

The Triple Crisis: Impact of COVID-19 on Informal Workers' Care Responsibilities, Paid Work and Earnings

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Key Findings

Between February and June 2020:

1. Women informal workers who report an increase in their care responsibilities—including cooking, cleaning, child care and care for the ill and older persons—are working fewer days and earning less than other informal workers.
2. Men who report an increase in their care responsibilities work fewer days, but do not see a significant drop in earnings as compared to other men working in the informal economy.
3. Both women and men who report an increase in their care responsibilities have resorted to asset-depleting strategies that deepen intergenerational poverty. For women informal workers, this undermines their capabilities in the long term.

Policy Recommendations

1. Ambitious investments towards universal social protection and accessible public services, including child care, health care and care for older persons, are central to enabling livelihood recovery among women informal workers, creating new decent work opportunities in the care sector, and addressing poverty among informal workers' households.
2. For women informal workers to benefit equally, targeted support to micro and small enterprises in the informal economy and public employment programmes must provide access to quality child care services.
3. Women's increased unpaid care work will affect their participation at multiple levels, including within their worker organizations. Without support their current capacity to lead, provide relief, disseminate information and connect with government services will be deeply compromised.

The COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as a triple crisis. At its origin it is a public health crisis and government responses to contain the virus through lockdowns, border closures and social distancing have led to an inevitable economic crisis. Along with closing creches and schools, these measures contributed to a care crisis. With entire families stuck at home during the lockdown periods of 2020, more time was spent cooking, cleaning and caring for household members. As lockdown measures eased but schools and creches remained closed, informal workers struggled with home-schooling and caring for their young children. This has slowed down their return to work and significantly reduced their earnings. Moreover, not only are informal workers more likely to lose their incomes, they may be at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 due to occupational health and safety risks at work and having less access to basic infrastructure both at home and in the workplace.

Working-class women across the global South, with intersecting disadvantages due to their occupational sector, ethnicity, caste or migrant status, bore an unequal responsibility for unpaid care work prior to the pandemic, limiting their time spent on paid or unpaid work. In addition, this has segregated them into the most vulnerable forms of informal work. The triple crisis is deepening gender inequalities within the informal economy, with [UN Women estimating that women informal workers' income fell by 60 per cent just in the first month of the pandemic](#), likely pushing many of these women out of the labour market permanently and into extreme poverty in the long run.

Drawing on data from the WIEGO-led [COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy Study](#), we highlight the impact increased unpaid care work responsibilities have on women and men's time for paid work, earnings and assets. In this first round of the survey, the impact of the health crisis on unpaid care work responsibilities is not yet visible.

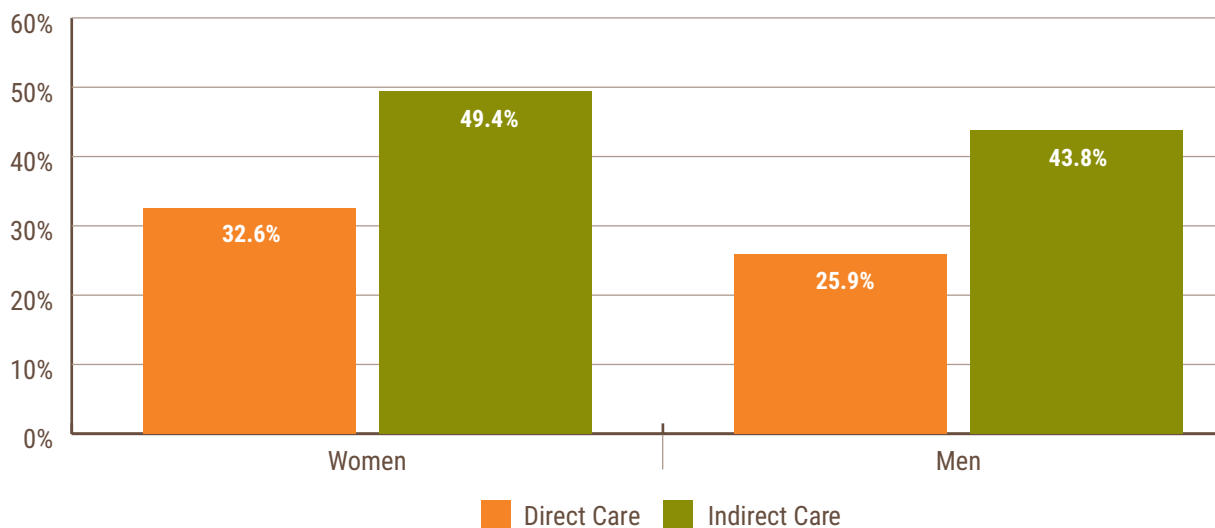


- 1- Accra (Ghana)
- 2- Ahmedabad (India)
- 3- Bangkok (Thailand)
- 4- Dakar (Senegal)
- 5- Dar es Salaam (Tanzania)
- 6- Delhi (India)
- 7- Durban (South Africa)
- 8- Lima (Peru)
- 9- Mexico City (Mexico)
- 10- Pleven (Bulgaria)
- 11- New York City (USA)
- 12- Tiruppur (India)

Time for Paid Work

Both women and men informal workers report an increase in their unpaid care work. This can be broken down into direct care and indirect care responsibilities. Direct care responsibilities in the survey refer to child care and care of the sick and older persons done within households and communities. Indirect care responsibilities include cooking and cleaning and contribute to direct care.

Figure 1: Percentage of women and men who reported an increase in direct and indirect care responsibilities



Source: Authors' calculations from the WIEGO 12-City Study (2020)

In the context of the pandemic, indirect care responsibilities included additional hygiene measures taken to protect workers and their families from contracting COVID-19. This was particularly noted in interviews with informal workers such as street vendors and waste pickers who continued to work in public spaces. As a male street vendor in Bangkok, Thailand, explained:

"Clothes needed to be taken off outside the house...We would boil our clothes as a way to disinfect. For money received from customers, if they were coins, we would boil in hot water, if they were notes, we would steam them. We think this could help disinfect. It was tiring but I had to do it because I have young children, and I am at risk of high blood sugar level."

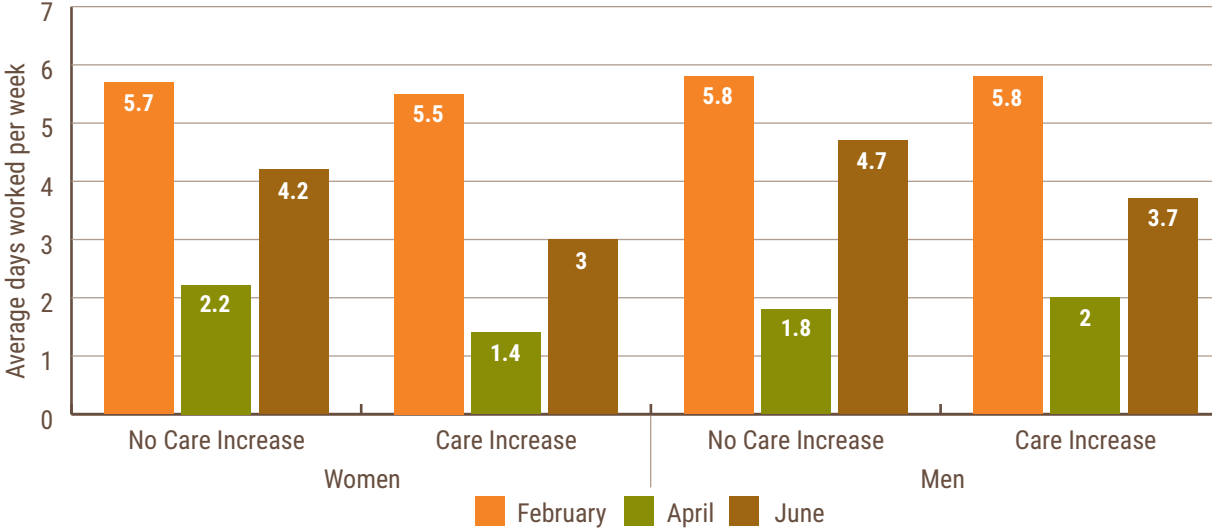
Interviews with worker leaders also revealed the time women spent on home-schooling. This requires supervision during working hours and additional expenses to buy data and borrow a smartphone. This was particularly expressed by informal workers in Mexico City and Lima, as well as by home-based workers in Tiruppur, Ahmedabad and Delhi in India and in Pleven, Bulgaria. A home-based worker in Ahmedabad mentioned:

"Before [home-based workers] would send their children to school and work freely at home as per the timings convenient to them. But, nowadays, they have to take care of their children, make them attend online classes, and help them do their homework."

The noted increases in indirect and direct care responsibilities undermine the capabilities of both the caregivers and care receivers with potential long-term negative consequences.

Patterns across sectors: Increases in both direct and indirect care are remarkably similar among street vendors, waste pickers and home-based workers where between 40 per cent and 50 per cent of women reported an increase in direct care, while just over 60 per cent of women reported increases in indirect care. The largest gender difference appears to be among street vendors where nearly 80 per cent of women and about 50 per cent of men reported an increase in any type of care work during the crisis. Among waste pickers, about 70 per cent of women and 60 per cent of men reported an increase in care work.

Figure 2: Days worked by gender and increase in care responsibilities



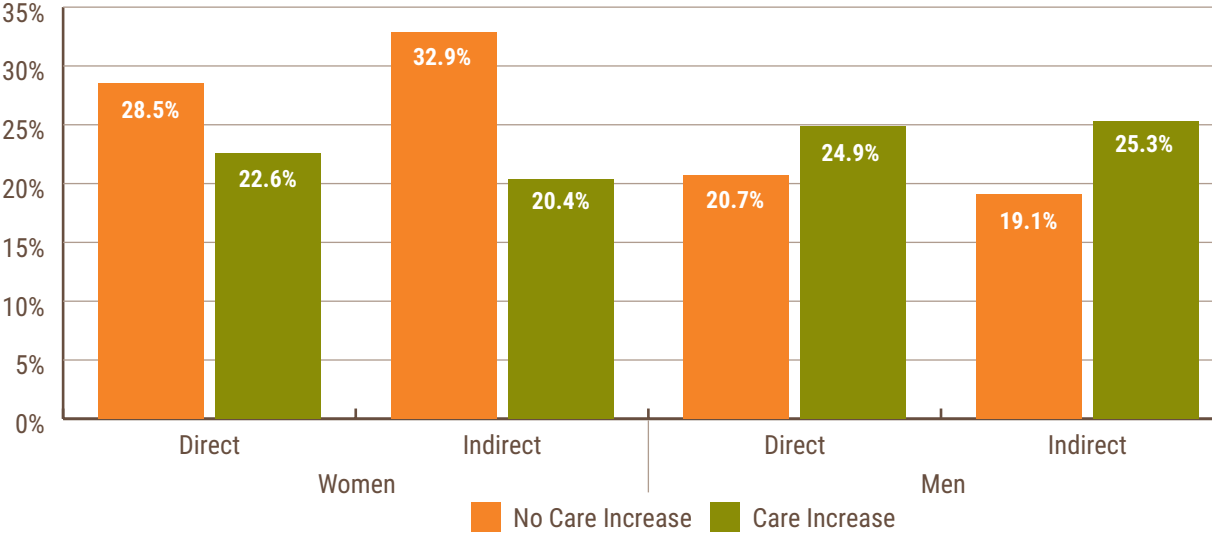
Source: Authors' calculations from the WIEGO 12-City Study (2020)

Both men and women across the 12 cities worked just under six days in a typical week prior to the pandemic. In April, when most workers were living under city restrictions, women who reported an increase in unpaid care work reported working an average of 1.4 days per week. By June and July, women who reported increases in care seemed less likely to return to their pre-crisis working levels. Men with increased care responsibilities were also less likely to return to their pre-crisis working day average – working four days per week as compared to men without increased unpaid care work working nearly six days per week in June.

Earnings

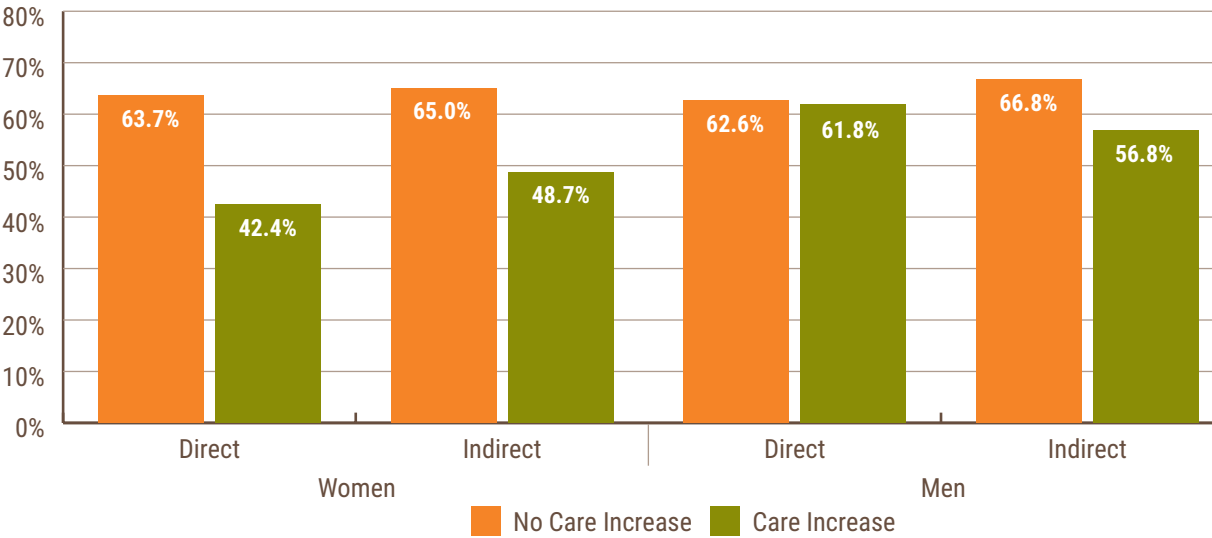
The decline in time spent on paid work resulted in lower earnings for all informal workers in April and June as indicated in Figures 3 and 4. However, women with increased unpaid care work responsibilities had lower earnings than all other informal workers during lockdowns and as restrictions eased. Men with more direct and indirect care work saw an increase in their earnings in April and an insignificant drop in June as compared to other men. This suggests that women informal workers with more significant direct and indirect care responsibilities will require additional support to regain their earnings.

Figure 3: April earnings as a percentage of pre-COVID-19 earnings by gender and type of increase in care responsibilities



Source: Authors' calculations from the WIEGO 12-City Study (2020)

Figure 4: June earnings as a percentage of pre-COVID-19 earnings by gender and type of increase in care responsibilities



Source: Authors' calculations from the WIEGO 12-City Study (2020)

The fall in earnings leads to greater food insecurity, stress, tensions and at times violence borne disproportionately by women informal workers as compared to men. This was highlighted in interviews with women workers in Indian cities and in Mexico City and Lima. As a domestic worker from Mexico City reported:

“The double, triple workloads lead to a physical burden, a stronger physical burden, and mental, psychological one.”

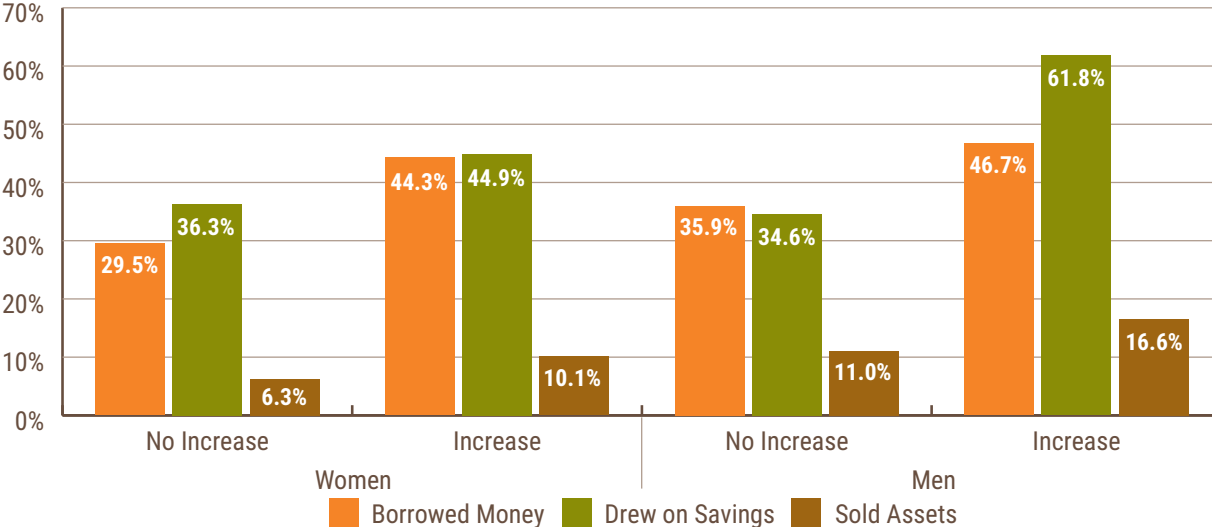
Women street vendors and waste pickers in cities such as Accra, Dakar, Delhi, Durban, Lima and Mexico City also reported difficulties related to child care and the ability to sustain their livelihoods. The longer-term implications for recovery of earnings was expressed by a woman street vendor in Delhi:

“If I don’t earn under the current circumstances, how will I take care of the family and my small kids? We are afraid of going out to work and taking the children. Who will I leave them with, where can I leave them? But then I don’t have food if I stop working.”

Asset-Depleting Strategies

In response to these dire circumstances, informal workers are depleting the few assets they have to cover the costs of basic needs. Women and men who report an increase in care responsibilities are also more likely to borrow money, draw on their savings or sell their assets (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of respondents who resorted to asset-depleting strategies according to whether there was an increase in care responsibilities



Source: Authors’ calculations from the WIEGO 12-City Study (2020)

Beyond the immediate loss of income, this trend points to deepening poverty and gender inequalities in households with dependents requiring care. Without greater government investment in social protection and public services, particularly the provision of health care, [affordable child-care services](#) and basic infrastructure that help redistribute women’s care responsibilities, the impacts of the triple crisis will be felt for a long time and across the many generations who rely on informal workers’ livelihoods to survive.

COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy is a collaboration between Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and partner organizations representing informal workers in 12 cities: Accra, Ghana; Ahmedabad, India; Bangkok, Thailand; Dakar, Senegal; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Delhi, India; Durban, South Africa; Lima, Peru; Mexico City, Mexico; New York City, USA; Pleven, Bulgaria; and Tiruppur, India. The mixed methods, longitudinal study encompasses phone questionnaires of informal workers and semi-structured interviews conducted with informal worker leaders and other key informants. Round 2 will be conducted in the first half of 2021. For more information, visit [wiego.org/ COVID-19-Global-Impact-Study](https://wiego.org/COVID-19-Global-Impact-Study).

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.



This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the **International Development Research Centre**, Ottawa, Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

