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## #8 Social Protection Responses to Covid-19

*Measures to tackle gender-based violence amid the global pandemic*

### Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic represents both a health and economic crisis, but it has also created many other challenges for countries related to the strict and prolonged lockdown period and its aftermath. One of the most concerning of these is the global increase in gender based violence, also referred to as [COVID's "shadow pandemic" by UN Women's Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka](#). While the home is widely recognised as the site of such violence, it is important to remember that women are equally vulnerable to harassment and violence in the workplace and in other public spaces. This is especially the case with women informal workers, who lack the security of a formal workplace and its amenities (such as toilets, and security), the social status that such formal work affords (including decent wages and living conditions) and remain unprotected by labour legislation.

According to the UN Women estimates, globally, 35 per cent of women have ever experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, or sexual violence by a non-partner, and, on average, 137 women are killed every day by a member of their own family. Gender-based violence can occur [across the life course and may be exacerbated in older age](#). During the pandemic, the problem got much worse, with lockdown measures creating tension and strain for many households burdened by security, health, and money worries, while simultaneously increasing isolation for women with violent partners, separating them from the communities and resources that could best provide support.

As a result, calls to helplines increased five-fold in some countries as rates of reported intimate partner violence increased during this period, also according to UN Women. In the [UK, Domestic abuse killings tripled amid Covid-19 lockdown between 23 March and 12 April](#), compared to the average of the past ten years. In South Africa, violence against women shot up from the moment the lockdowns began, with the police force's [gender-based violence hotline receiving 2,300 calls in the first five days](#) – nearly three times the rate prior to lockdown. [A short ethnographic study with domestic workers in India](#) has found “increased incidence of abusive environments in their respective homes and [respondents] were desperately looking to return to work despite the risk of getting infected or breaching the enforced lockdown restrictions.”

And there has been no respite from these increasing levels of gendered violence for women in the workplace, where power imbalances are more pronounced for women informal workers due to their gender, status in employment, and place of work.

While harassment and the threat of violence in the workplace is an ongoing concern for informal economy workers, COVID-19 conditions have, in fact, *increased* their vulnerability, especially those working as street traders, and home-based and domestic workers. Domestic workers often experience diverse forms of gender-based violence in their employers' homes due to the unequal power relations that characterise their employment relationship. Equally, this recognition is important for home-based workers who may experience violence in their homes by household members and middle men.<sup>1</sup> COVID conditions have increased the isolation of both these categories of workers, enhancing their vulnerability to such abuse.

Under lockdown conditions, street traders and domestic workers travelling to and from work have been exposed to violence at the hands of public authorities due to curfews.

StreetNet affiliate, the Zimbabwe Chamber of Informal economy Associations (ZCIEA) in Zimbabwe, reports that local governments have used the lock down and accompanying COVID restrictions to “clear markets” and informal trading spaces on the grounds of safety and hygiene, with police harassing and sometimes inflicting violence on traders in the process. Similar threats have been experienced by waste pickers who also operate in highly visible public spaces, such as residential streets and landfills.

Several of SNI's Africa affiliates also report that the gradual re-opening of trade and transport, has meant additional paperwork checks as well as delays and blockages at district, federal and national border points. For female cross border traders in particular, this has meant vulnerability to harassment or violence (in the form of detention, rape, confiscation of goods or financial extortion) by police and border officials. Informal economy workers who are migrants, face similar challenges, and for those who are undocumented, their immigration status creates a further barrier to reporting abuse and seeking help.

Across the globe evictions from places of work or the home have been a reality for the most vulnerable, including many informal workers, leaving families and women in particular, unprotected and out on the street, where the threat of violence from criminal elements or police harassment is ever present.

What is clear is that “Covid-19, and uncertainties around the duration of this pandemic, necessitates interventions on multiple fronts, both short-term and longer-term, in the public and private sphere, to address the specific, multiple intersecting vulnerabilities women face”, emphasises Mercy Brown-Luthango, writing for *Amandla* magazine<sup>2</sup>.

In this brief, we look at three countries, Indonesia, New Zealand and South Africa, that have responded to this shadow pandemic of gender-based violence at home and in the workplace in timely and innovative ways, exploring which elements of their approach could offer best practice lessons for other countries, and where they have fallen short. We also touch on a number of

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<sup>1</sup> WIEGO, 'Violence and Informal Work', WIEGO Briefing note November 2020, p. 4, <https://www.wiego.org/publications/wiego-briefing-note-violence-work>

<sup>2</sup> '[South Africa's 2nd Pandemic: reflecting on gender-based violence during and beyond COVID-19](#)' *Amandla* 71/72 September 2020,

other smaller measures from other countries that have to address the issue of gender-based violence amid the pandemic.

From this analysis several key factors stand out. Having a coherent and coordinated strategy to maintain GBV services while simultaneously keeping survivors and service providers safe, has been important. This is something both Indonesia and New Zealand have got right, with their introduction of national protocols, and efforts to ensure that GBV service providers are classified as essential workers. In numerous other countries, including South Africa, concerted efforts have been made to initiate, expand and strengthen existing channels to report abuse and seek assistance under lockdown conditions, including telephone helplines, text messaging and online chats.

When it comes to tackling GBV, resources are essential but correspondingly these need to be effectively targeted. New Zealand's commitment to GBV is reflected in its budgetary allocations, while Indonesia offers an example of a country that has been able to build partnerships with international development agencies on joint initiatives, to leverage resources.

Despite these important measures, Indonesia, New Zealand and South Africa's policies and legislation, like the majority of countries across the globe, fail to adequately acknowledge and address violence and harassment in the workplace as a central component of tackling GBV. Any coordinated, comprehensive and long-term strategy to tackle gender-based violence must address women's economic marginalisation and exploitation, which entrenches their economic dependency on men<sup>3</sup>. Indonesia's national protocol has attempted to do so, as has South Africa's National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence & Femicide 2020-2030. Yet neither Indonesia nor South Africa, have backed up this commitment by ratifying the [ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention \(No. 190\) and Recommendation \(No. 206\)](#), which calls for a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment.

Violence, based on deeply entrenched gendered roles within the family, workplace and society, is a way to discipline and control women's labour, both inside and outside the home. Therefore, discussions on domestic violence cannot be separated from violence in the world of work and the broader public sphere; as both are intended to suppress and control women's mobility, sexuality and access to resources.<sup>4</sup>

### **Putting national protocols in place**

The existence of adequate guidance and protocols for the victims, careworkers and other professionals dealing with violence against women is key for more effective responses on the ground, especially in a moment where the pandemic could bring uncertainty to all parts involved. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Social Development has issued "[Guidance for the Family Violence and Sexual Violence Crisis Workforce](#)" This document provides guidelines on how to operate – while meeting health and safety expectations that will keep staff and clients

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<sup>3</sup> 'South Africa's 2nd Pandemic'

<sup>4</sup> WIEGO, 'Violence and Informal Work', p. 3.

safe – for the family violence and sexual violence workforce supporting victims during COVID-19 Alert Level 3.

National protocols were also developed by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection to ensure safe reporting and help seeking for violence against women, and safe service provision for both survivors and providers. While support from the UNFPA and UN Women has helped New Zealand to develop other protocols for service providers to protect migrant workers during the pandemic.

Likewise, [Indonesia's Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection has developed a national protocol](#) to ensure the safety of those seeking and reporting gender based violence and those providing GBV services. In Indonesia, as elsewhere, the pandemic has amplified the need for such services. According to official estimates from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, the number of gender-based violence cases increased by 12% during the pandemic. Indeed, the National Commission on Violence Against Women reports that domestic violence contributed to almost two-thirds of 319 reported cases of violence during COVID-19. Data from the Legal Aid Foundation of the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice also [showed up to 110 domestic violence cases have been reported since the lockdown was enforced](#) from March 16 until June 20, which is almost half the number of domestic violence cases reported for the whole year of 2019.

Indonesia's national protocol initiative aims to [strengthen essential services for women and children who experience violence during COVID-19](#). It includes two areas of support: 1) Helping to develop umbrella guidelines and protocol for protecting the rights of women and children in COVID-19 response and recovery, including promoting economic recovery and resilience, responding to gender-based violence, and addressing stigmatization and discrimination against women in marginalized groups; and 2) strengthening the capacity to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, including essential services in the COVID-19 context.

Migrants are often excluded from government COVID relief and economic rehabilitation efforts, due to their lack of citizenship or absence of identity documents. What is best practice about both Indonesia and New Zealand's national protocols is that they not only cover service providers, but migrants as well, who in many instances are informal workers.

### **Ensuring services remain open and accessible**

Across the world, COVID has created a major barrier to accessing GBV services. A UNICEF global survey conducted between 1 May and 14 August 2020, found that [violence prevention and response services have been severely disrupted in more than 104 countries during COVID-19 lockdown](#). Services include psychological support, legal information and intervention, counselling, and referral to shelters and protection services. We know that timing is crucial with the delivery of these. The sooner a survivor is able to access help, the quicker they are able to escape an abusive relationship. The longer a person stays in such a relationship, the greater risk to their health and life.

GBV services need to remain operational and accessible during a pandemic, and those seeking such services also need to be allowed to leave their homes and travel to access these, even under strict lockdown restrictions. This means recognising GBV services as essential services, as well as adapting and strengthening existing channels of support. In New Zealand, one important government response was to declare public agencies and support organisations for survivors of family and sexual violence essential services that would remain staffed during COVID-19 to support anyone experiencing violence. Likewise, in Albania, shelters that take survivors of domestic violence were explicitly highlighted as an essential service.

In South Africa dedicated Thuthuzela Care Centres, [providing a one-stop service for victims of sexual violence at state hospitals have remained open during lockdown](#). While in the Eastern Cape province, community-level service delivery for survivors of GBV, with dedicated focus on women in the informal economy, as well as young girls and women affected by HIV and AIDS, was accelerated through additional support<sup>5</sup>.

Some countries, such as Botswana and Bulgaria, have kept their courts open for urgent cases, like those of domestic violence, while others, such as [Bangladesh and Dominican Republic adopted virtual hearings](#).

Where formal institutions might be less accessible, locally based informal support points have been established. France, for example, has opened pop-up counselling centres and designated pharmacies as safe places where victims of domestic violence can report their situation. In Spain, local authorities in many autonomous communities have set up, in partnership with the pharmacists' association, [an initiative that enables victims of domestic abuse to go to their pharmacy and request a "Mask 19"](#). This is a code word that will prompt the pharmacist to contact the authorities. [A similar measure has been implemented in pharmacies in Argentina](#), where the code word is "barbijo rojo" (red mask)

In other contexts where survivors can't leave the house, supplementary platforms for reporting abuse and seeking counselling can provide a crucial lifeline. In South Africa, proactive efforts by the South African Police Services, government departments and civil society organisations to lend support to victims of domestic abuse during the lockdown have included online and [additional telephonic reporting and counselling services, including a national gender-based violence hotline](#). Countries, such as Australia, Argentina, Chile, Lebanon and Portugal, [have strengthened existing channels, including telephone helplines, text messaging and online chats](#).

The vast majority of the mechanisms and services described above however remain geared towards domestic violence in the home. There remain few channels for reporting and seeking legal, psychological or health-based redress from the various forms of violence that workers in the informal economy experience in the workplace, and that have been exacerbated by COVID conditions. Such workers often lack access to state-provided complaint and recourse mechanisms and lack the financial means to seek legal recourse, nor can they afford to pay

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<sup>5</sup> U.N. Women, '[COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls](#)', p. 6.

legal fees or spend time away from work in legal proceedings.<sup>6</sup> This remains a glaring gap in government and private sector responses.

### **Budgetary commitments**

Whatever policy angle a country might choose to tackle GBV, resources are always essential. Commitment to this problem needs to be reflected in budgetary allocations, especially budgetary allocations made amid the lockdown period. In New Zealand, for example, domestic and sexual violence services received more than NZ\$200 million (US\$ 140 million) in 2020's budget, to respond to increased rates of violence during Covid-19. A holistic response requires interventions dedicated to stop the cycle of violence by focusing on the rehabilitation of perpetrators. To this effect the government of New Zealand has allocated NZ\$ 16 million (US\$ 11.2 million) to services to rehabilitation. While in the case of Indonesia, the government has been able to leverage much needed resources through embarking on joint initiatives to tackle GBV in partnership with UN Women and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

### **Promoting economic recovery and resilience**

While human rights must always foreground the fight against GBV, it is important to remember that much of women's vulnerability is rooted in their economic marginalisation and exploitation. This is especially the case with women informal economy workers. Women make up the majority of those employed in the informal sector, which has been hardest hit by the pandemic. Informal workers have no job security, do not enjoy the protection of labour legislation and cannot access credit. This reinforces their economic dependency on men keeping them trapped in abusive relationships. What this means in the context of COVID is that governments need to make gender-violence prevention initiatives integral to economic and healthcare programmes dealing with COVID-19, stresses Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO African Regional Director.<sup>7</sup>

It also means that government COVID relief and recovery programmes need to seriously address women's needs as workers: from ensuring safe working spaces and improved urban infrastructure, subsidised childcare and unemployment insurance through to skills development and access to credit. This is something Indonesia's national protocol has attempted to do through its focus on promoting economic recovery and resilience as one component of strengthening the capacity to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. It is also evident in South Africa's National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence & Femicide 2020-2030 where Economic Power forms one of the key pillars of the plan. Section 5.2. of pillar Five of the plan in particular calls for 'Safe workplaces that are free of violence against women and LGBTQIA+ persons, including but not limited to sexual harassment'. Yet South Africa like Indonesia and New Zealand have yet to demonstrate this commitment by ratifying the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) and Recommendation (No. 206), which calls for a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment, on the basis that it constitutes a human rights abuse, a threat to equal opportunities, and is

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<sup>6</sup> WIEGO, 'Violence and Informal Work', p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Adepoju 'Gender-Based Violence – The "Shadow Pandemic" Of COVID-19' 26 June 2020, Health Policy Watch, <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/75409-2/>

unacceptable and incompatible with decent work.<sup>8</sup> Without ratification the commitments made in South Africa and Indonesia's national plans remain abstract unfulfilled promises.

On the ground there are also a number of other practical steps that governments and the private sector can take to prevent violence against women in the workplace, and against women informal economy workers in particular. These include; legalising street trade and implementing transparent licensing systems for vendors to protect them from harassment from police and the municipality, improving urban infrastructure, putting gender-sensitive border control procedures and training to tackle the multiple forms of violence women crossborder traders face, and bringing informal workers under existing labour legislation or enacting new pieces of legislation geared towards protecting them against violence at work.

### **Other responses to gender-based violence around the world**

Several measures were taken in different countries to address the constraints that the pandemic brought when dealing with cases of gender-based violence. In Uruguay, the government has [revised protocols to enable health workers to detect cases of domestic violence](#)

Cash grants programmes in different parts of the globe have taken the issue of violence into consideration. In Colombia, one of the requirements for being eligible to one of the income support programmes in response to the Covid-19 crises was not having been reported of domestic violence. From another angle, in Malta, [the Government extended the Rent Housing Benefit Scheme to survivors of violence](#)

## **COVID 19: StreetNet International and WIEGO engagement & updates**

- WIEGO's Informal Economy Podcast released this month's episode, on the topic of gender-based violence. Divided in two parts, the programme featured [Sonia George, from the Self-Employed Women's Association \(SEWA\), in part 1](#), and [Oksana Abboud, international coordinator of StreetNet International, on part 2](#).
- WIEGO Briefing Note "Violence and Informal Work", available in two languages, [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

## **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

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<sup>8</sup> Fiji, Namibia and Uruguay are the only countries to date who have ratified the recommendation which is due to come into force in June 2021.

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).