. So, I couldn't get what I deserved, and I quit my job". She stated that she did not work for 15–20 days after leaving her job, and she could not receive any wage because she did not have social security. 17-year-old Taner, who was a senior high school student in Batman, came to Istanbul because education was resumed online and started working as an errand-runner in a textile workshop. Similarly, he worked in another workplace at the beginning of the pandemic, but quit his job when his wage was reduced from 2000 TL to 1400 TL. Umut (20), who worked as an industrial sewer, errand-runner and ironer in another textile workshop, was working without social security in his old workplace at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. During the process, he did not work for three months because the workplace gave a break



to production. He quit his job because he could not receive any payment. İlkay (23), who worked in the quality control department of a textile workshop that produces jeans, was infected with the virus and could not go to work (until she recovered) throughout the quarantine period. The days she stayed in quarantine while she was sick were deducted from her wage. She stated that money for more than six weeks had been deducted from her wage. Even getting sick was not considered a valid reason and ended up in a cut from İlkay's pay.

## Change in the Wage during COVID-19



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

## Unpaid Leave – Mandatory Use of Annual Leaves

With the Law on Reducing the Effects of the New Corona Virus Pandemic on Economic and Social Life, the employer has been given the authority to put any employee on unpaid leave during the dismissal ban. These practices aimed to reduce the costs of companies and to limit the employment losses. Prohibition of dismissal was introduced with a temporary article added to the Labor Law No.4857 on April 17, 2020, and the employer has been given the authority to take the employee on unpaid leave.<sup>11</sup> In other words, during the dismissal ban imposed due to the pandemic, the employer can get any worker on unpaid leave, and the employee cannot use this as a ground for justified termination.<sup>12</sup> This situation is incompatible with Article 31 of the European Union Convention on Fundamental Rights, which states that *"every worker has the right to working conditions which respect his or her health, safety and dignity."*

Under the aforementioned law, it was envisaged that workers on unpaid leave would be given **cash wage support** in order to prevent financial grievances they would experience during this period. Workers who are given unpaid leave pursuant to temporary Article 10 of the Labor Law No.857 and

who cannot benefit from short time work allowance; workers whose employment contract is terminated within the scope of Article 51 of Law No. 4447 after 15/3/2020 and cannot benefit from unemployment allowance according to other provisions of the same Law, are covered for the duration of unpaid leave or unemployment provided that they do not receive old-age pension from a social security institution.

In the field research, 50 people, who stated that they did not work for a certain period of time during the pandemic, were asked "Have you been sent on unpaid leave or dismissed?" When the answers and the observations of the person conducting the field interviews were considered, it was seen that the question was not understood. 34 people (68%) did not answer this question. That is because most of the interviewees worked without insurance and are outside the law's coverage. Unregistered workers do not have access to worker rights such as **unpaid leave** or **unemployment pay**. They just know if they get paid or not when they cannot work. Unpaid leave and dismissal for unregistered workers mean the same thing: being broke.

Of the respondents, 11 (68,7%) stated that they were given unpaid leave<sup>13</sup>, 4 (25%) quit their jobs, and 1 (6,3%) were dismissed. While some of the workers who were put on unpaid leave could continue to receive the same amount during this period (2 people), some of them stated that they received less than their current wage (1 person), and some of them did not receive any wage at all (5 people). Hilmi (32), who was originally an industrial sewer, but worked as an errand-runner in a workshop despite ten years of industry experience, said that the shoe company for which he worked was closed for two months due to curfews and restrictions, and he was put on unpaid leave in this process. After two months, he returned to work and worked for 4 to 5 months. At the end of that time, when Saudi Arabia imposed an embargo on products coming from Turkey, he was put on unpaid leave again. He said that he had not received any financial support from the state during the two months he was on unpaid leave.

When Gülsüm (20), who worked in the ironing and packaging department in a workshop, was asked whether she received any wage during this period, she said, *"I got a wage, and that was from last month."* Although she had social security, she could not receive any pay from the state. *"I applied for it, but I was declined,"* she said. *"Meanwhile, I went to Mardin. I applied to the Mardin office, and I was told they weren't making any payments. Neither my brother and my father, nor I... nobody could get it."*

<sup>11</sup> The Labor Law, does not take the date of employment into consideration for a decision of unpaid leave. The employer can also put an employee, s/he hired after April 17, on unpaid leave as s/he wishes. However, according to the Unemployment Insurance Law No. 4447, only those who work in an insured job as of April 17 and are given unpaid leave and that the employer can benefit from the cash wage support.

<sup>12</sup> Under normal circumstances, if the employer forces the worker to take unpaid leave, this is a justified reason of termination for the employee.

<sup>13</sup> While 9 out of 11 people who declared that they were on unpaid leave had insurance, two people did not. The two people in question stated that they were on unpaid leave while not working. This confirms that the related question was not understood and created confusion for the workers.



"They were supposed to help us during the pandemic," she concluded.

When the interviewees, who were given unpaid leave were asked how much they received during this period, each gave different answers. While some workers claimed that they received half of their wages from the state and the other half was paid by the employer, so there was no change in their income, some others reported very low figures. Kerem (23) and Cemal (33), working as industrial sewers in the same workplace, said "We received 1600 TL from İSKUR for 1 to 2 months"; Salih (34), who worked in the nailing department in a workshop that produces jeans for known brands, said that he received 1170 TL in the first month and 1300 TL in the second month.

Another practice that was frequently exercised by employers during the pandemic period and which was actually a violation of worker rights was the **compulsory annual leaves**. Once companies had to cease production many made the employees use their annual leaves compulsorily. Those workers with no annual leave rights had to continue working and were exposed to the risk of getting sick. An example of this was experienced in Kaplanser Halı in Gaziantep. The company made all of its workers go on annual leave, and obliged those who did not have that right to keep working.<sup>14</sup> According to Umut-Sen, the Bross Textile with 800 employees, put their workers on two-week leave due to the pandemic and further deducted the time from the annual paid leaves of the workers.<sup>15</sup> Production was suspended for two weeks in Çerkezköy Bony Textile and for five days in Çerkezköy Aba Textile. 1200 workers employed at Bony Textile and 250 workers at Aba Textile were made to go on annual leave and lost their annual leave days as well.<sup>16</sup> HugoBoss, Turkey's largest textile factory employing nearly 4000 workers in Izmir, gave all workers their two-week annual leave. The only measure against the pandemic taken by the LCW was to impose workers to take their annual leaves too on the ground that "there was a decrease of business."<sup>17</sup>

One of the workers interviewed in the field study, Ali (41), an industrial sewer in a workshop manufacturing combed cotton products, said that the workplace stopped working for a week during the pandemic and that this was deducted from his annual leave. Similarly, Gül (34), industrial sewer in another workshop producing combed cotton products, stated that she did not work for two months during the pandemic and 15 days of this time were counted as annual leave. Serhat (18), an industrial sewer in a workshop producing combed

cotton for known brands, was given a one-week compulsory annual leave with no payment. Because he worked without insurance, his boss said that he would pay Serhat what the state gave (1300 TL), but he did not pay that either.

### Short-time Work Allowance

Another practice within the scope of the law in question is the Short-Time Work Allowance paid to employees of businesses which reported to the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) a cease or slowdown in their activities for three months. The income support provided by the state widely during the pandemic was the short-time work allowance rather than the unemployment insurance in Turkey.<sup>18</sup> It was the major instrument used to protect the workers during the pandemic and to prevent dismissals. During this period, the employment status was kept intact. However, it was not possible for every employee to benefit from this allowance. In the beginning, the Unemployment Insurance Law and the Labor Law required 600 and 120 working days for the eligibility for short-time work allowance. These requirements were reduced to 450 and 60 days with an amendment made to the respective laws in March, 2020. Nevertheless, to be eligible for



<sup>14</sup> [https://twitter.com/isci\\_mamed/status/1243402178015793152?s=20](https://twitter.com/isci_mamed/status/1243402178015793152?s=20), Date of access: 27.03.2020.

<sup>15</sup> [https://twitter.com/Umut\\_Sendikasi/status/1247913396810461186](https://twitter.com/Umut_Sendikasi/status/1247913396810461186), Date of access: 08.04.2020.

<sup>16</sup> [https://twitter.com/Umut\\_Sendikasi/status/1247913396810461186](https://twitter.com/Umut_Sendikasi/status/1247913396810461186), Date of access: 10.04.2020.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2020/03/18/lcwde-bes-bin-isci-icin-tedbir-yok/>, Date of access: 18.03.2020.

<sup>18</sup> Short time working allowance is paid to the insured who cannot work at the workplace for no more than three months for the off period, in cases where the working hours of the workplace is temporarily reduced by at least one-third of the weekly hours due to short-working practice, economic, sectoral, and regional crisis or force majeure, or if the workplace is shut-down in whole or in part without seeking continuity for at least four weeks. In order for the employee to benefit from this practice, the employer must have applied to the Employment Agency (İSKUR) for the employee until June 30, 2020. During the unpaid leave, short-time work allowance cannot be received. If the short work time practice is less than 30 days a month, there is no obstacle for the employer to terminate short time work and put the employee on unpaid leave. (<https://www.iskur.gov.tr/isveren/kisa-calisma-odeneği/genel-bilgiler/>. Date of access: 24.04.2021)



short-time work allowance workers must have paid 450 days of premium in the last 3 years, and have had a service contract for at least 60 days of their working since the beginning of short time working. The allowance is specified as 60% of the gross wage. Therefore, it brings along a serious loss of income for the employees and forces them to live on a much lower income.

Ünal (44), one of the workers interviewed in the field study, who benefited from the short-time work allowance, reported that he received 1586 TL from the state. Neslihan (46) stated that the days she received short-time work allowance (40% of the gross wage earned in the previous year) for the days she could not work, and was paid by her employer for the days of work. Although she did not say how much she received in this process, she said, *"Anyway, I spent most of the time without work,"* and said that she had to live on an income below her normal wage.

## Dismissals

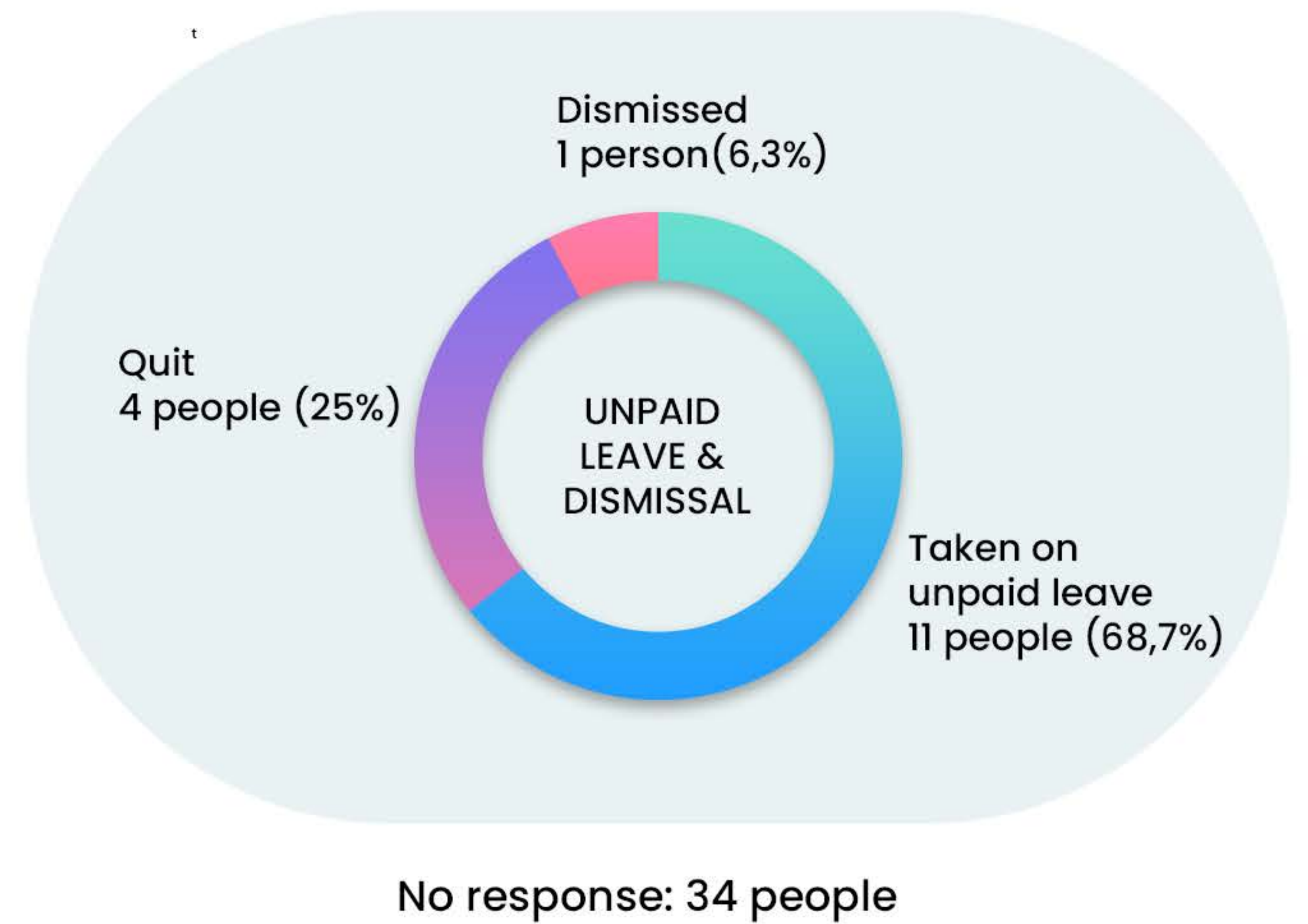
With the "Law on Reducing the Effects of the New Coronavirus Pandemic on Economic and Social Life", a dismissal ban was introduced to prevent the employer from terminating employment after April 17, 2020. Although the ban was put in effect due to the dismissals news, even after the ban, many news on workers who were dismissed from workplaces for various reasons were published. One example was about the workers who were dismissed in the city of Gaziantep for different reasons: three workers working in a carpet factory were fired for their refusal to work on Sundays; the workers were told, *"We cannot fire you by the law, so give your resignation and we will fulfill all your rights."* Following this, the workers said *"We aren't resigning, but we aren't working on Sundays either."* An hour later, the manager of the workplace arrived, read their names and they were taken out.<sup>19</sup> Despite the legal regulations, employers have found a way and dismissed workers. The article 25/2 (code 29) of the Labor Law allowing the termination of employment and constituting an exemption from dismissal prohibition with reference to *"Immoral, dishonorable or malicious conduct,"* has recently been used by employers to dismiss employees.<sup>20</sup>

The Unemployment Insurance Fund was expected to be the only assurance of the dismissed workers. However, the rate of employers benefiting from the Fund during the pandemic has been much higher

than the employees. In March 2020, when unemployment increased in the country, the incentives and aid transferred to the employers reached 1.6 billion TL; only 683 million TL was paid to the unemployed people. 85% of the unemployed people could not receive any unemployment payments. A total of 47 billion TL was paid to employers in the form of incentives or support payments from the Unemployment Insurance Fund in two years for the protection of employment or the creation of new employment areas. However, that amount could not even prevent a decrease, let alone increase employment. In short, the Unemployment Insurance Fund has benefited the employers in this process.<sup>21</sup>

In the field study, only one of the workers interviewed, Mehmet (27), an all-doer in a workshop producing combed cotton, stated that he was dismissed and that he could not receive unemployment pay during this period. When asked about the reason, he replied, *"Because I work without insurance."* He stated that while he was not a permanent employee, he did dayworks and received a daily wage of 120 TL, but this was not enough for anything, and he had difficulty in paying his rent.

## Unpaid leave & Dismissal\*



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

\* The information is on 50 people who stated that they did not work for a certain period of time during the pandemic.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/404911/antep-koza-halida-pazar-gunu-zorla-calistirilmayi-kabul-etmeyen-3-isci-isten-atildi?a=1acfb>, Date of access:16.05.2020.

<sup>20</sup> This is a more aggravating situation because the reason of dismissal for committing a disgraceful act is put on the records of employment. It negatively affects the employee in his/her future work applications. Workers dismissed with Code-29 cannot receive severance and notice pay either; nor they can benefit from the unemployment allowance from the Unemployment Insurance Fund. This method, which employers have resorted to for many years to usurp the severance and notice pay rights of workers, has also been abused to break the dismissal ban in effect during the COVID-19. Article 25-II of the Labor Law is one of the exceptions to the prohibition of dismissal. The Social Security Institution (SSI) does not publish data on dismissal or leave codes. SSI data obtained by DISK-AR through the CIMER appeal, 176,662 workers were dismissed in 2020 by Code-29. Thus, with the Code-29, the number of people fired reached 14, 772 per month and 491 per day on average (DISKAR, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.birgun.net/haber/isciye-1-isverene-2-5-issizlik-fonu-yine-isverene-yaradi-296170>, Date of access:13.04.2020.



## 7. Poverty and Financial Difficulties

All of the measures taken by the government to prevent the workers from being adversely affected by the pandemic have been unsuccessful and insufficient. Stating that the workers were on the ragged edge, Mehmet Türkmen, President of DISK Tekstil in Gaziantep voiced his evaluation regarding the issue, *“Nothing has been made to touch the lives of the workers. With the closure of businesses, workers have become insecure. Action should be taken so that the lives of workers, whose factories are closed and who are sent on unpaid leave, would change for the better. In this process, support should be provided from the unemployment fund, and it should be ensured that workers do not experience losses.”*<sup>22</sup>

The low payments made within the scope of the pandemic, such as unpaid leave and short-time work allowance, have deteriorated the already difficult living conditions of workers. They expressed difficulties especially in paying their rents and bills during this process. Birgül (40), who worked as the forewoman in a workshop that produces jeans, had to leave her job because her employer wanted to reduce her wage with the start of the pandemic. She once received a payment of 1030 TL from the state, but this was not enough to live on. In her own words, *“It wasn't even enough to pay my bills,”* and she added that she couldn't pay her rent for a month. When Birgül was unemployed, she did dayworks in the textile industry to earn a living. Similarly, İbrahim (19), who worked as an industrial sewer in a workshop, and Cennet (44), a multi-skilled worker, stated that they had difficulty in paying their rents and bills when they were unemployed. Gülsüm (20) was also an insured employee. During the pandemic, she was given unpaid leave for a certain period of time and could not receive any payment from the state. *“It was really hard to get by,”* she said as she explained her experiences in the process. She had a hard time paying her rent and bills. *“I wasn't working, but I had to pay the rent”* she said. She expressed her feelings as follows: *“It was on TV, they said we will pay the rent for people who cannot work during the pandemic period. It turns out there was no such thing.”*

Workers who were not able to work during the pandemic nor could benefit from any of the

aforementioned subsidies (unpaid leave, short-time working allowance, unemployment pay) because of their informal employment were much more adversely affected by the process. They could not receive an income or support and had difficulty in making a living when they could not work. It was seen that the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further increased the vulnerability of informally employed individuals and their families. Unfortunately, the measures taken against the economic effects of the pandemic have aimed only to protect registered and paid employment, thus making the situation of unregistered workers even more difficult (Uysal, 2020).

In this context, the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services launched the Pandemic Social Support Program, where 1000 TL was paid to those in need due to the coronavirus. This assistance is thought to be reaching mostly to unregistered employers because the application requirements include not benefiting from unemployment allowance and short-time work allowance, not receiving income or salary from SSI, and not being a civil servant or worker.

When the uninsured workers interviewed in the field study were asked how they managed during this period, and whether they had financial difficulties, almost all of them stated that they had difficulty in managing their lives. Aykut (36), who worked as an industrial sewer in a workshop was asked whether he was having trouble making a living. He said, *“Of course”* and explained what kind of troubles he had been through with the following words; *“We couldn't pay the rent. Sometimes I couldn't buy a diaper for my boy”*. When asked about the landlord's attitude, he said that the landlord was not understanding although s/he was relative. He summarized his experiences as: *“I couldn't pay the rent for a month, and we got into a huge fight with the landlord 19 days before the day of the rent for the second month.”* Hilmi (32) said, *“Current conditions are very harsh,”* and expressed his revolt against the authorities who did not try to find a solution to his troubles as follows: *“A person with 100 TL in his or her pocket can only buy two bags of food. A bag of apple, or a bag of orange.”*

“

*“We couldn't pay the rent. Sometimes I couldn't buy a diaper for my boy.”*

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gazeteekspres.com/haber/osbde-fabrikalar-kapaniyor-84789>, Access of date: 20.03.2020.



## Case 2: Being Torn Between Caring and Work

Nurten is a 35-year-old experienced industrial sewer, and a mother of two children. In recent years, because her mother-in-law has not been in good health, she could not look after her children as she used to do. That is why Nurten works for some months of the year, and then stays at home. For the last 2,5 years, she has been working without insurance at her current workplace. Because her insurance premiums were not paid before the pandemic, she cannot benefit from the state aid. Now she works two days a week and commutes to work with public transport. As Nurten is currently pregnant with her third child taking a minibus to work is a challenge for her in pandemic conditions. Although commuting with minibuses is dangerous they persist to be very crowded as everyone like Nurten struggles to arrive at their workplaces on time. She states that when the minibus driver does not pick up the passenger, other passengers protest the driver for not doing so, but when he does, they shout for letting them in. Nurten states that she has not had much trouble because she is pregnant and that she finds a seat as soon as she gets on, but she has to be in physical contact with everyone else on the vehicle.

Nurten was not working for 6-7 months before the pandemic. Then the financial difficulties started, the bills accumulated, and when she could not meet the demands of the children, she decided to return to work despite being pregnant. She goes to work two days a week, during the days her mother-in-law can take care of the children. The other days she stays at home. Her son, who goes to school, asks for a tablet to continue his education online. As she cannot afford to buy one, she leaves her mobile phone at home so that her son can go online and follow his lessons. She gives the head worker's cell number to those at home in case they need to talk to her, *"If I buy a tablet now, it is more than 1000 TL,"* Nurten says. She is fortunate as only one of her children has to have internet access for his classes. Her youngest son is 6 years old and has not started school yet, Nurten's cell phone is the only way for those at home to participate in education.

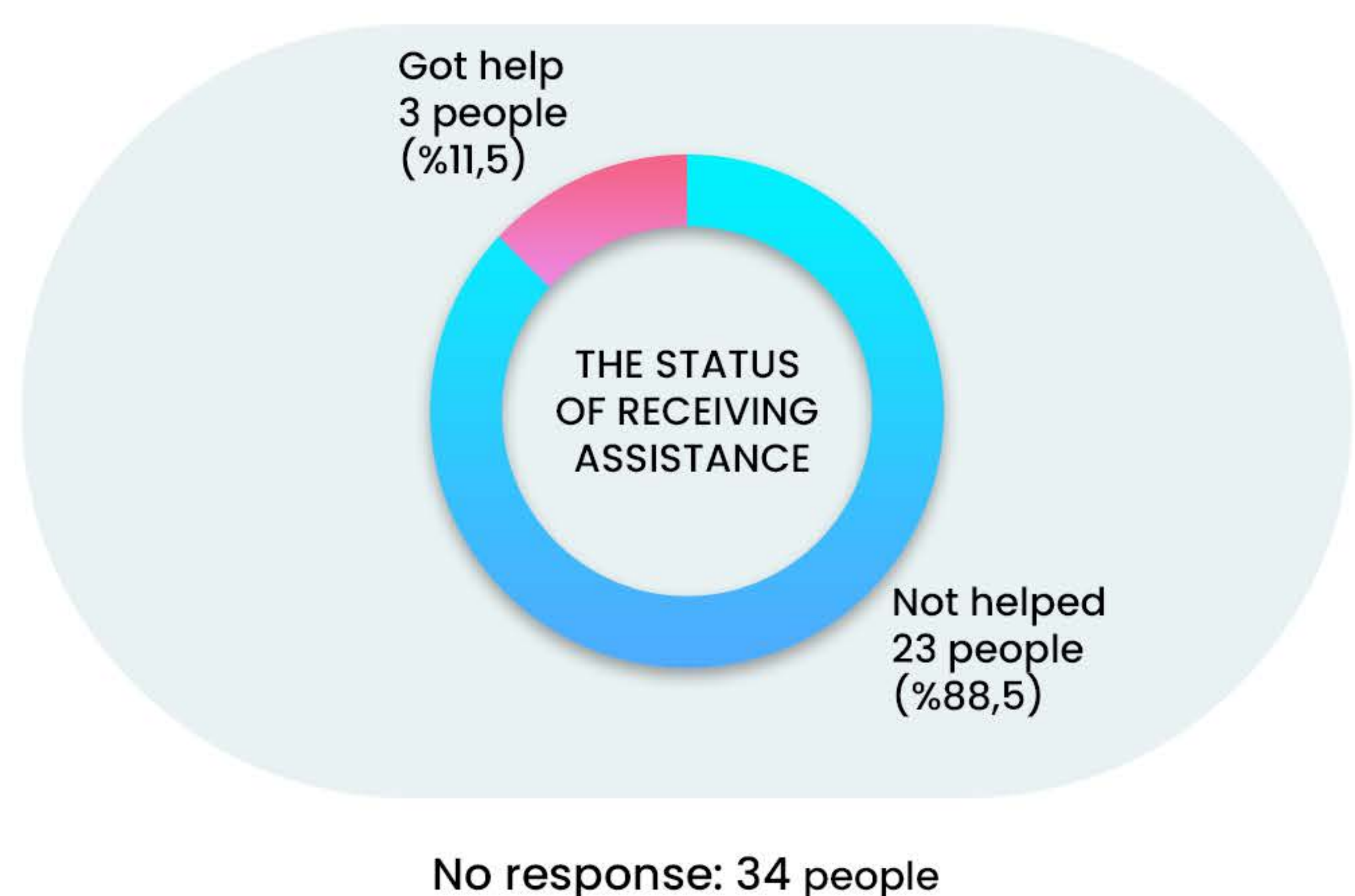


*I wish you had come from the municipality, or the presidency. Then, I would talk".* When he was asked whether he received aid from the state or any institution, he said, *"I have asked for some help from the municipalities, and I got some."*

Halim (42) said that all his family members, including himself, were infected with the virus and could not work during the quarantine period. The municipality sent some supplies to support the family. *"You can't get everything you want when you don't have money,"* he said. *"You can't go to the market, you can't bring home whatever you want,"* he continued, telling about his financial distress. When asked what he economized on, he said, *"I cut down on everything like fruit, vegetables, and meat."* He stated that he had trouble paying the rent and had 5 months of rent debt, but fortunately, the landlord was ok with the situation. Syrian Mohammed (21), who worked as an industrial engineer in a workshop producing jeans, said that he did not receive any wage when he was not working. *"I borrowed money from a friend of mine,"* he said when asked how he was making a living. Erdem (18), who worked in ironing, in a workshop producing combed cotton, said that his brother helped him to get by in this process.

When the workers interviewed in the field study were asked whether they received aid from the state or other institutions, it was found out that very few workers (3 people) asked for help. Two workers (Gökhan-38 years old and Hilmi-32 years old) reported that they received provisions and cash assistance from the municipality. Gökhan said that he received food aid from the municipality and that 100 TL was deposited on his social welfare card every month. Hilmi also received food aid and got 500 TL in cash from the municipality. İbrahim (19) said, *"When I had insurance while working, I received 500 TL in the first month and 1000 TL in the following month. At that time the workplace was closed"*.

### The status of receiving assistance from the state or other institutions



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.



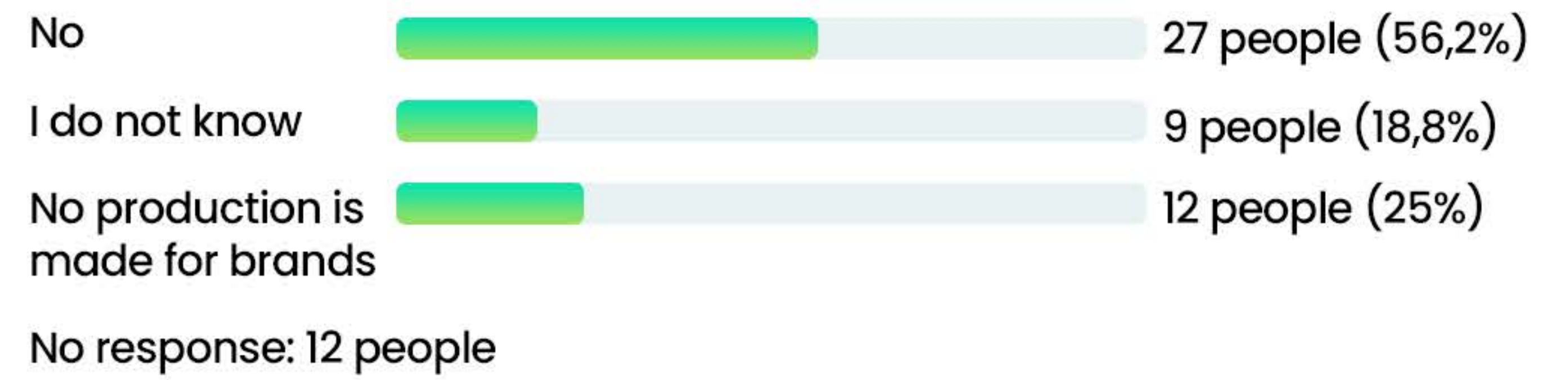


## 8. The Stance of Brands during the Pandemic

Most of the workplaces where the interviewees worked were workshops that produce for known brands. Therefore, the stance of the brands these workshops worked with during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether they supported the workplace or the workers, became extremely important. When the workers were asked what the attitude of the brands was in the process, and whether they supported the workplace or the workers, none of them said they were helped. 27 of the workers interviewed stated that the brand that they worked for did not support them in the process. In fact, the number of workers who said they did more damage than good was considerable. Many workers said that jobs were reduced because the brands either canceled or reduced orders during the pandemic. Serhat (18) stated that the brands did not help in the process with the following words: *"They damaged us financially; they withdrew the orders"*. He said that LCW and one foreign brand (he did not remember its name) canceled their orders because the customs were closed. Sedat (21), an industrial sewer in a workshop that did the preparation work for a well-known brand, said, *"The brands did not have a positive attitude to the workers, nor did they support us by any means during this period. Working conditions in the textile industry are very hard. At my old workplace, the boss told us that LCW canceled his orders, and that's when things stopped"*. Many workers like Serhat and Sedat said that the fact that brands cancelled or reduced the orders affected the business and them negatively.

Apart from this, other workers stated that brands did not have much to do in the process, so it was not possible for them to help. Gül (34) said, *"Brands were also in a difficult situation. Since the orders came from abroad, no goods were produced. There have been jobs here and there for 6 months. Brands suffered, and we suffered as well. Fortunately, they continued to pay our salary in some way."* Similarly, Ünal (44) stated that the brands did not have any support in the process with the words *"No, brands do nothing."* When asked if it had a negative effect, she summarized the situation, *"Even the brands have a low level of production because they cannot sell what they produce. That's why the business is bad right now. We used to produce 1000 before, but now it has decreased to 200."*

### Whether brands support the workplace or the workers



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.





## 9. Measures Taken in Workplaces and Working Conditions during the COVID-19 Process

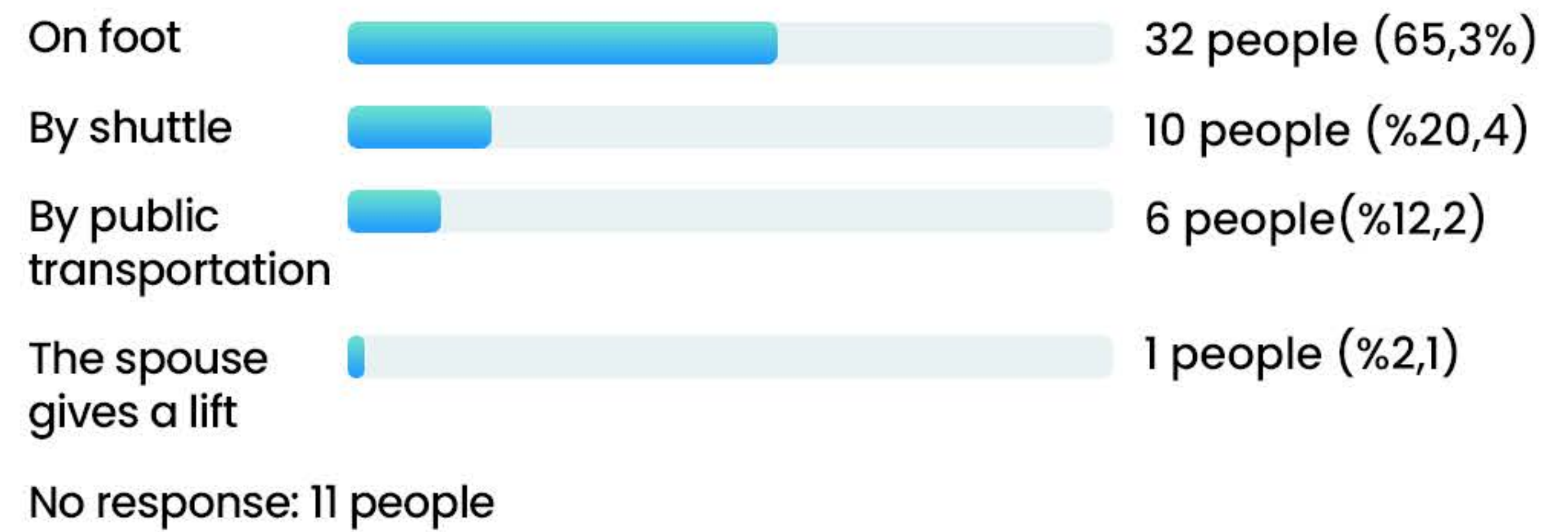
The COVID-19 pandemic has driven workers into financial deprivation as those who could not work have been left without a regular income and others who could have had to live with less. The return to work is another story: lack of adequate measures at workplaces has increased the risk of infections. For a fact, the struggle to make a living comes before the risk of the disease for most people. In order to pay their rents, their bills and debts, and meet the needs of their families, in short, to survive, they have to work. This necessity is even more crucial in the textile industry, where informal employment is quite high. Workers have to work despite the risk of the virus, the lack of protective or precautionary measures in their workplaces increases this risk even more.

### Shuttle Services

Most of the workers interviewed in the field study (32 people, 65,3%) went to work on foot, 20,4% by shuttle, and 12,3% by public transportation. While there were those who said that their shuttle capacity had been reduced to 3 to 4 people, that is to say by half, or seating arrangements (leaving an empty adjacent seat) were made, there were also workers who reported non-compliance to any of the rules. Durmuş (48), who worked in a factory producing car covers, said that the shuttles were working at half capacity for a while, and after the declaration of normalcy, they returned to the old order. His friend Asiye (41), who worked in the same workplace, said that the capacity of the shuttles was reduced by half and the number of the vehicles was increased for 10 days. She resumed, *“Except for that period, 16 people travelled in the 16-seat shuttle. We put on our masks ourselves. Our driver was sensitive about this; he didn't let anyone in without a mask.”*

Emre (42), who got to work by public transport, said that he travelled in crowded vehicles for hours, figuratively speaking hand in hand with other passengers. Even if all wore masks that would not help. When Nurten (35), was asked what kind of difficulties she had while commuting to work by minibus during the pandemic, she said that everyone wanted to get on the minibus at the same time so as not to be late for work. *“If the minibus driver does not pick up the passenger, they shout ‘why didn't you stop?’ and when the driver picks them up, the passengers inside start shouting for letting them in. I don't have much trouble because I am pregnant. I can sit as soon as I get on, but touching others is inevitable.”*

### Getting to work during COVID-19



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

### Mask-Social Distance-Hygiene

Employers are obliged to provide proper conditions in the workplace in order to minimize the risks that workers will encounter during the pandemic. Regular distribution of masks to workers, reorganization of workers' working order and making adjustments in dining halls and breaks in accordance with social distance rules, regular cleaning of common areas such as toilets and locker rooms, and provision of cleaning materials are the basic conditions employers must meet to secure employee-health.

Gaziantep Regional Representative of DISK Textile, Mehmet Türkmen, pointing out that no measures were taken for workers, stated that hundreds of thousands of workers, especially in provinces such as Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Adıyaman, Maraş and Malatya were employed in factories and workplaces with not even the minimum health and hygiene requirements: *“In many factories, businesses and workshops, toilets are in filth, there is not even soap and paper towels. Common public areas such as dining halls, changing rooms, service vehicles, and surfaces such as tables, benches, and handrails that workers have to touch are not disinfected. Even in the workplaces where occupational health and safety experts and workplace physicians are required to be present, necessary measures are mostly missing; measures such as supervision by specialists and physicians, health check for employees and training for virus protection have not been taken.”*<sup>23</sup> Türkmen emphasized that *“The factories should be inspected by the institutions affiliated to the Ministry of Health and Labor for necessary precautions. Sanctions should be imposed when it is determined that the necessary measures are not taken. Workers' health should not be left at the mercy of the bosses.”*

<sup>23</sup>[https://www.evrensel.net/haber/399669/fabrikalarda-koronavirus-onlemi-yok-isciler-hijyen-kosullari-olmadan-calistiriliyor?a=f7e63?utm\\_source=paylas&utm\\_campaign=twitter\\_ust&utm\\_medium=haber](https://www.evrensel.net/haber/399669/fabrikalarda-koronavirus-onlemi-yok-isciler-hijyen-kosullari-olmadan-calistiriliyor?a=f7e63?utm_source=paylas&utm_campaign=twitter_ust&utm_medium=haber), Date of Access: 17.03.2020.



### Case 3: COVID-19 Days: Just Keep Working, Don't Stop!

Tarik is a young worker living with his family of seven. He has been working in the textile industry since he was 12, looking for another job but continues to work because he can't find anything else and gets used to working there. He continues to work during the pandemic. With no insurance, Tarik works in a large workshop that manufactures for the brands we know.

He tells about the times he was working as a child. When the authorities came to inspect the workplace, employers were hiding him and the other children under the age of 16 working there: *"They hid us when we were children. They were hiding us behind bags, into the toilet. I was no more than 13 at the time."* he says.

In the first days of the pandemic, the workplace was closed for two weeks. The registered workers were given a week of compulsory paid annual leave, and a week of leave without pay. Tarik could not get any payments from the state because he works without insurance. During this period, the owner of the workplace told Tarik that he would pay him 1300 TL for working without insurance, but he did not. Tarik did not ask why he was not paid because he felt timid.

In the first days of the pandemic, it was not mandatory to wear a mask in the workplace. Then the workers started to get sick and the workplace was closed for about a week. This time Tarik was taken on a weekly paid leave. *"Then they were stricter. They said 'Wear your mask from now on.' That's when they realized the situation was serious,"* he says. There were other cases of COVID-19 after the workplace was reopened. Although other cases erupted later, the workshop was not closed again. Some of the workers did not want to work, some others did because they needed it. After that, while the sick were being sent home, the workplace continued to work.

Tarik also says that at one point the employer declared the workplace as closed for a period but continued production of masks as well. Tarik explains this situation as follows: *"He was cunning; he tricked the state by making the workplace look like it was closed but it was open. He received money from the state while we were sewing masks and other equipment for healthcare professionals. We also continued to sew the same products as we did for the domestic market."* During this period, the employer declared work would continue voluntarily, and only the workers who wanted to work went to work.



Half of the workers interviewed in the field study stated that mask and social distance rules were not followed in the workplaces, which were not disinfected either. 37,5% of them stated that mask and social distance rules were followed, but the workplace was not disinfected regularly. Neslihan (46), said that personal cleaning materials were not provided at the workplace. Once the union pressed the bosses on this issue, these materials were supplied but not on a regular basis. When they were not provided, they brought cologne and disinfectant from home. She stated that the social distance rules were followed in the quality control department where she worked, but the workers in the production department worked in close proximity to one another. She added, *“Since parts of the product are assembled by workers one after another, they are passed on by everyone. We have to be very careful”*.

Durmuş (48), working in the same factory, summarized the situation, *“Yes, there were problems, but we worked on it seriously. So, the problem was constantly under control. None of my colleagues, who had the slightest health discomfort, came to work and the management did not confront us on that. It could be much better, but there was no one we could ask for improvements. We, as workers, managed the process by ourselves.”* Although he said that masks were worn at work, there were problems in the procurement of masks and in the provision of a hygienic environment (no toilet paper and detergent was provided for a week). He added the conditions were improved as a result of the union's intervention.

When the workers interviewed in the field study were asked whether any officials from the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Labor and Social Security came for inspection on the measures for the prevention of the spread of the COVID-19, 29 people (56,9%) said that there was no inspection. There were 17 people (33,3%) who said that someone was sent by the government to inspect the workplace. Zeliha (41), who worked as an industrial sewer at a factory, said that her workplace was not controlled by the state in the process and continued to tell the situation at work; *“I wish I had complained to the authorities about hygiene. They didn't care about the lives of the employees, and inevitably the number of cases increased. They just put disinfectants in front of the sinks, even cleaning was not done. We requested cardboard cups, wooden spoons, and packed sugar cubes for the tea breaks, but they did not meet any of our requests. We had to ask for napkins many times. There were no napkins for the past month”*.

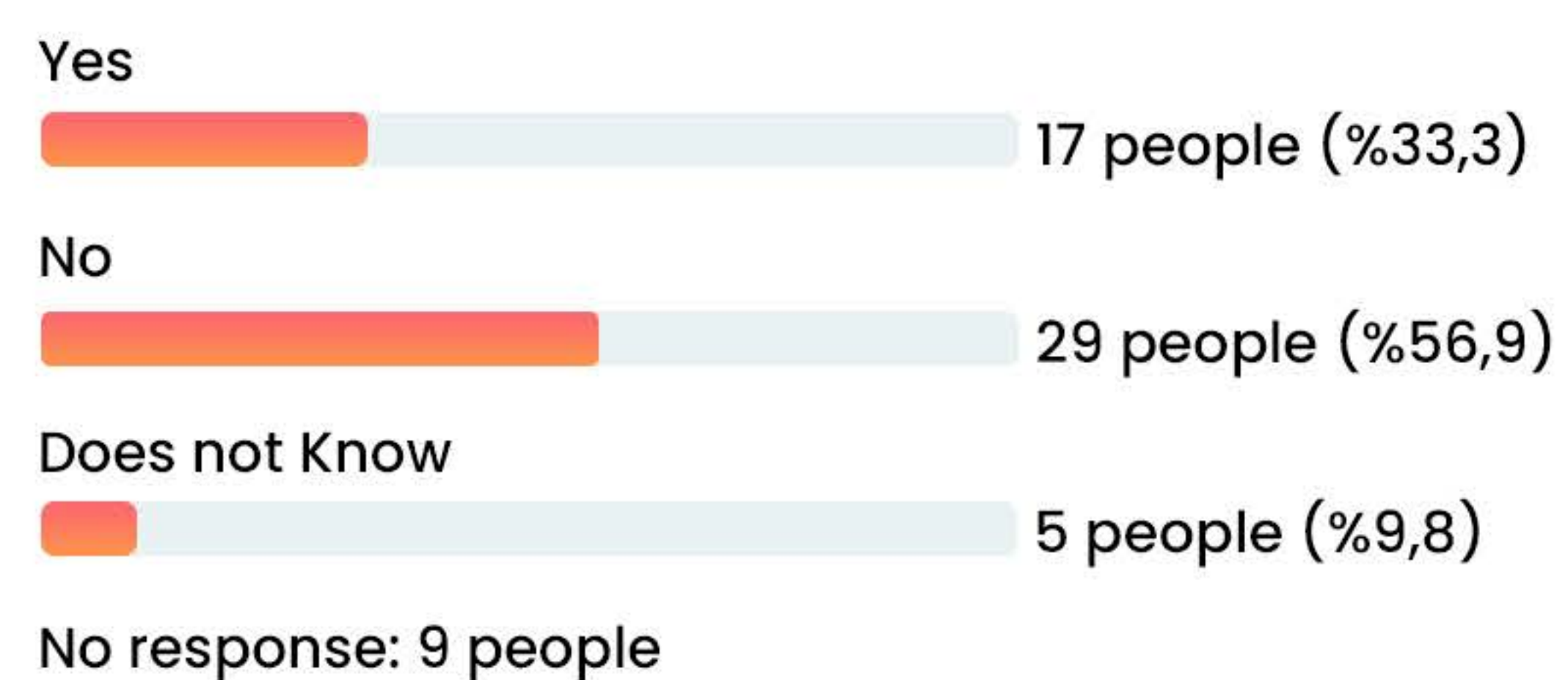
Another measure that should be taken to reduce the risks faced by workers during the pandemic is to ensure that the working environment is regularly

ventilated. Only 11 (25%) of the interviewed workers confirmed the presence of a ventilation system in their workplaces. The workplace where 45,5% of the workers employed was ventilated with a simple ceiling fan, running only in hot weather. While the fans were not operating, airing was provided by opening windows or doors. There was no solution for ventilation in 18,2% of the workplaces.

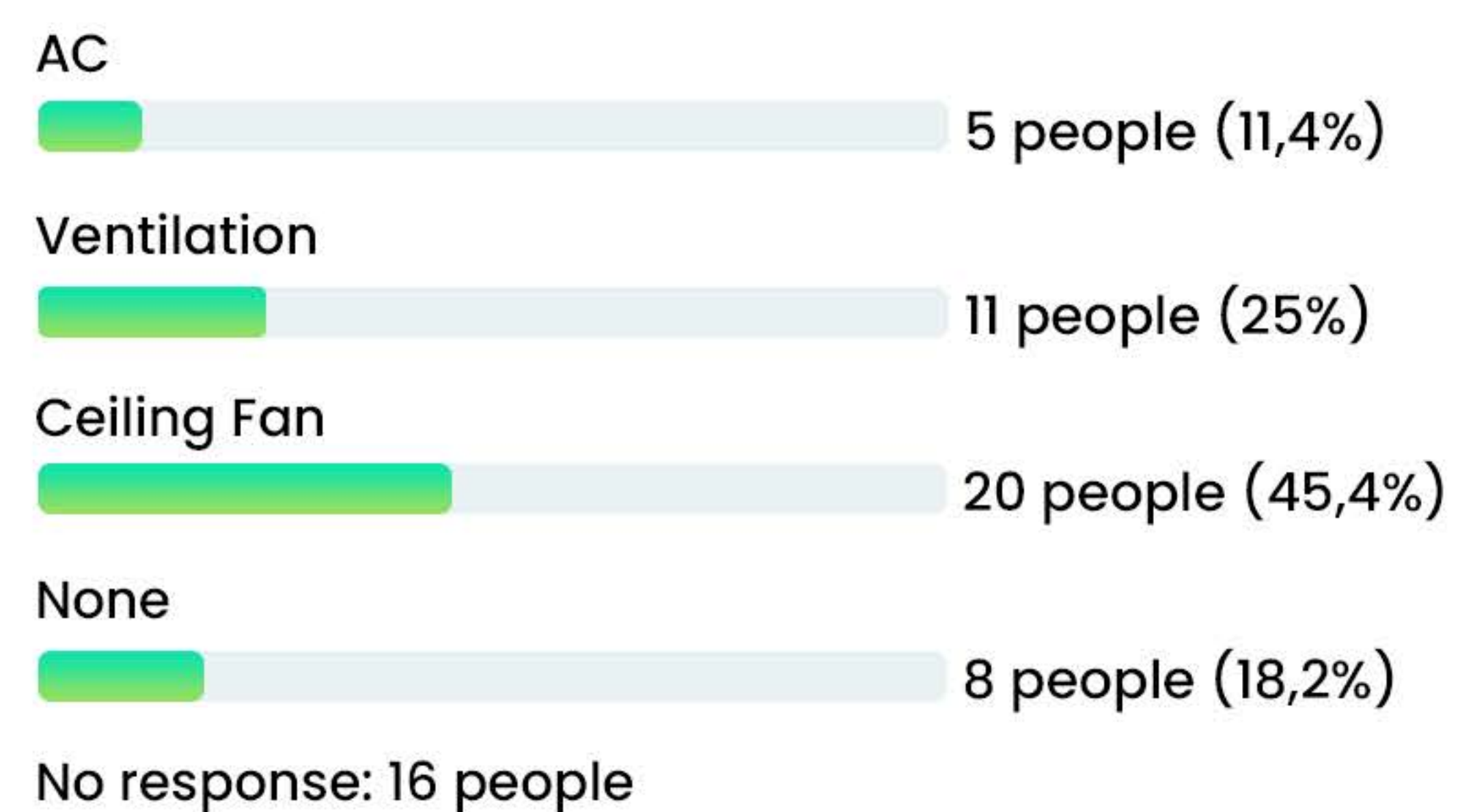
## Whether the social distance, mask and hygiene rules are followed in the workplace



## Whether the workplace has been inspected by the Ministry of Health and/or Labor

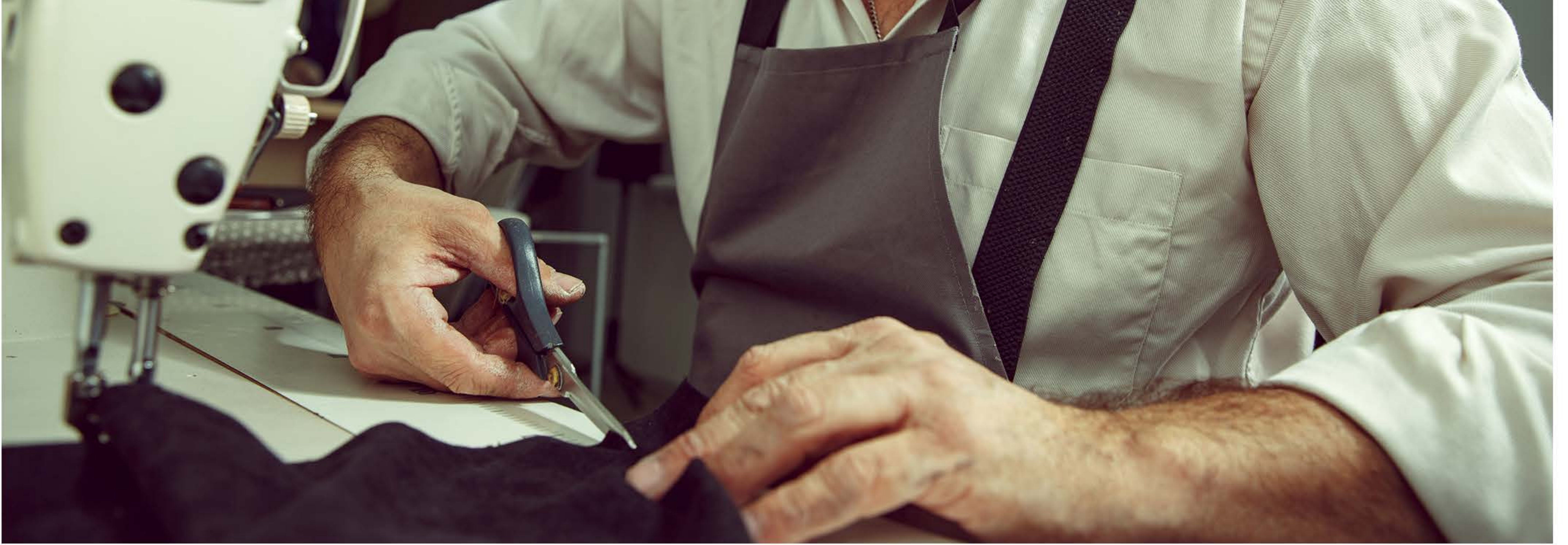


## The ventilation system at the workplace



Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.





## **COVID-19 Cases in the Workplace and the Non-stop Production**

The irresponsibility of the employers and the ineffectiveness/lack of measures in general increased the spread-rate of the pandemic. Many workers got sick or even died in the process. Employers have not taken hygiene/distance measures, made workers continue to work until their Covid tests came out positive. They have continued the production despite the presence of infected workers at workplaces and found a way to continue production even if their operation is not within the scope of industries where production must continue under the pandemic conditions. As a result, workers are overexposed to the virus.

According to the COVID-19 Information Report published by DISK in April 2020, the rate of COVID-19 positive among DISK member workers was three times higher than the national average. In the report, it was stated that more than 60 thousand DISK members were directly affected by the health and social risks created by COVID-19.<sup>24</sup> Although the research does not reflect a worker profile as it involves all DISK members, findings are significant. Furthermore, according to the 2020 report prepared by the Occupational Health and Safety Council (OHS Council) 2427 workers lost their lives in 2020. The report has indicated that 2% of worker deaths occurred in the textile industry. The report has also stated that the cause of death of 752 (31%) of 2427 workers who lost their lives in 2020 was infected with COVID-19.<sup>25</sup> One of the important points emphasized in the report was that this disease has become the reflection of class-based inequality as time went by, and that "the coronavirus has gradually become a working-class disease." In the report prepared by OHS Council in April 2020, it was emphasized that the health of the working class in Turkey had been visibly endangered. The report expressed that

*"The presence of more than one infected workers in large workplaces in April has led to the spread of the pandemic; not stopping production in the workplaces despite the discourse of 'We are all on the same boat', has clearly revealed the class dimension of the pandemic."* Another finding of the report indicated some of the worker deaths occurred in the textile industry.

62,7% (37 people) of the workers interviewed in the field study reported that there were no COVID-19 cases in the workplace, while 37,3% (22 people) reported outbreaks. Only three (13,6%) of the workers who reported COVID-19 cases in the workplace stated that their workplace was closed after that. The remaining workers (86,4%) reported no shutdown after the detection of COVID-19 positive cases in the workplace. Durmuş (48) said that 60% of the employees in the workplace were infected with COVID-19. An agreement has been made with the employers to secure the wages of infected workers during the quarantine period. Once a positive case came out, all employees who were in close contact with the infected worker were notified and the ones working in the same belt area were isolated. The whole shift (70-80 people) was tested for COVID-19, 2 to 3 times as well. Durmuş said that in order to return to work, people with the corona virus were required to have a negative test result.

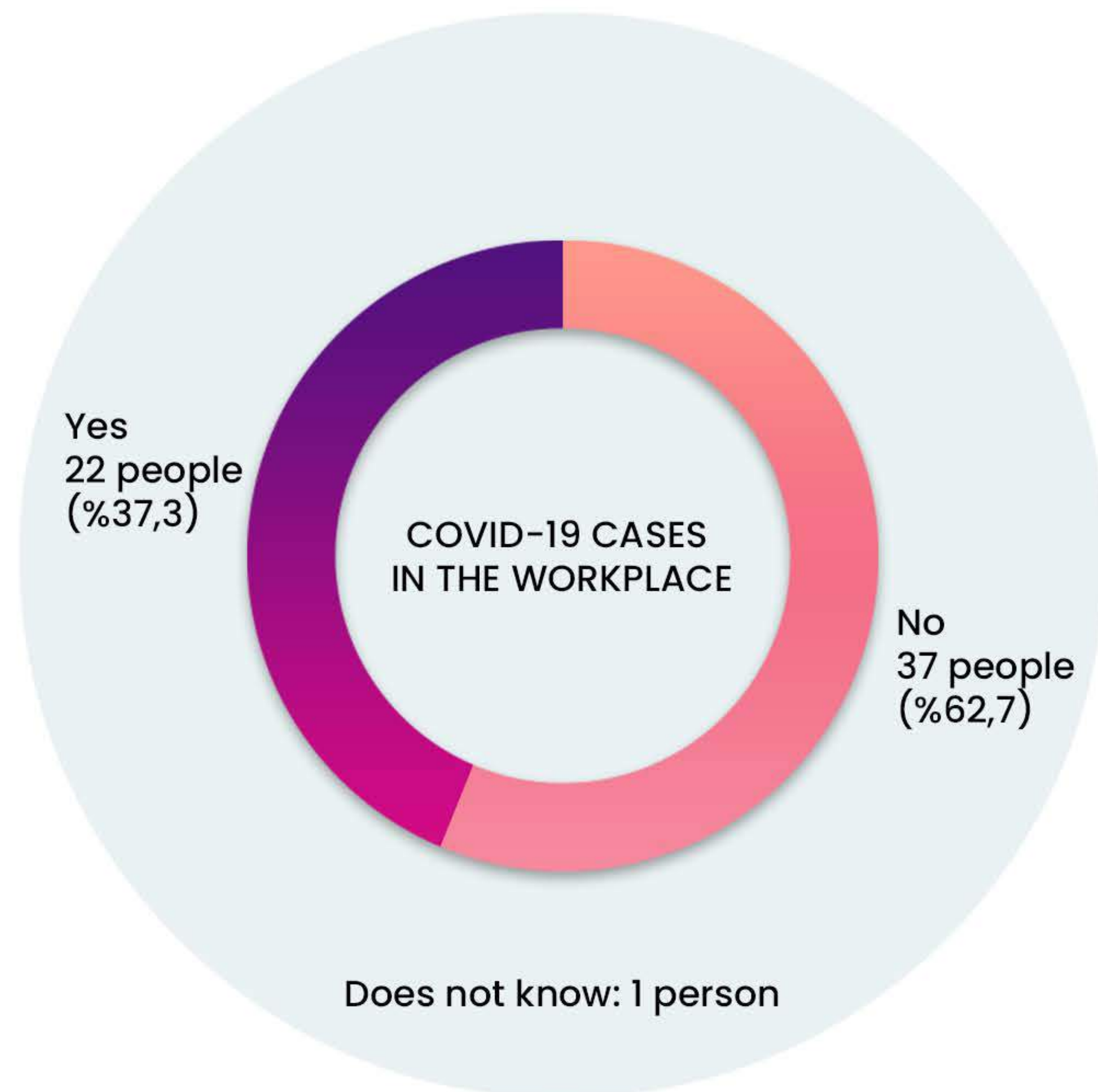
Serhat (18) and Cem (18), friends working in the same workplace, said that their workplace was closed for a week when several cases of COVID-19 erupted. Later, there were other single outbreaks too, but the workplace was not closed as some of the workers wanted to continue working. Those who wanted to continue the work were allowed to come. Bahar (43), who worked as an industrial sewer in a workshop that produces women's clothing for the domestic market, said that she was infected with COVID-19 virus, but her workplace was not closed in this process.

<sup>24</sup> As of April 17, 2020, four DISK members died, at least 378 of them tested positive for COVID-19, and at least 646 workers were quarantined.

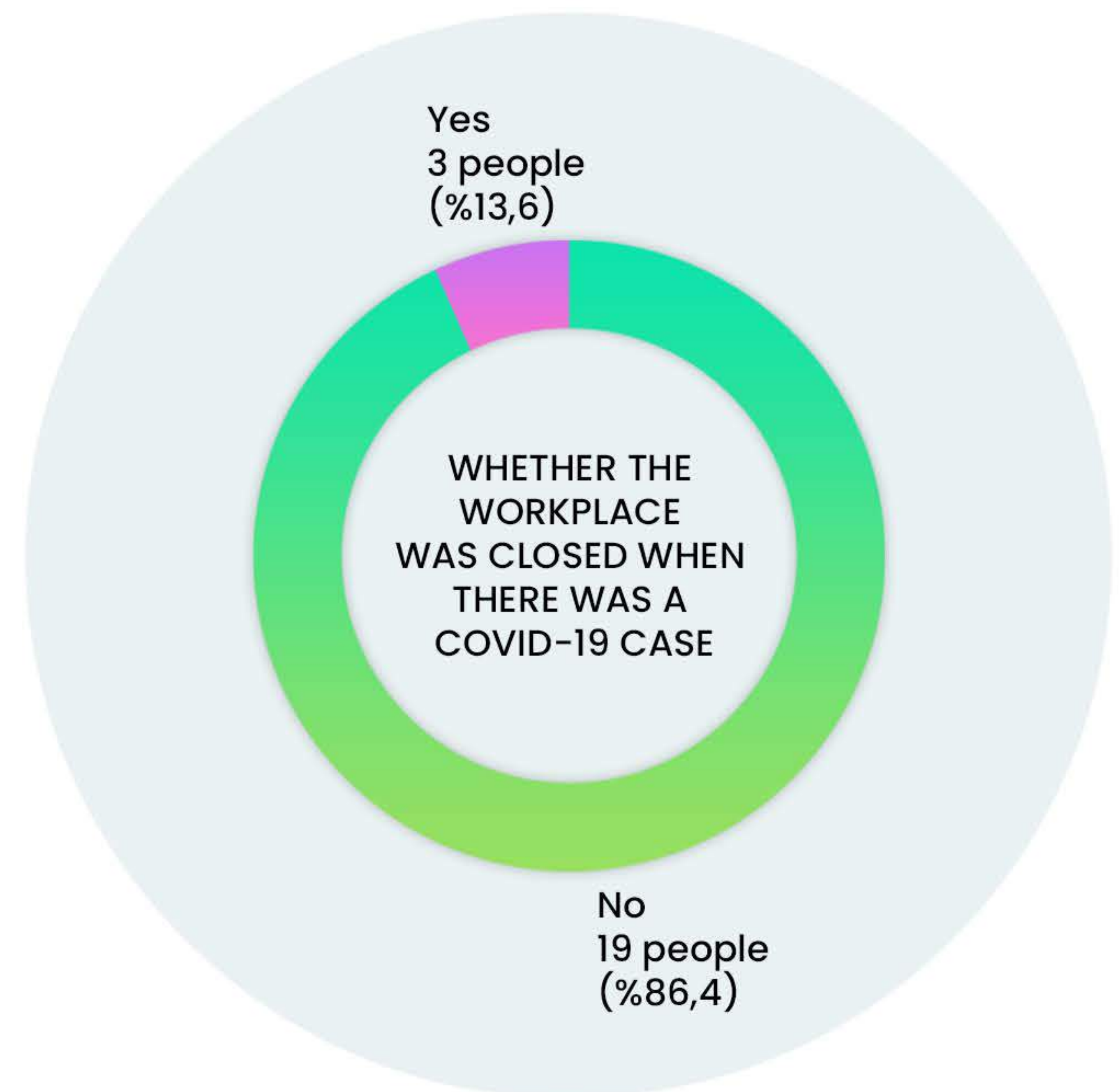
<sup>25</sup> According to the report, 148 of the workers who lost their lives in 2020 were women and 2279 were male workers. There were also child workers among the ones who lost their lives. 68 child workers died in 2020. There were 867 workers aged 51 and over who died while working.



## COVID-19 cases in the workplace



## Whether the workplace was closed when there was a COVID-19 case\*



\* It was evaluated on the basis of 22 workers who declared that there were cases in the workplace.

Note: Proportional calculations were made by considering the number of responses to questions.

## Conclusion

Following the outbreak, the government announced the Economic Stability Shield Package. While the announced package includes various support and conveniences for employers (such as postponing SSI premiums, credit debts, tax debts etc.), no measure or support was offered to the workers. The exclusion of the most adversely affected group by the pandemic, namely the workers, from such a support package has brought to mind the questions of what and for whom production at work is continued. The announced focus on the "stability of the economy" actually meant *"the employers' welfare"*.

All of the measures or support (unpaid leave, short-time work allowance, unemployment benefit) introduced by the government to prevent/reduce the hardships workers went through during the COVID-19 pandemic, require them to meet certain conditions in order to be eligible for such support. In other words, not every worker can have access to these supports. First of all, a worker needed to be insured/registered. Unregistered workers cannot benefit from any rights (such as unpaid leave, unemployment pension, short-time working allowance etc.) granted to employees by law, and

are obliged to continue working under the conditions determined by the employer. The purpose of the practices then is not the minimization of the risks or the protection of the worker, but rather the minimization of the loss of employment and work. The only benefit the workers get from this practice is the continuation of their employment status somehow. On the other hand, the worker has no responsibility to continue employment. This responsibility belongs to the employer and the state. The only governmental measure that would offer some protection to the unregistered workers has been the Pandemic Social Support Program. Within this scheme, however, the workers were expected to live on with 1000 TL per month.

The risks faced by workers are increasing day by day due to the inadequacy of the measures and the ones not taken by the employers during the pandemic. The necessary precautions have been left to the initiative of the employers, and unfortunately, no serious measures have been put in effect to eliminate the risks and to protect the security of life of the workers.



When the scope of the measures taken in workplaces and factories were analyzed, it was seen that the employers and the state have reduced the protection to the masks worn by workers. The employers did not take the necessary precautions at the workplaces and burdened workers with the responsibility of putting the masks on. This situation is reflected in the statements of public officials as well. As the governmental discourse about work safety in public spots is simplified with the slogan *tt* and puts the responsibility of health and safety on the shoulders of the workers, the Ministry of Health warned people by saying: *“Put on your mask!”*<sup>26</sup> Employers’ responsibilities and the measures that should be taken to prevent risks and to protect the workers are left out of the equation.

Even when a 50 percent passenger capacity limitation was imposed on public transport, workers’ shuttles were exempted from this requirement. Hundreds of thousands of workers have commuted

on the shuttles together during the pandemic, forced to work side-by-side, and eat together in the same place. Hygiene rules, in particular, which were not well-followed in textile factories, continued to be ignored during the pandemic (Dev Textile, 2020). The risks workers are exposed to increases even more with inadequate and inefficient inspections that the state should carry out.

There have been many cases where necessary measures were not taken by the employers, where workers have continued to work until they were tested positive, production continued despite the presence of infected workers; ways of continuing production even though the operation is not within the scope of sectors where production must run during the pandemic. Hence, workers are more exposed to the risk of infection and COVID-19 has become a working-class disease, as emphasized in the OHS report.



<sup>26</sup> <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/406407/isciler-maske-takinca-tum-sorun-cozuluyor-mu?a=b5096>, Erişim tarihi: 06.06.2020.



A photograph of a textile factory. In the foreground, several white tables are covered with stacks of blue denim jeans. In the background, several workers wearing blue short-sleeved shirts are working at their stations. The factory has a high ceiling with industrial lighting and metal structures. A semi-transparent orange box with a white border is overlaid on the center of the image, containing a quote.

“

One of the most important findings the field research data reveals is that when everyone wants and is told to “*stay at home*” these days, textile workers cannot have such an option. As unregistered employment is widespread in this sector, workers have no choice but to work because when they do not, they are left with no income or support. Since their desperation cannot be remedied by the government, they have to continue working regardless of the conditions.



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## The Clean Clothes Campaign's Demands

Not only in Turkey, but all over the world, workers are feeling the consequences of brands', retailers', and factory owners' responses to the pandemic, in the form of wage theft, unsafe working conditions, union busting and harassment.<sup>1</sup>

The Clean Clothes Campaign holds brands and retailers responsible for the working conditions of the garment workers in their supply chains. Their business decisions to cancel or limit orders and push down prices create or exacerbate bad working conditions for workers, including wage and severance theft and unsafe working conditions. Brands and retailers must monitor their supply chains and ensure that workers can work safely during the pandemic, that they are paid in full – also during sick leave, lockdown or self isolation –, and that all their rights are respected up to international standards. To ensure that workers rights are respected during the pandemic, a coalition of over 225 trade unions and worker rights organisations in and outside the Clean Clothes Campaign network<sup>2</sup> are calling upon brands, retailers, and factory owners to negotiate and sign a binding agreement directly with unions to be help legally accountable for:

- Paying the workers who make their clothes their full wages, including back wages owed since the beginning of the pandemic;
- Making sure workers are never again left penniless if their factory goes bankrupt through a severance guarantee fund; and
- Protecting workers' right to organise and bargain collectively.

### Governments must fulfil their responsibilities:

- All unregistered workers must be registered and their rights must be protected by law.
- Authorities responsible for auditing must ensure that workplaces provide healthy working conditions by performing their inspection duties.
- Ensure compliance to the preventive legislation issued under pandemic, by workplaces.

<sup>1</sup> [http://cleanclothes.org/un\(der\)paid](http://cleanclothes.org/un(der)paid), <https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Hunger-in-the-Apparel-Supply-Chain.pdf>, [https://media.businesshumanrights.org/media/documents/files/200805\\_Union\\_busting\\_unfair\\_dismissals\\_garment\\_workers\\_during\\_COVID19.pdf](https://media.businesshumanrights.org/media/documents/files/200805_Union_busting_unfair_dismissals_garment_workers_during_COVID19.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> [www.payyourworkers.org](http://www.payyourworkers.org)



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