

Research for Policy and Practice Report Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE)

Why Covid-19 recovery must be gender-responsive

Foreword

The Covid-19 crisis is different from previous crises and has hit women and gender minority communities hardest.

Globally, women lost 46 million jobs whereas men lost 57 million in 2020. In percentage terms, job losses were larger for women, at 3.6 per cent compared to 2.9 per cent for men. Employment has recovered for both women and men during 2021, but at a slower speed for women. The latest projection by the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicates that neither women nor men have recovered their 2019 employment levels. Total jobs for women were approximately 19 million fewer in 2021 than in 2019, while this figure was 10.2 million for men (ILO, 2022). Losses in employment have resulted in economic inactivity (the withdrawal from the labour market) much more than in unemployment, particularly for young women (ILO, 2020).

There are fundamentally three reasons behind these gender-differentiated impacts. First, women's employment dominates in sectors severely impacted by the crisis, from domestic workers to wholesale and retail commerce, accommodation and food services, and some labour-intensive segments of manufacture, like garments. Second, beyond the sector they work in, women are over-represented in informal or casual employment, making them cheaper and easier to lay off or at risk of losing their livelihoods. Informality has also left women out of the radar of labour market policies, as they are ineligible for unemployment insurance benefits or job preservation subsidies. Third, measures like the closure of schools or restrictions to mobility exacerbated care demands within households that were mostly taken up by women, forcing some women to extend their paid and unpaid hours to unsustainable levels, cut down on paid working hours, or leave employment altogether (ILO, 2021).

The studies included in this Research for Policy and Practice Report supported by the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) Programme of IDRC provide solid evidence about these impacts and the ways ahead. The study by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) provides evidence about informal women workers, be they domestic workers, home-based workers, waste pickers or street vendors, indicating that recovery from the deleterious economic



Domestic worker from Mexico City.

PHOTO: CÉSAR PARRA, WIEGO ARCHIVE

shock is far from complete. The research project REBUILD, from International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) Asia, gives insights to the experiences of domestic workers and street vendors in New Delhi. Finally, the African School of Economics (ASE) study focuses on the effect of Covid-19 containment policies in Benin, Burkina Faso and South Africa, revealing significant differences between the three countries, in particular on their effects on gender-based violence. Based on these diagnostics, all three studies demand gender-responsive policies which focus on: protecting women informal workers' livelihoods; countering food insecurity; providing access to long term social protection, and providing informal workers organisations' the avenues for representation in key decision-making and rule-setting processes.

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Covid-19 and impacts on women informal workers

The majority (61 per cent) of the world's workforce is informally employed. In many developing countries, women are especially likely to be informally employed and are more often found in the most vulnerable forms of employment with lower earnings in comparison to men. New research highlights how the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated women informal workers' precarious employment conditions.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing's (WIEGO) Covid-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy Study draws on the results of a mixed-methods longitudinal study of 1,982 informal workers from four main sectors – domestic workers, home-based workers, waste pickers and street vendors – across 12 cities. The adverse impacts of the pandemic were disproportionately felt by women as a result of the intersection of city-level restrictions, work conditions – including place of work and status in employment – and gendered norms and expectations.

- Home-based workers, predominantly women, were the hardest hit of the four sectors. By mid-2021, they had barely recovered two per cent of pre-pandemic median earnings. Broken local and global supply chains as a result of the pandemic impacted negatively on the demand for the goods and services they produced, limiting their ability to secure livelihoods.
- Domestic workers, predominantly women, showed the greatest signs of recovery by mid-2021. However, 22 per cent of those actively working in mid-2021 were still earning less than three quarters of pre-pandemic earnings and 16 per cent were still unable to work. Domestic workers reported that the pandemic compounded exploitative employment relations, occupational health and safety issues, and mental health strains.
- Among waste pickers and street vendors, the pandemic's adverse economic repercussions were often more pronounced for women when compared to their male counterparts. Women waste pickers were more likely to miss work for two months or more and were also more likely to report increased competition, greater difficulty in accessing waste, and increased exposure to heavier labour as a result of the pandemic. Women street vendors were more likely than their male counterparts to report that their lack of capital – which was more acute than that of men even before the pandemic – constrained their ability to work.
- More than a third of women (35 per cent) and less than a quarter of men (22 per cent) reported that increased unpaid care work – resulting from childcare centre and school closures during the pandemic – prevented them from working or reduced their working hours. Women who reported increased unpaid care work struggle more to work the same number of days and hours as before the pandemic in comparison to other workers.

National and local governments' responses to the pandemic should address women informal workers' specific circumstances and needs. Membership-based worker organisations' (MBOs) knowledge of and ability to reach informal workers have been central in their mutual aid initiatives and claims-making strategies during the pandemic and hold important lessons for governments. Considering MBOs as essential partners could ensure relief and recovery measures efficiently target women and the most vulnerable groups of workers.

Gender sensitive policy recommendations include:

Immediate demands

- Support to recover and improve existing livelihoods through no or low-interest loans, grants, business capital, moratoriums on permits, and fees. Workers have also advocated for procurement quotas for informal workers' services.

Long-standing demands

- Access to long-term social protection, including ambitious investments towards universal social protection and accessible and quality public services, including health care, childcare, and care for older persons. Quality childcare facilities near worksites, which should accommodate workers' long and irregular hours, can support women's time for paid work and ensure better care for children.
- Implementation of enabling urban policies, including the recognition of informal workers' contributions to cities and local economies. Support from local governments should include the access and right to work in public spaces, safe and decent workplace infrastructure, personal protective equipment and a decriminalisation of informal workers and their livelihood activities. Worksites with proper water, sanitation and hygiene facilities can secure women's physical and livelihood security.
- Representation in key decision-making and rule-setting processes that puts women informal workers' needs and solutions at the centre can help build resilience in facing future crises.

To curb the deepening gender poverty gap and gender inequalities, governments must recognise the crucial role the informal economy plays in building a just and inclusive recovery.

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FURTHER READING

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ILO (2018) [*Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture. Third Edition*](#), Geneva: International Labour Organization

Ogando, A.; Rogan, M. and Moussié, R. (2021) [*Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Unpaid Care Work on Informal Workers' Livelihoods*](#), *International Labour Review*, Accepted Author Manuscript

Reed, S.O.; Rogan, M.; Graspá, E.; Ismail, G. and Valdivia, M. (2021) [*The Crisis is Far from Over for Informal Workers — We Need an Inclusive Recovery for the Majority of the World's Workforce*](#), WIEGO Policy Insights No. 8, Manchester: WIEGO

WIEGO (2021) [*There is No Recovery Without Informal Workers Covid Recovery and Post-Covid Reforms: Demands of Informal Worker Organizations*](#), Manchester: WIEGO

Pandemic and the lives of women in the informal economy

The Covid-19 pandemic has wrought an unprecedented socio-economic crisis in India. The situation has meant that health responses to control the pandemic have taken precedence over livelihoods. But in a country where the informal economy is large, the economic losses have made these workers more vulnerable. The impact has been particularly devastating for women in the informal economy (more than two-thirds of the urban female workforce). Existing research suggests that such an economic shock has profound implications for women not only in domains of income and employment but also ownership and control over assets, unpaid work, decision-making, and access to various resources required for well-being (food security, shelter) and autonomy.

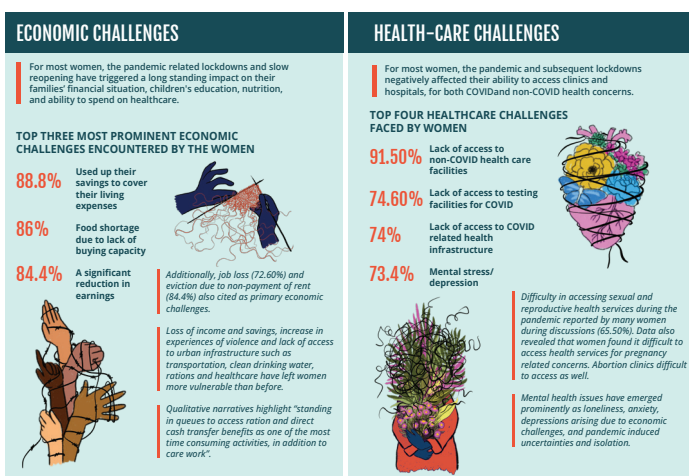
Building upon these early insights, International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) Asia is conducting a research project to assess the impact of Covid-19 policy responses on the urban informal economy in India that aims to make significant contribution towards understanding the experiences of women workers. The project seeks to identify the crucial areas of vulnerability for women workers due to the pandemic (including impact on livelihoods, access to healthcare and experience of violence) and the resilience strategies adopted by them to cope with the challenges. It is using varied approaches including a scoping study; policy analysis (assessing gender responsiveness), and a sequential mixed methods design with an individual level survey with 1,400 women workers and a qualitative study with women workers and subject matter experts. The research focuses on domestic workers and street vendors in the National Capital Region (NCR); two occupations that make up a large part of the urban informal economy. The women in these occupations are often migrants with insecure jobs and low incomes, living in informal settlements inside the city, devoid of civic citizenship, and have been further marginalised due to the pandemic. Our findings below present some of key problems impacting women informal workers.

- Women workers reported loss of employment and wages, depletion of savings, food insecurity, and massive increases in borrowings to overcome the losses.
- Access to reproductive health services, particularly delivery- and abortion-related services, was affected severely due to restrictions on mobility and rerouting of health workers for Covid-19 management. Large parts of the population relied on overburdened health workers to disseminate health care for women on ground.
- While women spoke about domestic violence as a normalised and regular occurrence in their lives, there was an increase in violence during the pandemic. In addition, mobility restrictions, lack of support systems and prioritisation of the Covid-19 response further inhibited access to GBV services.

FURTHER READING

Bussolo, M.; Kotia, A. and Sharma, S. (2021) *Workers at Risk: Panel Data Evidence on the Covid-19 Labor Market Crisis in India*, The World Bank

Deshpande, A. (2020) *The Covid-19 Pandemic and Lockdown: First Effects on Gender Gaps in Employment and Domestic Work in India*, Working Paper 30, Department of Economics, Ashoka University



Economic and health-care challenges faced by street vendors and domestic workers in Delhi.

SOURCE: *Women in Urban Informal Work and Covid-19 in India: A REBUILD Scoping Report*, ICRW (2022)

- Women's unpaid care burden increased considerably owing to closure of schools, increased burden of caring for the sick and elderly at home, and overall greater household demands.
- Increase in episodes of domestic violence, growing loneliness due to social confinement, disproportionate share of household work, and minimal interaction with social support networks aggravated psychological turbulence among women workers.
- While women were facing challenges in different realms, the policy response focused primarily on ensuring food security. Moreover, access to free rations through e-coupons required access to smart phones which many did not have and hence, free rations could not always reach the intended populations. Cash transfers, due to the pre-existing gaps in the coverage of the schemes and the severity of the economic distress caused by the pandemic, did not have the desired effect. Having said that, among all the relief and recovery measures announced, food security was still found to be important for the urban poor.

These findings highlight a need to not only minimise the spread of the pandemic but also protect the livelihoods of women informal workers, counter food insecurity, and enable access to quality healthcare. This could include greater efforts to create formal livelihood options for women workers and provide social protection mechanisms for their economic rehabilitation and overall well-being.

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ICRW (n.d.) *REBUILD: Covid-19 & Women in the Informal Economy in Kenya, Uganda & India*, Washington DC: International Centre for Research on Women

Shekar, K.C. and Mansoor, K. (2020) *Covid-19: Lockdown Impact on Informal Sector in India*, Practice Connect

Socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on African economies, social cohesion, and governance: evidence from Benin, Burkina Faso and South Africa

Gender, income, and other inequalities are prevalent among different minority groups in our societies, and the pandemic shock of Covid-19 has further exacerbated the existing disparities. This briefing presents preliminary results from new research on the effect of Covid-19 containment policies with a focus on gender and sexual orientation in three African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso and South Africa.

The African School of Economics (ASE) study uses mixed methods (national level surveys and interviews) to assess levels of vulnerability caused by the pandemic on marginalised community members, with a focus on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The key findings to date show:

- In Benin, we found no effect of stay-at-home orders on intimate partner violence. However, we did find an increase in intimate partner violence in households that experienced a reduction of income due to Covid-19.
- In Burkina Faso, an analysis of the informal sector revealed that the containment measures caused an increase in economic inequality between men and women. The analysis also reveals that female-led organisations were less likely to use layoff as a means of coping with lost income due to the pandemic.
- In South Africa, the lockdown orders disproportionately negatively affected the LGBTIQ community. The negative effect arose as a result of discrimination and a resulting distrust of the criminal justice system.

In South Africa, Covid-19 has exacerbated the vulnerability of LGBTIQ people and limited access to services such as the police and psychosocial support services, particularly in Alexandra. What the interviews collected during the pandemic reveal is that:

- In South Africa, emergency support institutions were unable to respond to individuals experiencing family displacement for different reasons, including prejudice based on sexual orientation. According to the Sizonqoba LGBTIQ activist network in Alexandra, its members 'couch-surfed' between peers when forced to leave their homes due to prejudice.
- Shelters for SGBV survivors are mainly oriented towards serving 'straight' women and require applicants to have filed a criminal complaint as a pre-condition of admission. This presents a significant barrier for LGBTIQ victims who are dissuaded from reporting to the police because of the high levels of prejudice they face, particularly when reporting SGBV cases.

“Encouraging female entrepreneurship can help to reduce the negative employment effects of future crises”

In Benin and Burkina Faso, the research provides some insight into how the pandemic, through its effect on the economy and the policies implemented to contain it, affected households and firms. In Benin, the results of a national level survey suggest that the policies used to contain the spread of the virus did not have a direct effect on intimate partner violence. However, households that were negatively economically affected experienced an increase in intimate partner violence. **The results suggest that policies that alleviate the financial constraints on households may have an added benefit of preventing intimate partner violence.**

In Burkina Faso, an in-depth analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected among the informal sector economic agents shows that the ban on public transportation, the closure of markets, and curfews are the three main public measures taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 that have had the greatest negative impact on the economic activities of informal businesses. In Burkina Faso, 90 per cent of the workforce work in the informal sector. The analysis revealed an increased level of inequalities between men, women, and youth. In terms of turnover, the results also revealed a greater negative impact for men compared to women. Furthermore, this negative impact has hit young people harder than adults. However, female-led enterprises were the least likely to use layoffs as a strategy to adapt to the crisis. Male-led firms were therefore the ones that contributed most to the increase in unemployment. **The results suggest that encouraging female entrepreneurship can help to reduce the negative employment effects of future crises.**

The analysis in the three countries indicates that biological sex and sexual orientation interact with the pandemic and public policy in complex ways. In South Africa we see that the existing system was inadequate to meet the needs of the LGBTIQ community. In Benin, the negative economic impact from Covid-19 increased intimate partner violence. Finally, in Burkina Faso we find that female-led organisations responded to the negative income shock more compassionately by laying off fewer workers than male-led organisations.

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FURTHER READING

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World Bank (2019) *Creating Markets in Burkina Faso: Growing Burkina Faso's Private Sector and Harnessing it to Bolster Economic Resilience*, Country Private Sector Diagnostic, Washington DC: World Bank Group

Project list

Informal Workers and Covid-19: Evidence-Based Responses to the Crisis at the Base of the Economic Pyramid

Partner: Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organizing Limited (WIEGO)

This project focuses on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns on the livelihoods and health of poor workers, especially women, in the informal economy. It will do so using a mixed-methods longitudinal study that includes a large-scale survey of informal workers spanned over ten cities across eight countries, with a focus on four groups of informal workers that predominantly employ women: domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, and waste pickers.

Further information: <https://c19re.org/project/informal-workers-and-covid-19evidence-based-responses-to-the-crisis-at-the-base-of-the-economic-pyramid/>

REBUILD: Covid-19 & Women in the Informal Economy in Kenya, Uganda & India

Partner: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

This project focuses on urban informal economic activities across three countries (India, Kenya, and Uganda), where the researchers will provide critical insights into the resilience of and challenges faced by women and their broader social 'ecosystem'. The ultimate goal of the research is to inform policies and strategies that ensure vulnerable populations, such as female workers in urban informal economies affected by Covid-19, can recover and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

Further information: <https://c19re.org/project/economies-beyond-emergencies-assessing-impacts-of-covid-19-policy-responses-on-informal-workers-in-india-kenya-and-uganda/>

Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on African Economies, Social Cohesion, and Governance: Evidence from Benin, Burkina Faso and South Africa

Partner: African School of Economics (ASE)

Research partners: Groupe de Recherche et d'Analyse Appliquées pour le Développement & The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

This project will contribute to policies and strategies to address the immediate and longer-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on economies, social cohesion, and governance in Benin, Burkina Faso, and South Africa. The research team will investigate the negative income shock and state regulations resulting from the pandemic and their corresponding effects on social cohesion, governance, and violence (including violent extremism) in Africa. The project will contribute to enhancing collaboration between researchers in Africa and strengthen their contribution to the development of effective and rapid responses to the social and economic effects of the pandemic in Africa.

Further information: <https://c19re.org/project/socio-economic-impact-of-covid-19-on-african-economies-social-cohesion-and-governance-evidence-from-benin-burkina-faso-and-south-africa/>

This summary highlights key learning from research from the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) initiative focusing on the impact the pandemic is having across different vulnerable groups and how gender intersects and often exacerbates these effects. Supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), CORE brings together 21 projects to understand the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, improve existing responses, and generate better policy options for recovery. The research is being led primarily by local researchers, universities, thinktanks and civil society organisations across 42 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

This output was published by the CORE Knowledge Translation Programme, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), which supports the translation of knowledge emerging from the CORE initiative. It was written in collaboration with CORE research teams from the African School of Economics (ASE), International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), and collated by Jessica Meeker, Knowledge Officer (IDS). CORE's knowledge translation goals are to connect the research with policymakers and practitioners. The initiative is identifying synergies between projects and grant-holders, supporting researchers as they exploit influencing and engagement opportunities, and facilitating mutual learning.

 c19re.org

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