



Women in Informal Employment:  
Globalizing and Organizing

WIEGO Workers' Lives N° 9  
December 2020

# Undeterred in the Face of a Crisis

## Profile of a Market Trader in Durban, South Africa

*by Sarah Heneck*

Romilla Chetty is a successful third-generation trader in Durban's Warwick Junction and a determined advocate in the struggle for traders' rights. But when the COVID-19 response shut down her busy market, she and her colleagues faced their greatest struggle yet.





Durban's Warwick Junction in 2018.  
Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

Cover: In 37 years of trading, Romilla has expanded the family business from two stalls to six. Romilla's table (opposite) in Warwick Junction's Early Morning Market is a flurry of colour. Photos: Sarah Heneck



**O**n a bright October morning, Romilla Chetty effortlessly lifts 10-kilogram bags of potatoes off a delivery truck and throws them to one of her helpers, who divides them into smaller denominations and sets them up on the trading table. Romilla offers instruction, switching from English to isiZulu with ease. The potatoes take up only a small portion of space. The rest of Romilla's table is a flurry of colour. Herbs and spices, dry goods and fresh goods, all neatly positioned and waiting to be purchased, as has been the case since Romilla's grandfather began trading in Warwick Junction's Early Morning Market (EMM) in 1950.

As a third-generation trader and the first woman in her family to run the business, Romilla knows how to stand her ground. When she first took over the business from her father in the late 1980s, she was a "woman in a man's world"—one of the very first women to purchase goods from the bulk market. It was tough at first, but she was determined to make a success of herself. And she has. In 37 years of trading, she has expanded the family business from two stalls to six. Competition is fierce in this inner-city fresh produce market, where a majority of traders sell similar goods, but she has kept her prices low and built up a base of loyal customers.

Romilla wakes up at 3:30am every morning and leaves home by 5am to get to the bulk market to buy stock for the day. Her two assistants, Zoleka and Thandeka, set up the stall and when she arrives at 10am, she works alongside them until closing time. After all these years, she still finds her work exciting and says that "no two days are ever the same."

Although the days are long and the work tiring, she is especially glad to be back at work now, after long months of being shut out of the market—months when her family suffered with no income.

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## The fight for traders' rights

As well as owning six profitable trading stalls—five of which are managed by other people—Romilla has proven to be a determined advocate for the rights of traders in the market. She has been the secretary for the EMM Traders Association for the past 20 years. She sees the EMM trading community as “one big family.” That family has been lucky to include powerful women like Romilla during several crises, and especially in the time of COVID-19.

Warwick Junction is a transport hub at the heart of Durban; it connects the northern suburbs to the southern suburbs, the rural areas to the urban ones. It is the conduit through which people travel to and from their jobs, and a location where thousands of informal workers earn their livelihoods. They sell *mealies* (corn on the cob), bovine head meat, *phutu* (maize meal) and beans to hungry commuters, and clothes and hats and beads. It is constantly bustling; within what looks like chaos to an outsider, there is a functioning system that has been sustained for many years, despite a lack of government support.

In 2008, prior to the 2010 FIFA World Cup held in South Africa, the municipality planned to demolish the Early Morning Market and replace it with a supermarket. Asiye eTafuleni, a Durban-based NGO which focuses on enhancing the lives of informal workers, worked alongside the market traders to stop the construction. At that time, Romilla was very vocal in the fight to protect the market and the rights of her fellow traders. After months of tireless campaigning (and legal battles), **plans for the shopping mall were scrapped**. This was an important victory that both galvanized traders and helped to highlight the historical and current importance of the EMM as one of Durban's major food hubs.

However, since this battle, the municipality has badly neglected the space. The market is run-down and in desperate need of restoration. The same can be said of the majority of trading spaces in Warwick Junction (and in the city of Durban as a whole). Across the board, ablution facilities are in poor condition, often lacking running water, toilet paper and closing very early in the day. **Research by WIEGO and IIED** has shown that in Durban, informal traders spend 8–12 per cent of their monthly earnings on water and toilet expenses. Waste removal happens far too infrequently, and leaks and broken lights are only fixed after months of complaints, if at all. Furthermore, harassment and destruction of goods at the hands of the authorities is commonplace.

## Lockdown brings a new battle

Despite this neglect, the market traders were able to make a living. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the South

African government announced a national lockdown from March 27th, 2020—and informal trade came to a sudden halt.

The South African Informal Traders Alliance (SAITA), of which the EMM Traders Association is a member, quickly took action. SAITA joined forces with WIEGO and other advocates to demand that informal traders be included in the Disaster Management Regulations. On April 2nd, the government deemed informal food traders an **essential service**—but only if they had municipal authorization and permits. Several municipalities balked, however, saying they were closed. It took more concerted advocacy, with traders' representatives leveraging the connections they have built in recent years, for the government to respond by telling municipalities to open offices and ensure traders could get the necessary permits.

And even then, the Early Morning Market remained closed.

“We left the market on the 27th of March, thinking that we would be back in a month's time, but that certainly did not happen,” Romilla recalls. “We experienced problems for over six months with getting the market opened.”

The municipality barred EMM workers from entering the market for three months (despite promising it would only take six weeks) arguing the market needed to be ‘cleaned’. When the traders were eventually allowed back to work in July, only one of the eight gates into the market was opened. Due to the way the market is configured, and because many of the traders sell similar goods, this meant that only the traders situated near the single open gate had customers. Furthermore, the operating hours of the market were shortened and barrow operators (porters who use wheelbarrows to transport produce from the wholesalers to

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Romilla and her husband, Dillon, who works with her in the market.  
Photo: Sarah Heneck

the traders' stalls) were not allowed to work. These factors all contributed to a devastating loss of income for the EMM traders, many of whom are still struggling to make ends meet or keep their businesses afloat many months after the lockdown commenced.

While it appeared that the South African government was changing its attitude towards the informal economy when they declared informal food vendors (and later on, informal recyclers) an essential service, their support for the sector stopped there. Across the country, all levels of government have remained disconnected from the informal sector and the needs of informal workers during this unprecedentedly challenging year. Rather than trying to assist informal workers, their responses have been punitive. Over the past few months, Asiye eTafuleni reports, numerous informal workers have been forced off the streets by law enforcement officials because they were unable to acquire the correct permit.

### Dire circumstances for informal traders

There is a false yet widespread belief that the informal sector is resistant to shocks felt by the formal sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has again made it clear that this is not the case. In addition to the hurdles that the EMM traders faced, numerous factors resulted in a dramatic **decline in income for all types of informal workers across the country**, with women informal workers being particularly hard hit.

For traders, disruptions in their supply chains, a lack of customers due to fewer people travelling to and from work, and an inability to restock were significant issues. Before

the lockdown, the average number of days worked per week by market traders who took part in a WIEGO-led **COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy Study** was 6.1. In July, when the majority of the South African economy had reopened, the average number of days worked per week had dropped to 2.5. Prior to the pandemic, 22 per cent of informal workers in South Africa were surviving below the poverty line (Bonnet et al., 2019); this proportion is expected to be far higher post-lockdown.

Romilla's husband, Dillon, works with her in the market, so for more than four months their joint income was zero. They are far from alone. WIEGO's *Crisis Study* found 47 per cent of market vendors were forced to borrow money to make it through the lockdown period. In South Africa, informal money lenders, referred to as 'loan sharks,' charge very high interest rates. Informal workers, who usually do not have payslips, credit records or even bank accounts, are often left with little choice but to make use of this form of money lending when they are in dire straits. Romilla and Dillon, however, were lucky enough to have some savings, and to be able to get additional financial support from their two eldest children. This ensured that they and their youngest child, who is 23 and studying, did not go hungry during this period.

However, Romilla says that during this lean time, she was shocked at the amount she was spending on food. She usually purchases all her produce at the EMM, but while it was closed, she was forced to buy goods from the supermarket at more than four times the price she was used to paying. "It was really, really difficult times during the lockdown because your money was not even taking you for much."

An increase in the price of food at formal retail outlets has been felt across South Africa. Close to 70 per cent of households in poorer neighbourhoods frequently source food from informal retail outlets (PLAAS 2020) and more people are employed in the informal food sector than the formal one (Wegerif 2020). A report published by the Competition Commission in September noted that although at first, increased food prices were related to a weakening rand and panic-buying due to the pandemic, some stores took advantage of the situation and hiked up their prices far more than was necessary. Furthermore, although wholesalers have generally returned their prices to pre-lockdown levels, retailers have not followed suit with many of their goods.

This is especially concerning when it relates to essential items. **Research conducted in Pietermaritzburg** (a city situated 78 kilometres from Durban) between March and May 2020 showed that, for instance, the price of onions increased by 58 per cent, carrots by 22 per cent and rice by 26 per cent. A decrease (or complete loss of) income, combined with higher food prices, has led to a worrying increase in food insecurity. The WIEGO *Crisis Study* found

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Romilla with Zuleka, who helps her in setting up and running the stall.  
Photo: Sarah Heneck



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### Elusive government supports

After the president announced that the country would be going into lockdown, Romilla visited the manager of the EMM to ask whether the traders would be receiving any relief funds from the government. She says she left that meeting without any valuable information.

During strict lockdown, the South African Social Security offices were closed, meaning applications had to be completed online. Many informal workers do not have internet access. In May 2020 President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a R350-a-month COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant. Romilla did not put in an application because her fellow traders who had, had all been unsuccessful.

Many women informal traders received financial assistance through the top-up to the Child Support Grant, but Romilla does not receive child support money so she was not eligible. Thus, Romilla entered and exited the lockdown with no financial support from the government. Out of the 180 participants who took part in the WIEGO *Crisis Study*, only 39 per cent reported receiving cash assistance from the government.

Romilla has not only suffered from financial hardship during the pandemic, but emotional hardship as well. Three of her fellow traders in the market contracted the coronavirus and passed away. Due to the close-knit nature of the EMM community, these deaths caused a lot of anguish. Romilla's face reveals her grief over the losses. Many of the older traders have still not returned to work out of fear of contracting the coronavirus.

Older informal workers worldwide face a difficult decision around returning to the workplace. They are at higher risk of falling very ill if they contract the coronavirus, but many of them cannot afford not to work. This spotlights the urgent need for better social protection for older workers. Adequate health and safety protocols is also imperative, in order to ensure that informal workers, particularly those who are more vulnerable, can earn a living without having to fear sickness and death.

### Health and safety guidelines

In the early days of the pandemic, health and safety guidelines specifically relevant to the informal sector did not exist. How do you wash your hands between customers, for example, if there is no running water available? WIEGO and



Durban's Warwick Junction in 2018.  
Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

Asiye eTafuleni supported by public health experts developed **guidelines aimed** at preventing the spread of the coronavirus. Asiye eTafuleni has also initiated a "health champion" programme wherein informal workers are equipped with the knowledge and tools (such as handwash stations) to keep their work environments hygienic. These health champions disseminate their knowledge amongst their colleagues so that areas like Warwick Junction, which has close to 500 000 commuters travelling through it every day, do not become viral hotspots.

Over 90 per cent of informal workers who took part in the WIEGO *Crisis Study* reported that they used Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) daily. Asiye eTafuleni provided masks for 200 informal workers at the beginning of the lockdown and has been distributing sanitizer at no cost every Friday since June. Due to the lack of provision of any kind of PPE from the government, the majority of informal workers across South Africa had to dip into their already very shallow pockets to purchase their own to keep themselves and their customers safe. The **prices of masks and hand sanitizer skyrocketed** in March, in some cases by 300 per cent, making them unaffordable to most informal workers.

### The power of a positive outlook

Despite the battery of hardships brought on by COVID-19 and the response to it, Romilla's ever-optimistic nature allowed her to see the bright side in a largely depressing situation. "It has been an eye opener for me. I introduced myself to new cooking methods and baking and I kept myself busy trying to clean out my cupboards and you know, things like that."

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Romilla did much more than focus on herself, her family and her domestic tasks during the lockdown. She once again became a powerful advocate for her community. After the municipality allowed only one gate to be opened into Warwick's EMM, she made numerous appeals to the municipality to open the rest of the gates and to reinstate the regular trading hours. When they did not receive a response, Romilla and her colleagues decided to prove to the municipality that adequate measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus could be upheld with all gates open. They ensured that all the traders were equipped with sanitizer and that all of the trading tables were at least 2.5 metres apart. Then they created rosters for each of the gates, designating certain traders the responsibility of ensuring that customers' hands are sanitized as they enter the market.

The approach has met with some success. They have succeeded in getting four of the gates opened and will continue to fight until their market is restored to its pre-lockdown state.

Romilla is likely to continue to work in the EMM for some time. Her hope is that the municipality truly recognizes the value of informal workers and treats them as such.

"Being the brave person that I am, I have overcome my fear of the virus and have learnt to live with it because it is going to be part of our lives," she says. "We just got to be extra careful."

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#### About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)

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