



Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing



Between 23 March and 8 April 2020, WIEGO conducted a rapid assessment to understand how COVID-19 and the related public health measures are impacting informal workers in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The rapid assessment included interviews with 21 national or local member-based organizations (MBOs), five regional and global networks of informal workers organizations, as well as a research institute and an NGO that work closely with informal workers.¹

The organizations interviewed represent mainly domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors and market traders, and waste pickers. In most countries, these are highly feminized sectors characterized by vulnerable wage or self-employment. In addition, some member-based organizations interviewed represent workers in other sectors such as shoe shiners in Mexico City, Mexico and newspaper vendors in Lima, Peru.

In these five tables, we present the findings from these interviews. They highlight the impact of evolving public health measures on informal workers' livelihoods. As public responses to COVID-19 are rapidly changing, these interviews represent a specific moment in time. However, many of the economic impacts on informal workers' livelihoods will remain relevant once the crisis subsides and countries transition from a full lockdown to a semi-lockdown or physical distancing. WIEGO will conduct another round of interviews in the next two months to understand how the economic and health crises are affecting informal workers across these sectors.

The impact on informal workers' livelihoods, in many cases, represents a permanent loss of income. In India, local governments are using the lockdown to break up street vending infrastructure. In Colombia, waste pickers do not want to stop work because private companies will use this to justify the transfer of waste management contracts to large private

¹ The global and regional networks of informal workers organizations consulted include HomeNet Eastern Europe, HomeNet South Asia, HomeNet South East Asia, the International Domestic Workers Federation, and StreetNet International. Many of the national MBOs consulted were affiliates of these networks. The local MBOs are those WIEGO works in partnership with in its Focal Cities.

companies. Across South East Asia, home-based workers are concerned that tourism will not return to the region, leaving them no market for their products. Domestic workers are anxious that as their employers lose their jobs, they will not have work to return to even after the lockdown measures are removed.

In certain countries, food vendors in markets and waste pickers are now considered essential workers and allowed to operate. Domestic workers organizations are calling for their members to also be recognized in care worker packages as they provide homecare to the ill and elderly. In Argentina, home-based workers are now producing face masks for the local market. Whether they are recognized formally by the government as essential workers, many informal workers across a broad range of sectors including agriculture, healthcare, childcare and transport are on the frontlines of national responses to the pandemic. This recognition underscores the importance of informal workers to our economies.

Common challenges faced by informal workers include:

- Physical distancing is impossible in over-crowded urban neighbourhoods and informal settlements.
- Informal workers have limited access to information on the virus and how it spreads, and have been the target of misinformation campaigns
- Informal workers often lack soap and/or clean water to wash their hands.
- Informal workers require protective gear to undertake their essential work and daily activities; MBOs are working to acquire it themselves in the absence of government support and in the face of price-gouging and stockpiling by the middle and upper classes
- Meagre daily incomes mean informal workers could not stockpile food and other basics ahead of the lockdown period.
- Mental health challenges are cited as a key concern due to the health and economic uncertainties and their current lack of income.
- Lockdown measures are increasing the threat of domestic violence among women informal workers.
- Women informal workers across all sectors are finding it more difficult to work due to childcare responsibilities as schools and childcare centres are closed.
- Police harassment of informal workers was common across all regions resulting in the confiscation of goods, fines or physical violence and abuse.
- Since many do not have digital bank accounts and/or access to mobile money transfers, restrictions on mobility make it difficult for informal workers to collect income support.
- Urban migrants returning to rural areas are losing their incomes and housing, and have become targets of violence.
- Sense of isolation as, due to lockdown, the support systems have broken down.

“We feel protected now by the measures that we are following, but not by the economic strategies of the government, we’re waiting. We will feel protected when the lockdown ends and the authorities show their intention to include us in the public policies of the city... We hope they include us in employment policies, this reality is showing that we aren’t the problem, we are the solution. Without the informal workers we wouldn’t have food in the markets, and without the smaller markets food wouldn’t get to the farthest districts.”

– Leader in a street vendor organization RENATTA in Peru

Domestic workers

“The number of employers who have provided protections is minimal. They [domestic workers] ask for protections during the workday and the employers use the pretext that, ‘we barely have enough for ourselves.’”

– Interview with domestic worker organization SINACTRAHO, Mexico



Photo: J. Barrett

<p>Border Closures (i.e. between and within countries)</p>	<p>Migrant domestic workers in S.E. Asia are unable to return to work. When the Philippines closed its border unexpectedly in February, migrant domestic workers could not return to their employers in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Malaysia refused entry to returning migrant domestic workers on the grounds that they are not essential workers.</p>
<p>Quarantine</p>	<p>Domestic workers returning from Malaysia or the Philippines lose out on 14 days' worth of income when they are quarantined in Hong Kong.</p> <p>Live-in domestic workers are forced into quarantine with their employers when they fall ill. High exposure to COVID-19.</p> <p>Eight domestic workers in Hong Kong are in quarantine.</p>
<p>Physical Distancing (i.e. schools still open, people encouraged to work from home when possible)</p>	<p>Domestic workers are being given heavier workloads as employers raise hygiene standards. Working without protective or preventive measures in employers' homes increases exposure to COVID-19.</p> <p>Employers who do not respect physical distancing are putting domestic workers at risk of catching COVID-19.</p> <p>Seven domestic workers in Hong Kong caught the virus from their employers.</p>
<p>Semi-Lockdown (i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)</p>	<p>Workloads are heavier as children are not in school and employers are working from home. Employers use public health guidelines to justify requests for domestic workers to stay longer hours and go out and make purchases for the household (Mexico).</p> <p>Domestic workers receive no provision of protective equipment (live-in domestic workers in S.E. Asia and Middle East, Mexico) and no preventive measures are taken in employers' homes.</p> <p>Live-out and part-time domestic workers in Africa, Middle East, Asia and Latin America have been dismissed because they are seen as unclean due to their use of public transport and living conditions in low-income communities. No compensation provided.</p> <p>With schools and childcare centres closed, live-out and part-time domestic workers cannot go to work as they are caring for their own children (Mexico, S.E. Asia, India).</p> <p>Employers are at home or are unemployed and no longer need a part-time domestic worker. Leads to lay-offs and lack of daily earnings for part-time domestic workers with multiple employers (Hong Kong, South Korea, Malaysia, Cambodia, Mexico, Kenya and Uganda).</p>
<p>Full Lockdown (i.e. schools closed, all non-essential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)</p>	<p>Massive layoffs without compensation for live-out and part-time domestic workers across the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Not yet apparent in Africa, except South Africa.</p> <p>No rest day for live-in domestic workers as they can no longer leave employers' home (S.E. Asia).</p>

Home-based workers

“For our members...they are afraid of nothing to eat. They are afraid of economic issues, much more than health issues.”

– Interview with home-based workers organization HomeNet Thailand



Photo: S. Tubsakul

<p>Major shutdowns in large global economies (i.e. China, Europe and N. America)</p>	<p>Cost of raw materials rose across Asia once China closed its borders. Europe and US cancelled contracts with garment factories in Viet Nam, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan leading to fewer or no orders, and no income.</p>
<p>Border Closures (i.e. between and within countries)</p>	<p>Decline in demand for home-based workers products catering to the tourist industry in S.E. Asia and E. Europe and decline in (international) product market for Cambodia. The market completely dipped for handicraft and handmade products as products cannot be transported (both domestic and exports). All handicraft shops, fairs and exhibitions have been cancelled. Many cooperatives and producer companies may cease to exist if the situation lasts.</p>
<p>Semi-Lockdown (i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)</p>	<p>School closures and unemployment among men have increased care responsibilities for women at home, making it difficult to complete orders. Decline in demand for traditional crafts as trade fairs and cultural events are cancelled in Cambodia, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and E. Europe. Rising debts now as workers used credit to buy materials. Work orders disappeared.</p>
<p>Full Lockdown (i.e. schools closed, all non-essential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)</p>	<p>Unable to collect payment for previous orders. Unable to buy raw materials for production. In South Africa, cooperatives who have been receiving monthly orders from social enterprises have been told that no work will be available during the lockdown period (i.e. April) and that the social enterprise would revert to the coops in May. Registered home-based workers coops in South Africa are attempting to register on the Department of Small Business Development portal for SMME relief. There have been no reports of successful registration and relief received yet. In Philippines, people are not allowed to leave home to buy food. The government delivers food. Home-based workers report that the food is not enough for bigger households and is not fresh. In India, it has led to food scarcity. Ration shops have limited supply and a lockdown doesn't allow them to travel to procure food. Many don't have ration cards, especially the migrant workers, so they are dependent on cooked food provided by charity organizations. Many expect to have no work for at least the next 6 months.</p>

Street Vendors and Market Traders

“When you go out you also have problems coming home. All these people beat up by the police were informal workers who wake up early to work and go home in the evening. They have huge difficulties because of restrictions on inner-city transport.”

- Interview with food vendor organization SYGAS, Senegal Homebased workers



Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage

<p>Border Closures (i.e. between and within countries)</p>	<p>Cross border traders cannot operate, leading to no sales and lower incomes.</p> <p>In Ahmedabad, India wholesale markets and small grocery (kirana) stores are operating but farmers cannot transport goods or cross village/state borders to sell what they produce; all street vendor markets, including Bhadra Chowk, are closed. If farmers are able to sell to big traders, the traders are gouging them on prices: they now pay only 1 rupee for cabbage which they used to buy for 10 rupees.</p>
<p>Physical Distancing (i.e. schools still open, people encouraged to work from home when possible)</p>	<p>Sales drop as fewer people go out in public spaces.</p>
<p>Semi-Lockdown (i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)</p>	<p>Stockpiling by the middle class has increased the price of inputs such as rice and eggs for food vendors in Thailand.</p> <p>Street vendors and market traders who sell products other than food can no longer operate. In Thailand, night markets are now closed, though food markets remain open.</p> <p>Diminished sales and loss of perishable good stock has led to rising debts (all regions).</p> <p>Forced evictions and police brutality reported against informal traders (Ghana, Liberia, India, Senegal, South Africa, Zimbabwe).</p> <p>In Senegal, those who sold cooked foods from home are no longer able to sell for lack of demand.</p> <p>Market traders in Senegal can still work but are doing so with great difficulty – low demand, closed wholesale markets limiting their ability to source supplies, and lack of protective gear from government.</p>
<p>Full Lockdown (i.e. schools closed, all non-essential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)</p>	<p>Market traders selling fresh produce are considered essential workers in Ghana, Peru, and South Africa. However, all cite not receiving protective equipment from the government to work safely.</p> <p>In Peru, some market porters are ill, some are not coming in for fear of getting ill, and some are sleeping outside the market on the ground for fear of sleeping in crowded dorms or getting families sick.</p> <p>Market traders selling cooked foods are not permitted to work in Peru.</p> <p>Street vendors have nowhere to sell, cannot move out of homes to go to where people are (India, Peru, Senegal).</p> <p>Fresh food vendors in Ghana can work, but they have not received the same treatment as market traders. They were not consulted on their needs and do not benefit from handwashing stations or sanitizers like market traders.</p> <p>In Ghana and Peru, non-fresh food vendors cannot work and have temporarily lost their livelihoods. However, some are continuing to go to the market as it's difficult for authorities to regulate.</p>

Street Vendors and Market Traders (cont'd)

Full Lockdown (cont'd)
(i.e. schools closed, all non-essential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)

Some wholesale markets are open in Delhi, India for limited hours, but natural markets are closed, resulting in a total loss of earnings for almost all market vendors and street vendors. Low demand has led to loss of perishable goods, leading to rising debts (all regions). Women garment makers and bead sellers (i.e. religious apparel and crafts) can no longer produce or sell their goods as these markets are closed in South Africa. No sales means they cannot buy the materials they need for production. Vendors on public transport can no longer sell their goods (Chile). Forced evictions and police brutality against informal traders has led to temporary or permanent loss of trading spaces (Ghana, India, South Africa, Zimbabwe). Police confiscated and destroyed farmers' produce when farmers tried to take it to market (Zimbabwe).

Waste Pickers



Photo: L. Tuttle

"Women are bringing their children to work since there are no classes. They put them on their carts, because they have to work."
– Interview with waste pickers in Mexico City, Mexico

Major shutdowns in large global economies
(i.e. China, Europe and N. America)

Waste pickers in Colombia note that the prices of metals have fallen, glass is on the floor, paper is OK. Some links in the value chains are broken as big industries are closed (at national and global levels).

Border Closures
(i.e. between and within countries)

The collection warehouses have closed, driving prices down because of border closures as no one is buying internationally.

Quarantine

In India, municipalities have not identified which households are under quarantine (due to potential illness), so waste pickers cannot know when waste is hazardous.

Physical Distancing
(i.e. schools still open, people encouraged to work from home when possible)

Waste pickers living in isolated waste picking communities in South Africa already saw their income drop as middlemen no longer wanted to buy up recyclables. As the virus can live on certain materials for up to a few days, the market for recyclables has collapsed. Middlemen are refusing to buy up more recyclables as they suspend operations impacting cooperatives and street collectors (South Africa, Brazil). Waste pickers cooperatives are closing across Brazil as waste pickers are not allowed to collect recyclables and no new materials will be reaching cooperatives. Waste pickers work in cramped spaces in their recycling warehouses and also need to load heavy materials, which require teamwork. Lack of protective gear is a key issue across all regions. In Colombia, private companies are refusing to pay the recycling levy that goes to waste pickers. In Mexico, household waste has diminished and not all households are separating out sanitary waste as recommended. Schools are closed and women waste pickers reported difficulty navigating childcare and work with their children out of school.

Waste Pickers (cont'd)

<p>Semi-Lockdown (i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)</p>	<p>Landfills are closed so no access to recyclables.</p> <p>In Belo Horizonte, waste pickers are concerned that they will not be paid for the month of April as they will not be working.</p> <p>Waste pickers cooperatives fear demobilization of the selective waste collection schemes as citizens will lose the habit of recycling.</p> <p>Waste pickers worry that municipalities will be more concerned about safety issues and revoke waste pickers' contracts after COVID-19, and that they will move to implement waste to energy technologies or opt for incineration measures.</p> <p>For reasons above, waste pickers fear having less materials to recycle after the COVID-19 crisis.</p> <p>In Colombia, waste pickers remain on the streets without protective gear to retain access over recyclables as private companies continue waste collection.</p> <p>In Senegal, waste pickers are harassed by authorities at the dump site and stop them from working.</p>
<p>Full Lockdown (i.e. schools closed, all non-essential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)</p>	<p>Waste pickers fear losing important gains made with municipalities for recognition and contracts due to inability to operate during this period. Mounting fear that contracts could be given to private waste collection companies after the crisis (South Africa, Colombia, Brazil).</p> <p>In Ghana, sanitation workers are classified as essential workers and are exempted from the ban, but waste pickers fall in a grey area. Small groups are able to work because they live on or near the dump site in Accra. The majority are at home because they are either afraid of getting sick or do not think they can pass through security checkpoints.</p> <p>Those who continue to work have no market for their products – the buyers are gone, leading to a total loss of income (Ghana, Peru, India). In Ghana, they are stockpiling goods for when the lockdown ends.</p> <p>In Argentina, waste pickers are classified as essential workers and are receiving a stipend from the government to support their work. Many have stopped or lessened work to run community soup kitchens. Large companies have asked waste pickers to step up collection of cardboard as there is a local shortage.</p>

Other workers in public space

The economic impact is high for the lack of work, to make it day to day we've got to work."

- Interview with shoe shiner in Mexico City



Photo: Juan Arredondo/Reportage by Getty Images

Semi-Lockdown

(i.e. schools closed, people encouraged to work from home when possible, food markets and stores open, public transport still operating)

In Mexico City, Mexico shoe shiners are able to continue to work but there is a sharp drop in demand and their earnings have been significantly reduced.

Many are not working because they cannot make in one day what the transport would cost to get to work, and others are taking up new activities.

Full Lockdown

(i.e. schools closed, all non-essential workers remain at home, food markets closed, limited public transport service)

In Lima, Peru newspaper vendors have been given designations as essential workers. They continue to work but have not been given adequate protections by the papers they are distributing for (some papers have provided gloves and masks, but others have not).

Transportation is hard – metro schedules are limited, and they must travel long distances to work.

As their costs are rising because of transport and the need to purchase protective gear, their earnings are falling due to lower demand than before.

Most newspaper vendors are older adults, and some are choosing to stay home to protect their health.