

#6 Social Protection Responses to Covid-19

Addressing the care burden challenges amid the pandemic

Introduction

Women across the globe have found themselves at the frontline of COVID-19 responses and impacts. On the one hand, as they make up the majority of workers in healthcare and social services in many countries, women face a greater risk of contracting the virus. On the other hand, structural barriers related to unequal economic opportunities, coupled with prevalent gender biases, mean that women's jobs, businesses and incomes are likely to be more exposed than men's to the economic fallout from the crisis. These risks are particularly acute for certain categories of informal workers who lack job, income and social security, including domestic workers, agricultural workers and small traders, among whom women are over-represented, as well as migrant workers and refugees¹.

Furthermore, containment measures to curb the spread of the pandemic have increased women's unpaid care work as they take on the additional burden of home schooling and taking care of the sick and the elderly. Recent research on the impact of COVID indicates that in many places lockdowns and curfew measures have worsened already high rates of domestic violence.² It is vital therefore that governments, the private sector and civil society adopt gender sensitive measures and initiatives to mitigate the impact of the crisis on women. In this brief we look at various measures governments have introduced to alleviate the care burden for women informal workers.

While childcare is indeed an important aspect of the care burden it is essential to remember that free or subsidised childcare is not the only way to alleviate the caring burden. In this brief we therefore also look at government food security programmes, especially school feeding schemes and food parcel home deliveries, old age, child care and disability pension top ups, gender violence support services and the provision of flexible working hours and paid leave as other initiatives that can contribute towards alleviating the burden of care and acknowledging gender sensitive policy planning in response to COVID.

¹ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 'COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses' 10 June 2020, p. 2.
<http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-in-the-mena-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses-ee4cd4f4/>

² OECD, 'COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region', p.2.

Childcare

One essential aspect of the care burden is that of childcare. As the pandemic hit, many childcare facilities and schools across the globe closed down, leaving essential workers and informal workers - who could not stop working - without adequate childcare options. According to the [World Bank response tracking](#), only 9 countries have implemented some sort of childcare support measures, most of them in Western Europe. Other care measures, such as school feeding schemes, appear to have been much more widely implemented.

This reveals a distinctly gendered dimension to the crisis as women bear the brunt of caring responsibilities. In South Africa, for example, when schools closed during the month of April workers had to balance their time in the labour market with an unexpected increase in household responsibilities. Data from the first wave of the [South African National Income Dynamics Study Coronavirus Rapid Mobile \(NIDS-CRAM\) Survey](#), reveals that 65% of women in informal employment reported spending more time in April taking care of children (compared with 58% of men). The uneven increases in the responsibility for caring for children in April were particularly pronounced among informal employees where 70% of women (and only 50% of men) reported an increase in childcare responsibilities.³

Informal workers who are parents, and particularly women, had to balance an increase in childcare responsibility with the need to earn an income. This resulted in women informal workers experiencing a larger decrease in working hours and earnings during the crisis period, relative to men. The reduction in women's typical working hours in the informal economy between February and April was almost 50%. Accordingly, the overall gender gap in earnings in the informal economy widened noticeably between February and April, and women in informal self-employment reported earning considerably less.⁴

This suggests that childcare is not considered to be a policy priority, and as a particular form of care is overlooked. Even with the strictest lockdowns not very much was done to ensure that childcare facilities were made available to essential workers. This suggests a lack of gender sensitivity in COVID emergency response measures worldwide.

In Latin America, the government of Costa Rica decided to keep childcare facilities open for those [families that have not suspended their activities](#) and needed to work even during the containment measures/partial lockdown. According to the government statement, this measure was implemented to stop the “ transfer [of] the care burden to older persons, which are part of

³ Michael Rogan, and Caroline Skinner 'The Covid-19 crisis and the South African informal economy 'Locked out' of livelihoods and employment', 15 July 2020, p.21. <https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Rogan-Covid-crisis-and-the-South-African-informal-economy.pdf>

⁴ Rogan, and Skinner 'The Covid-19 crisis and the South African informal economy, p.22.

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the risk group that constitute their family support network”. In [Trinidad and Tobago](#), the government ruled that working parents who have no support system to care for their children would be able to access pandemic leave during the closure of schools.

In the Middle-East and North Africa region, after pressure from women’s groups, the Jordanian government decided to ease the previous measures that determined the closing of day-care centres. In June, the [government issued regulations under which day-care centres could reopen](#). These regulations included obliging all nursery workers to test negative for the coronavirus before returning to work, amongst other precautions.

In South Korea, the government implemented a measure to support childcare to low-income households as they shift from child day-care to homecare, in which the worker would be entitled to a grant of ₩50,000/day (US\$ 4.2).

Offering women paid leave or flexible working hours is another way of supporting women to manage their work and care responsibilities. [In the Palestinian Authority](#), measures have been taken to support working women with childcare responsibilities as schools and nurseries were forced to close. In particular, the government has instructed companies to allow women employees with children below the age of 10 years old to take exceptional paid leave or offer them flexible working arrangements. Similar measures have been implemented in [Egypt](#), where pregnant women or mothers of children under the age of 12 have been granted exceptional leave, pursuant to a ministerial decree aimed at enabling all working mothers to perform their family duties without losing their job. While these measures are more likely to be targeted at formal workers - the same principles could be applied to certain sectors within the informal economy. For example, offering flexible working hours for domestic workers and home-based workers.

School Feeding

According to a [World Food Programme estimate](#), 161 countries have closed their schools because of the pandemic. This meant that some 346 million children have missed out on meals at school globally. This is a very important aspect of children development, as in many countries the food provided by the school is the main meal of the day for millions of children.

As the countries have enforced lockdown measures, authorities in many of those places implemented policies to ensure the food provision for children, with Latin America leading the way. According to the World Bank review, 27 programmes were implemented by 25 countries around the world. In Argentina, Belize, Bulgaria, Colombia and Dominican Republic, governments distributed school feeding food stocks as take-home rations. In many countries, this has represented an important logistical effort. In Chile, for instance, 1.8 million food baskets were delivered every month, since the beginning of the pandemic. In total, [12 million units were delivered](#) for children and adolescents from March to August across Chile. In the case of

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Guatemala, the government has arranged with parent associations to organize take-home rations for pick up at school level. While in Bolivia, a Family Grant (Bono Familia) of 500 bolívanos (US\$ 72) was paid to poor families with children of school going age, as a food security measure, since these children normally received breakfast at school.

A decentralized approach was adopted in Brazil, where legislation was passed allowing mayors to use resources from the National Education Development Fund (FNDE) to purchase and distribute food baskets to students. Outside Latin America and the Caribbean region, in India, the Kerala state government delivered food ingredients for mid-day meals to over 300,000 children studying in 33,115 anganwadis (rural childcare centres) closed due to the pandemic. Here, teachers resolved the challenge of distribution by packing and delivering the supplies themselves. Taking a similar route, the Western Cape provincial government of South Africa allocated extra funds to support the 483,000 children that are beneficiaries of the province's School Nutrition Programme.

In turn, Cape Verde adopted a targeted strategy focusing on the most vulnerable children. Here the Government launched a programme to support 30,000 children from the poorest households. In Jamaica, instead of food, the families with children enrolled in primary and secondary schools who are beneficiaries from the country's conditional cash-transfer (PATH) received a top-up of J\$150 (US\$ 1) per day, while children in early childhood development are receiving J\$100 (US\$ 0,70) per day for school feeding while school is closed. Similarly, in Trinidad and Tobago, families with children enrolled in the national school feeding programme and had their income affected by the pandemic were granted a temporary food card voucher equivalent to US\$ 75.

Pension and child grant top ups

Topping up pensions, or the provision of special grants for the elderly and infirm, offer other avenues for supporting care work, as they contribute to keeping older people safer. The State of Delhi in India, for example, doubled its pension for widows, differently abled and the elderly, covering 850,000 beneficiaries, for one month during the pandemic. South Africa supplemented its Child Support Grant (CSG) by R300 per child in May 2020, and then by R500 per caregiver for five months. The cook islands implemented a one-off payment to be paid on top of the current welfare payment in the amount \$400.00 per beneficiary to assist the most vulnerable as they are not only at health risk from the COVID19 but also likely to be exposed to its economic impact. This cash grant was only available to those who are currently on the welfare list of infirm, destitute and pensioners.

In Argentina, the government included the vulnerable older population who benefited from the non-contributory pension scheme (PUAM) to the eligible beneficiaries from a life insurance programme, the Subsidio de Contención Familiar (SCF). This benefit was originally designed to

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benefit retired workers families from the formal sector. The SCF amount, in turn, was increased from AR\$ 6,000 to AR\$ 15,000.

In the case of South Africa, while these measures would have made an important difference, they have been criticized for being insufficient in terms of amount and limited in terms of reach. The Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group calculates the monthly cost of securing a basic nutritious diet for one child at R670 and a modest monthly household food basket at R3,474. This puts the R500 supplement per caregiver into better perspective. Such a grant will contribute towards necessities, but not cover such costs. The Institute for Economic Justice also points out that limiting the CSG increase to each caregiver, not each child, means almost one-third less support to the poorest people, and an additional 2 million people below the food poverty line.⁵

Recognising the vulnerability of informal women workers to domestic violence

The enhanced care burden that informal women workers are facing coincides with women spending greater time at home. This, in turn, can increase the vulnerability of all women, including informal women workers, to domestic or gendered violence. Being confined and isolated during a lockdown along with a lack of work routine, and enhanced financial and livelihood worries, may exacerbate existing abuse, or create an environment where it occurs for the first time.

A recent [ILO COVID 19 Response Report](#) notes that many countries have been testifying to an escalating incidence of domestic violence since the COVID-19 outbreak and accompanying lockdown. [WIEGO's rapid assessment](#) on the impact of public health measures on informal workers' livelihoods and health confirms this, reporting that "lockdown measures are increasing the threat of domestic violence among women informal workers." This is another clearly gendered dimension of the pandemic which must be recognised and addressed.

Furthermore, being cooped up at home during the pandemic makes reporting and seeking help even harder, particularly if a survivor is unable to leave the house to go to work or carry out other routine tasks. Acknowledging the value of women's unrecognised care work - and the disproportionate burden they bear during any crisis in terms of caring - also means acknowledging women's greater vulnerability to domestic violence. The government of Lebanon has done this by setting up a new hotline for cases of domestic violence during COVID-19. Home-Based Workers in South Asia too, understand this, and this is why access to dedicated

⁵ Rogan, and Skinner 'The Covid-19 crisis and the South African informal economy, p.10 -11. <https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Rogan-Covid-crisis-and-the-South-African-informal-economy.pdf>

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emergency services in cases of domestic violence or other legal emergencies have been demanded in their recent [Charter of Demands by HomeNet South Asia](#).

Concluding thoughts

Adopting a gender sensitive approach to COVID-19 relief planning, requires thinking more broadly about the meaning of caring work, while simultaneously acknowledging the central importance of affordable, convenient and quality child care, as an enabling factor for all women workers but especially those in the informal sector.

As governments put together important economic and social programmes to counteract the impact of the pandemic and prepare their post-crisis relaunch, could the crisis open up a new space for acknowledging the value of caring work in longer term planning and policy? The COVID-19 pandemic represents also an opportunity for countries to address the structural issues facing women and girls which have been exacerbated by the crisis. Only time will tell.

COVID 19: StreetNet International and WIEGO engagement & updates

StreetNet International launches a series of COVID-19 response [Best Practices and Guidelines](#) drawing on affiliate initiatives from around the world.

Laura Alferts, Director of WIEGO's Social Protection Programme, participated in a webinar on *Social Protection in Southern Africa: The Role of Social Protection and Emergency Response to COVID-19* hosted by the Southern African Social Protection Experts Network (SASPEN) <http://www.saspen.org/home/en/> As well as one on [Care and Labour Rights](#)

Rachel Moussié SPP Deputy Director took part in a webinar on [Accelerating the Realization of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of all Women and Girls](#) hosted by the President of the

UN General Assembly on the 21st July and attended the launch of the [Women's human rights in the changing world of work](#) report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights Working Group on Discrimination Against Women. This report incorporates recommendations submitted by WIEGO.

ABOUT WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.