



COVID-19 and Informal Work: Distinct Pathways of Impact and Recovery in 11 Cities Around the World

By Martha Chen, Erofli Grapsa, Ghida Ismail, Mike Rogan and Marcela Valdivia with Laura Alferts, Jenna Harvey, Ana Carolina Ogando, Sarah Orleans Reed and Sally Roever

WIEGO Working Papers

The global research-policy-action network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) Working Papers feature research that makes either an empirical or theoretical contribution to existing knowledge about the informal economy, especially the working poor, their living and work environments and/or their organizations. Attention is paid to policy-relevant research including research that examines policy paradigms and practice. All WIEGO Working Papers are peer reviewed by the WIEGO Research Team and/or external experts. The WIEGO Publications Series is coordinated by the WIEGO Research Team.

WIEGO Working Papers are part of the WIEGO Publication Series.

See www.wiego.org/wiego-publication-series.

About The Authors

The authors of this paper are the members of the WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study team who co-designed the study, oversaw the study, analyzed the data and wrote up the findings in different formats, all in partnership with local organizations of informal workers and research teams in each study city. For their profiles, see <https://www.wiego.org/about-us/who-we-are/wiego-team>.

Acknowledgements

The WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study team would like to acknowledge our local partners in each study city – the local organizations of informal workers and the local research teams – as well as the informal workers who participated in the study. All of them participated willingly and fully despite the significant public health concerns and economic hardships they were experiencing. For a list of our local partners, see Appendix I.

The COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy Study was carried out with generous support from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Cover Photo Credit

Jothyraj/Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE)
Tiruppur, India - November 3, 2020: Home-based Worker

Published by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)
A Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee – Company No. 6273538,
Registered Charity No. 1143510

WIEGO Limited

521 Royal Exchange
Manchester, M2 7EN
United Kingdom
www.wiego.org

Copyright © WIEGO. This report can be replicated for educational, organizing and policy purposes as long as the source is acknowledged.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
1. Introduction	3
2. WIEGO-Led Study	4
3. Related Studies	6
4. Impact on Work and Earnings: Across 11 Cities	9
5. Distinct Pathways of Impact: By Sector and Within Sectors	12
5.1 Overall Impact by Sector	13
5.2 Distinct Pathways of Impact: By Sector and Within Sectors	14
6. Relief Measures	28
6.1 Government Relief Measures	28
6.2 Relief Role of Organizations of Informal Workers	30
7. A Better Deal for Informal Workers	31
7.1 Defining Moment: Three Possible Future Scenarios	31
7.2 Building Recovery from Below	32
7.3 Real Threat of Worse New Deal: Countervailing Forces	33
7.4 A Better New Deal for Informal Workers	34
Cited References	35
Appendix I : Local Partner Organizations and Research Teams plus WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study Team	37
Appendix II: City Profiles	38

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a study on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on informal workers in 11 cities across 5 regions of the world (Asia, Africa, Latin America, North America and Eastern Europe). A unique feature of the study is that it examines the degree – and pathways – of impact on different sectors of informal workers and, within sectors, by key variables (status in employment, place of work, goods/services provided, and gender). Also, the study provides insights from informal workers in their own words. The paper concludes with common demands for recovery by local organizations of informal workers and a call for a Better New Deal for informal workers.

The study methods included a survey questionnaire for informal workers and in-depth interviews with informal worker leaders and organizers as well as representatives of government, civil society and academia. The survey was conducted by mobile phone and collected information on the ability to work, working hours, earnings and sector-specific constraints to livelihoods at three points in time: mid-2020 (June–July) when the survey was carried out and two recall periods – April 2020 (period of peak lockdowns or restrictions in all study cities) and February 2020 (pre-COVID-19 reference period). The survey also collected information on health and safety, food security and hunger, care and other household responsibilities, relief measures and household coping strategies.

The study was conducted by local researchers in partnership with local organizations of informal workers in each city. The total sample of just over 2,000 informal workers was drawn from the membership of the local organizations using a purposive quota approach: to reflect the membership in four main sectors (domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors/market traders and waste pickers) as well as several additional sectors in some cities. The sample was not intended to be representative of informal workers in each city or even of the membership of the local organization.

The study findings confirm that the COVID-19 crisis had a major negative impact on work and earnings. In April 2020, during peak lockdowns or restrictions, 74 per cent of informal workers were not able to work. By mid-2020, when the lockdowns or restrictions had been eased to some degree, 21 per cent of informal workers were still not able to work; and the average days of work per week and earnings of those able to work were lower than in February 2020 (pre-COVID-19). The study findings also illustrate how changes in demand, supply, prices, wages or piece rates and other factors impacted specific groups of informal workers: resulting in different degrees of impact on work and earnings. The degree of impact differed between live-in and live-out domestic workers; self-employed and subcontracted home-based workers; street vendors/market traders who sold food versus non-food items; and between waste pickers by city, depending on whether the sites where waste was reclaimed (e.g. dumps and landfills), sorted and stored and/or the dealerships where reclaimed waste was sold were closed or open.

1. Introduction

In May 2018, the International Labour Organization (ILO) published the first-ever global estimates of informal employment. These global estimates show that 61 per cent of all workers worldwide are informally employed – a total of 2 billion workers (ILO 2018: 13; Bonnet et al. 2019: 4). They also show that the rate of informal employment is highest in developing countries (at 90 per cent), lowest in developed countries (at 18 per cent) and quite significant in emerging countries (at 67 per cent) (ILO 2018: 14; Bonnet et al. 2019: 4). The global estimates confirm a significant overlap between working informally and being poor: a higher per cent of informal workers, than formal workers, are from poor households; a higher per cent of all workers in poor households, than in non-poor households, are informally employed (ILO 2018: 49-50, figures 22-23; Bonnet et al. 2019: 15-17, tables 4.1 and 4.2) and less than 3 per cent (2.7 per cent) of all informal workers are employers (ILO 2018: 39; Bonnet et al. 2019: 6), the one segment of informal workers that, on average, is non-poor (Chen et al. 2005).

Two years later, in late April 2020, the ILO estimated that 1.6 billion people employed in the informal economy – 80 per cent of the global informal workforce and nearly half of the total global workforce – could see their livelihoods destroyed due to the decline in work, working hours and earnings brought on by lockdowns or other restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19 (ILO 2020: 1). The ILO estimated that, during the first month of the crisis, informal workers globally experienced a 60 per cent drop in income: more than an 80 per cent decline in Africa and the Americas, 70 per cent in Europe and Central Asia, and 22 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, reflecting the phased spread of the virus across these regions (Ibid: 1-2). Since then, a growing body of studies on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on informal workers has confirmed the ILO prediction.

The COVID-19 crisis is unique in several regards. First, it is both a public health and economic crisis: what some have called a “pandemic recession”. Second, the economic crisis started in the real economy, not the financial markets. Third, many formal workers were able to start working remotely, while most informal workers were not and had to stop working. Fourth, the ILO and other observers predicted that the crisis

would have a disproportionately negative impact on informal workers and their livelihoods. During previous economic crises, it was widely assumed that the informal economy was “a cushion to fall back on” for formal workers who lost their jobs (Verick 2010) and little, if any, consideration was paid to the impact of crises on informal workers and their livelihoods (Horn 2009).¹

Despite the current attention to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on informal workers, there is limited evidence of the various channels through which distinct groups of the global informal workforce have been impacted by the crisis. More nuanced data reflecting the diversity of employment arrangements and working conditions in the informal economy are required to understand the true scale and nature of the economic crisis and to identify policies which will translate into a real recovery for informal workers.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to describe the specific impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on different sectors of informal workers from 11 cities across 5 different regions. Two additional objectives are to examine the sources of support to informal livelihoods during the pandemic and to consider the key lessons from the crisis for the economic recovery of informal workers and for policy and regulatory reforms to protect and promote informal workers going forward. The paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the WIEGO-led study: its design, sample, methods and value added. Section 3 summarizes the findings from selected recent studies on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employment in developing countries. Sections 4 to 7 present the findings from the 11-city study. Section 4 summarizes the aggregate impacts of the pandemic on informal workers and their households across the 11 cities, noting significant variations between cities. Section 5 examines the different pathways and degrees of impact by sector and, within sectors, by key variables including gender. Sections 6 and 7 summarize the role of the state and of local organizations of informal workers in relief efforts and other measures to mitigate the impacts of the crisis on workers’ lives and livelihoods. The paper concludes with the common demands for recovery (and beyond) of informal worker organizations from the 11 cities within a framework that builds off the pathways of impact and calls for a “better deal” for informal workers, who represent the majority of the global workforce.

¹ In 2009 and 2010, WIEGO carried out two rounds of a multi-city study on the impact of the Global Recession on informal workers (Horn 2009 and 2011).

2. WIEGO-Led Study

This paper presents findings from the first round of a mixed-method longitudinal study of informal workers from 11 cities² across 5 regions. The quantitative component consisted of a mobile phone survey of 2,009 workers from four main sectors of informal work – domestic work, home-based work, street vending and market trading, and waste picking – and an additional six sectors across some cities. The questionnaire was designed to collect information on the ability to work, working hours, earnings and sector-specific constraints to livelihoods at three points in time: mid-2020 (June-July) when the survey was carried out; and two recall periods – April 2020, when almost all the study cities were under some form of government lockdown or restrictions in response to the pandemic, and February 2020,³ as a reference point for pre-COVID-19 working conditions. The questionnaire was also designed to collect information on health and safety, food security and hunger, household responsibilities and tensions, and household coping strategies.

To help interpret the survey data, the study also included in-depth interviews with informal

worker leaders and other key informants from worker organizations, government, civil society and academia. The qualitative data highlight the perspectives of informal workers, providing insights in their own words.

To carry out the study, WIEGO partnered with a local organization of informal workers in each city whose members helped design the study, identify the local research team, identify the study respondents and interpret the study findings.

A team of WIEGO researchers and data analysts oversaw the study, with one researcher assigned as a focal point for each study city. See Appendix I for the list of local organizations, local research team members and WIEGO team members who collaborated on the study.

The sample from each city was based on a purposive quota approach designed to reflect the composition of the membership of the informal worker organizations participating in the study. In other words, the sample was not intended to be representative of informal workers in each city or even of the membership of the partner organization in each city. Compared to

Table 1 – Study Sample by Sector and City

	Four Main Sectors				Other Sectors					Total
	Domestic Workers	Home-Based Workers	Street Vendors/ Market Traders	Waste Pickers	Market Porters- <i>Kayayei</i>	Newspaper Vendors <i>Canillas</i>	Non-Salaried Workers ⁴	Motor-cycle Taxi Drivers	Massage Therapists	
Accra	0	0	99	49	45	0	0	0	0	193
Ahmedabad	61	53	78	57	0	0	0	0	0	249
Bangkok	51	49	51	50	0	0	0	49	52	302
Dakar	0	0	0	77	0	0	0	0	0	77
Delhi	67	68	72	63	0	0	0	0	0	270
Durban	0	0	119	66	0	0	0	0	0	185
Lima	55	0	59	52	0	50	0	0	0	216
Mexico City	44	0	46	29	0	0	44	0	0	163
New York City	0	0	62	56	0	0	0	0	0	118
Pleven	52	73	51	0	0	0	0	0	0	176
Tiruppur	0	60	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	60
Total	330	303	637	499	45	50	44	49	52	2009

² The cities include: in Asia, Bangkok (Thailand); Ahmedabad, Delhi and Tiruppur (India); in Africa, Accra (Ghana), Dakar (Senegal), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), and Durban (South Africa); in Latin America, Lima (Peru) and Mexico City (Mexico); in North America, New York City (USA) and in Eastern Europe, Pleven (Bulgaria). Since no lockdown or restrictions were imposed in Tanzania, the data from the twelfth city, Dar es Salaam, have been excluded from the analysis in this paper.

³ The pre-COVID-19 reference period in Bangkok was December 2019.

⁴ In Mexico, the term “non-salaried worker” refers to workers who earn by fees, commissions, tips and other modalities which are different from a fixed wage or salary and, also, from earnings from self-employment.

Box 1 – Study Cities by Key Variables⁵

	Country Income Group	Informal Employment	National Government Lockdown	Government Relief ⁶
Accra	low middle income	90% of total employment & 84% of urban employment in Ghana + 83% of total employment in Greater Accra	3 months: partial	food aid + 3-month free water for all + utility forgiveness for ultra-poor
Ahmedabad	low middle income	90% of total employment & 79% of urban employment in India	10 weeks: full	one small cash grant + food aid + 3-month waiver of utility bills
Bangkok	upper middle income	56% of total employment & 42% of urban employment in Thailand + 28% of total employment in Bangkok	2 weeks: partial fresh food markets and vendors allowed to operate	3-months cash transfer + bank moratorium on loan repayments, credit card debt for eligible individuals
Dakar	low middle income	91% of total employment in Senegal		food aid
Delhi	low middle income	90% of total employment & 79% of urban employment in India + 81% of total employment in Delhi	10 weeks: full	one small cash grant + food aid + 3-month waiver of utility bills
Durban	upper middle income	34% of total employment in South Africa + 24% of total employment in 8 metro areas + 26% of total employment in Durban	3 weeks: full	6-month top-up to existing cash grants + 11-month special COVID-19 relief cash grant
Lima	upper middle income	69% of total employment in Peru	3 months: full	2-month bonus credit + food aid
Mexico City	upper middle income	56% of total employment & 45% of urban employment in Mexico + 51% of total employment in Mexico City	10 weeks: full	cash grants + loans + food vouchers
New York City	high income	19% of total employment in USA	3 months: partial food vendors allowed to operate	one stimulus check + unemployment compensation, including some self-employed (but excluding undocumented workers)
Pleven	upper middle income	16% of total employment in Bulgaria	2 months: full	some cash transfers + loans + food aid
Tiruppur	low middle income	90% of total employment & 79% of urban employment in India	10 weeks: full	one small cash grant + food aid + 3-month waiver of utility bills

the average informal worker in each city, the respondents, as members of local organizations of informal workers, are more likely to have benefited from collective action pre-COVID-19 and to have received relief support during COVID-19. For this reason, and because the study includes one city in a high-income country,

five cities in upper-middle income countries and no city in a low-income country, the findings are likely to underestimate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on informal workers worldwide.

⁵ See Appendix II for more details on each city and the sources for the data in this box.

⁶ The information on government relief is from local partner organizations and informal worker leaders. It was not always possible to discern which government relief measures reached at least some informal workers in each city sample, especially state and local government relief measures.

3. Related Studies

Following the ILO projections in early 2020, there has been growing evidence on the impact of the lockdowns and restriction measures on work, earnings, food security and other indicators. While there are more COVID-19 crisis data from high-income countries, this review focuses on data from developing countries: the data are from special crisis surveys as well as official labour force or other household surveys, mostly conducted by phone. Some studies present data from dozens of countries while others present data from one or two countries.

Some studies do not differentiate between types of workers or sources of household income. For instance, data from a sample of 30,000 households drawn from 16 household surveys across nine countries found that the percentage of respondents reporting declines in employment during March 2020 ranged from 5 to 49 per cent (with a median of 30 per cent) across the nine countries (Egger et al 2021: 7). The percentage of households experiencing a decline in income ranged from 8 to 87 per cent (with a median of 68 per cent) (Ibid.).

A World Bank study disaggregates workers by the branch of the economy in which they are engaged. In collaboration with national statistics offices, the World Bank conducted rapid phone surveys in dozens of countries starting in April 2020. An analysis of findings from 39 countries between April and July 2020 found that 34 per cent of the respondents had stopped working, 20 per cent had not received full payments and nine per cent had changed jobs. Further, 62 per cent reported that their household had lost income (Khamis et al. 2021: 5-6). Workers in the service and industrial sectors were all badly impacted, more so than workers in the agricultural sector. Around 40 per cent of industry workers and service workers (40 and 38 per cent, respectively), compared to just over 20 per cent (22 per cent) of agricultural workers, reported stopping work (Ibid: 6). Reflecting this difference, three-quarters of households with non-farm businesses reported a fall in income while around two-thirds of households with farm businesses reported a fall in income (Ibid: 6).

There have also been studies which identify the differential impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on formal and informal workers. For example, surveys in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal suggest that,

by the end of April 2020 across these three West African countries, a quarter of all workers had lost jobs or were not able to work and half of all workers had experienced a decline in earnings (Balde, Boly and Avenyo 2020). These surveys found that informal workers were at significantly higher risk than formal workers. At the end of April 2020 in Burkina Faso, 4 per cent of formal workers and 48 per cent of informal workers were unemployed; in Mali 8 per cent of formal workers and 32 per cent of informal workers; and in Senegal 8 per cent of formal workers and 42 per cent of informal workers (Ibid: 13). These large differences can be attributed, the authors argue, to the fact that informal workers tend to be over-represented in activities that were disproportionately impacted by lockdown measures – such as retail trade, restaurants, tourism, hairdressing and taxi driving (Ibid.).

Few studies have interrogated the impacts of COVID-19 on distinct groups of informal workers, differentiated by their occupation and/or status in employment: two notable exceptions are studies from Ghana and Bangladesh. The study from Ghana, conducted jointly by the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana/Legon and UNU-WIDER, estimated the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the employment, labour earnings and working hours in both lockdown and no-lockdown districts. The sample was further differentiated by whether workers were formal or informal and self-employed or wage employed (Schotte et al. 2021). The study was carried out in late August–early September 2020 but included two recall reference periods: pre-COVID-19 (February 2020) and peak lockdown (April 2020). The study found that just over one-third (35 per cent) of respondents in lockdown districts continued working in April, compared to just over two-thirds (67 per cent) of respondents in no-lockdown districts (Ibid: 1). In no-lockdown districts, the inability to work in April was highest among informal wage workers. But overall, unemployment was most pronounced among the informal self-employed.⁷ By contrast, workers in formal wage jobs were the most likely to continue to work in both lockdown and no-lockdown districts.

By August–September 2020 in the Ghana study, the gap in employment rates between no-lockdown and lockdown districts had closed: 86 per cent of respondents in no-lockdown districts and 84 per cent of respondents in lockdown districts were working again (Schotte

⁷ Other studies have found that the informal self-employed tried to continue to work despite the restrictions and the danger posed by the pandemic (Durizzo et al. 2020; Kazeem 2020).

et al. 2021: 10). However, the workers in both lockdown and no-lockdown districts who were unable to work in April were far more likely to be out of work in August–September than workers in both areas who were able to continue working in April. Moreover, the average probability of being in work at the time of the survey was 12 per cent below the February 2020 average (Ibid: 2).

In Bangladesh, a joint study by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) estimated the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on the main source of household income, household income levels and food security in 7,236 households in April and in mid-2020, compared to February 2020 (pre-COVID-19) (Rahman et al. 2020). The study found a drastic drop in economic activity in April, especially in urban areas, which had improved considerably by mid-2020, after the strict lockdown had been eased, although not to pre-COVID-19 levels. Overall by mid-2020, 76 per cent of both rural and urban households were able to resume their main pre-COVID-19 source of work, 7 per cent had shifted to another line of work and 17 per cent were not able to work (Ibid: 16).

The degree or scale of impact in Bangladesh varied between formal and informal employment and, within informal employment, by “occupation”. Those households that depended mainly on formal work – factory work or salaried jobs – suffered the least impact on employment in the main source of household income (between 16 and 18 per cent) (Rahman et al. 2020: 14). Domestic workers suffered the sharpest decline in employment: over half (54 per cent) remained unemployed in mid-2020, while unskilled labourers suffered a 20 per cent increase in unemployment (Ibid.). The majority of those who changed occupations found work as unskilled labourers, generally earning less than they did in their pre-COVID-19 occupation.

The Bangladesh study suggests there was “significant recovery of economic activity” but only “a moderate recovery of incomes” by mid-2020 after a dramatic decline in April. There was a significant difference between the income recoveries of households whose main source of income was formal work – factory work and salaried jobs – and households whose main source of income was other (mainly

informal) occupations. For example, the income of households which depended primarily on the earnings of factory workers and salaried jobholders had recovered to 84 per cent and 82 per cent, respectively, whereas the income of households which relied primarily on the income of transport workers and unskilled labourers had recovered to around 52 per cent (Rahman et al. 2020: 14).⁸

Two analyses of South African national data by WIEGO focused on how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted formal and informal workers as well as different groups of informal workers. The first, an analysis of the first wave of a representative national phone survey (the National Income Dynamics Study Coronavirus Rapid Mobile or NIDS-CRAM survey), found that just under a third (31 per cent) of informal workers who did not lose their livelihoods completely were “locked out” of employment in April⁹ – compared with 26 per cent of those in formal employment (Rogan and Skinner 2020: 14). Women informal workers experienced a decrease of 49 per cent in the typical hours worked in April compared to February, while men informal workers experienced a 25 per cent decrease (Ibid: 16). The decrease in hours worked within the informal economy was greatest for the self-employed where average (mean) hours decreased by a third and typical (median) hours decreased by more than half. Not surprisingly, these large reductions in hours coincided with earnings losses in the informal economy. Among the informal self-employed who were working in both February and April, average earnings decreased by 27 per cent and typical earnings by 60 per cent. For women in informal self-employment, typical earnings decreased by nearly 70 per cent (Ibid: 18).

The second, an analysis of the South African quarterly labour force surveys, compared employment in the second quarter of 2020 to the same quarter in 2019 (Skinner et al. 2021) for formal and informal workers as well as different types of informal work. Just under 1.5 million informal workers lost their livelihoods over the year, compared to 840,000 job losses among formal workers. In relative terms, informal employment decreased by 29 per cent while formal employment decreased by 8 per cent. In addition, these data suggest that the impacts *within* the informal economy were varied. The inability to work was far higher, in both relative

⁸ The earnings/income estimates from the Bangladesh study do not include those who reported zero earnings in April or mid-2020.

⁹ The questionnaire design did not allow for identifying which of the respondents who became unemployed (i.e., lost their livelihoods) during lockdown were informal. But it did allow for identifying those who did not report being unemployed but did not work at all during the April lockdown: Rogan and Skinner (2020) refer to the group as “locked out of employment”.

and absolute terms, among informal workers engaged in informal enterprises than among informal workers engaged in formal enterprises. The number of informal jobs in informal enterprises decreased by about 25 per cent between the second quarters of 2019 and 2020: a net loss of about 814,000 jobs. Domestic work, which is predominantly informal, decreased by 25 per cent over the same period. There were 250,000 fewer people employed as domestic workers in the second quarter of 2020 compared to a year earlier (Ibid: 4-5).

In brief, these (and other) studies confirm the April 2020 ILO projection that the pandemic and lockdowns/restrictions would have disproportionately severe negative impacts on informal workers, their livelihood activities and their households. In low-income households which depend on daily earnings, the imposition of lockdowns and other stay-at-home restrictions to curb the spread of the virus led almost immediately to three interrelated crises for informal workers: no work, no income, no food. Around the world, during peak lockdowns, informal workers voiced a common lament: *“We will die of hunger before we die from the virus.”*

Another set of studies analyzes the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on employment by gender. Many of the studies suggest that the COVID-19 crisis has had disproportionate impacts on women workers (Alon et al. 2020). Some of these studies focus on the increased burden of unpaid work on women, while others focus on the impact on women’s paid work. The impact on women’s paid work has been mixed. Work stopped for many women (and men) workers in the sectors hardest hit by the crisis, such as hotel and food services, wholesale and retail trade, and labour-intensive manufacturing (Kabeer et al. 2021). But work intensified for other women (and men) workers in sectors deemed to be essential. In regard to paid care work, work intensified for most women (and men) workers in healthcare but stopped for many women (and men) workers in childcare. Overall, according to the editors of a special issue of *Feminist Economics* on the COVID-19 crisis, the fact that women tend to be overrepresented in most of the hardest hit and essential sectors “translated into larger declines in employment for women than men in numerous countries” (Kabeer et al. 2021: 7). But, as has been noted above (Balde et al. 2020), these are also sectors in which informal workers (both women and men) tend to be overrepresented.

In the Bangladesh study summarized above, the group that was least able to work, domestic

workers, was predominantly female. Among the other groups of workers, there were significant differences between women and men. Among small business owners, a higher percentage of women (16 per cent) than men (10 per cent) became unemployed (Rahman et al. 2020: 15-16). And, among unskilled labourers, a higher percentage of women (31 per cent) than men (20 per cent) became unemployed (Ibid.). Overall by mid-2020, across occupations, a higher percentage of women remained unemployed; and a higher percentage of men than women who lost work had found alternate employment.

An analysis of national panel data in India found that both gender and caste matter in determining the employment outcomes of the crisis. “Women who were employed in the pre-lockdown phase were 23.5 percentage points less likely to be employed in the post-lockdown phase, compared to men. Male heads of household were 11.3 percentage points more likely to be employed post-lockdown, compared to female heads of household” (Deshpande 2020: 1). Although caste differences were not as marked, the study found that the national lockdown affected employment of the disadvantaged caste groups relatively more adversely than the higher ranked caste groups. In the post-lockdown period, employment among Other Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes declined by 6, 12 and 9 percentage points more, respectively, than among upper castes (Ibid: 30).

It is important to highlight that race, ethnicity, caste and class intersect with gender to determine labour market outcomes for both women and men. Several studies in the US have shown that job losses during the crisis were often highest among women of colour (Frye 2020; Holder et al. 2021). In South Africa, a study, which disaggregated data by race, class, education and sex, found that job losses were largest among the African population, those in the lowest income tercile pre-COVID-19, those without tertiary education, and women within each of these categories (Casale and Posel 2021: 3).

It is also important to highlight that the nature of employment intersects with gender, and other markers of disadvantage, to determine labour market impacts for women and men. During the crisis, workers who could work remotely tended to fare better than those who could not and, for this and other reasons, formal workers tended to fare better than informal workers. Gendered outcomes depended on whether women or men were over-represented in different groups of workers in different countries. Considered through

an intersectional lens, informal workers in general, not just women, tended to be over-represented in the hardest-hit as well as most essential sectors. It is important to first understand the differential impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on different groups of workers and, then, women and men within the different groups.

To fully understand the degree and pathways of impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employment in developing countries, where the vast majority of workers are informally employed, it is important to disaggregate informal employment by economic sector or sub-sector, status in employment, place of work, goods or services provided and, then, within each category by women and men – as this paper will illustrate.

This paper, based on evidence from 11 cities across 5 regions of the world (Asia, Africa, Latin America, North America and Eastern Europe) confirms that the lives and livelihoods of informal workers were hit hard. The paper goes further by differentiating impact within the informal economy by sector and, within sectors, by key variables (economic sector or sub-sector, status in employment, place of work and goods/services provided) and by sex. It also interprets the quantitative survey findings through qualitative insights from open-ended questions and key stakeholder interviews, including interviews with leaders of local organizations of informal workers. The qualitative data highlight the perspective of informal workers, providing insights in their own words. The paper concludes by presenting

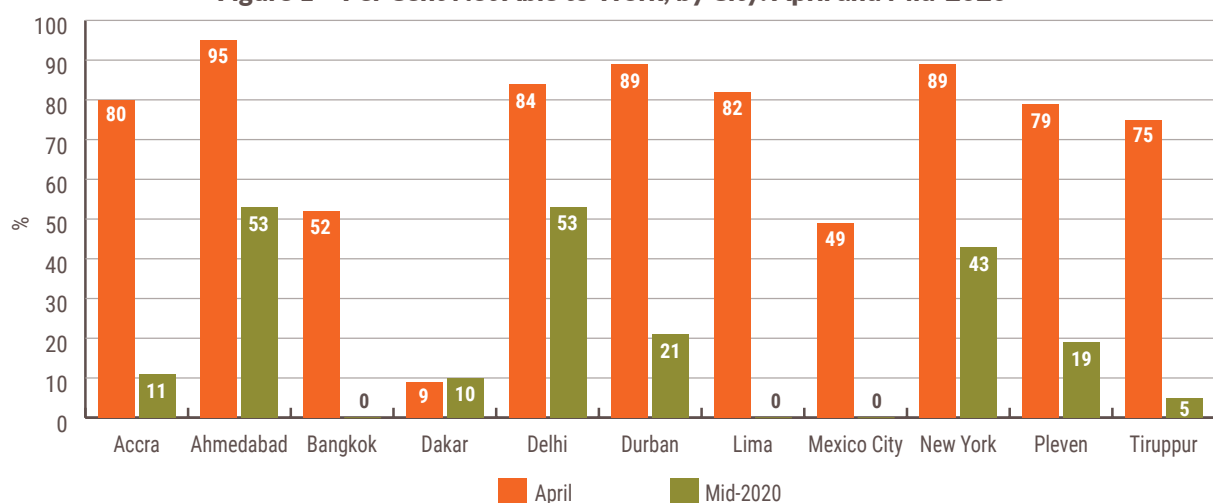
the common demands for recovery by the local organizations of informal workers within a framework that builds off the pathways of impact. In brief, the paper explores both the pathways of impact and the pathways to recovery from the perspective of different groups of informal workers, both women and men, and through a city lens focused on the policies and practices of local government.

4. Impact on Work and Earnings: Across 11 Cities

The findings from the WIEGO-led 11-city study confirm, first and foremost, that the impact of the crisis on the ability of informal workers to work was substantial.¹⁰ Across the cities, nearly three quarters (74 per cent) of the respondents reported not working at all during the peak lockdowns/restrictions in April 2020. By mid-2020, when severe restrictions had been eased or lifted, most informal workers had returned to work but about one-fifth (21 per cent) were still unable to work; and average days of work per week and earnings of those who were able to work were lower than pre-COVID-19.

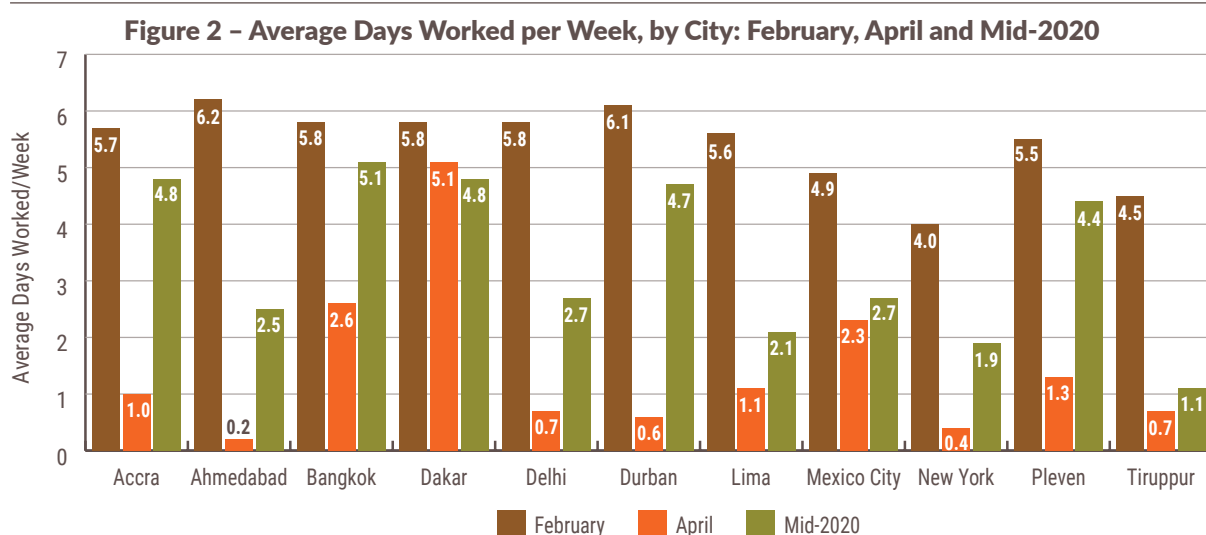
But there was significant variation across the cities (**Figure 1**). This variation reflects the degree and length of government restrictions on movement, transport and commerce. It also reflects the ability of local organizations of informal workers to support their members during the peak lockdowns and the ability of individual workers to recover by mid-year. Dakar is an

Figure 1 – Per Cent Not Able to Work, by City: April and Mid-2020



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

¹⁰ The sample from Dar es Salaam has been excluded from all graphs and statistics in this paper. The government of Tanzania did not acknowledge the presence of the COVID-19 virus in the country and, consequently, did not institute restrictions to control its spread until the second quarter of 2021.



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

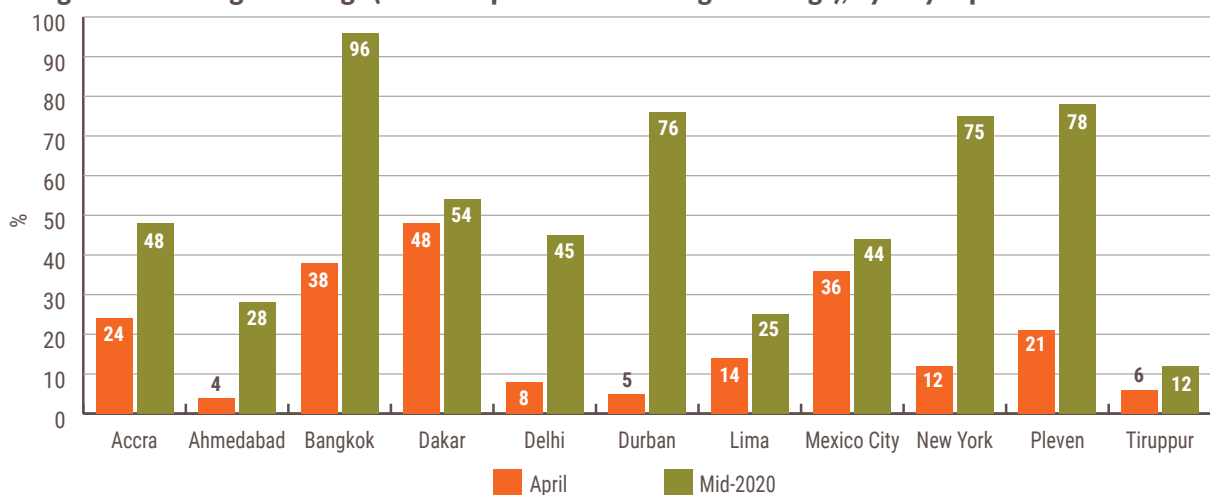
outlier as the sample included only waste pickers: all of whom worked at a dump site which was not closed. In Bangkok, the lockdown was partial and relatively short, and fresh food vendors were allowed to continue to work. In Mexico City, the restrictions affected different groups in varying ways – although waste pickers (representing 18 per cent of the sample) did not receive official designations as essential workers, they continued to work throughout the period of restrictions alongside formal sanitation workers.

It should be noted that “ability to work” in this study means the ability to work for at least one day. But the decline in employment is also reflected in average working days per week compared to the average working days per week pre-COVID-19. Across the city samples, there was a 77 per cent reduction in working days between February and April 2020: from an average of 5.6 per week to 1.3 days. By mid-year, working days had recovered to some extent, with the full sample reporting a weekly average of 3.5 days of work. However, this still denotes a 38 per cent loss in average working days, relative to pre-COVID-19, even after the easing or lifting of lockdowns and other restrictions.

As suggested in **Figure 2**, the losses in working days during the first six months of the pandemic were not experienced evenly. In Ahmedabad, one of the three cities in India where a strict national lockdown was imposed for 10 weeks, the total sample of informal workers reported a nearly 100 per cent reduction in working days – from 6.2 in February to less than 1 (0.2) in April. Moreover, by mid-year, the informal workers in Ahmedabad had recovered to less than half (2.5 days on average) of their pre-COVID-19 working days. By

contrast, in Accra and Bangkok where the national lockdowns were partial and relatively short, the average working days in mid-2020 (five days) were nearly as high as the average working days pre-COVID-19 (six days). But across the 11 cities, the data suggest that the loss of working days in April was severe and that, by mid-year, none of the city samples from the study had returned to their previous levels of work. Indeed, in roughly half of the city samples, average working days by mid-year were still less than half of average working days in February 2020.

Not surprisingly, these reductions in employment translated directly into decreased earnings (**Figure 3**). Across the entire sample, average earnings in April were only 19 per cent of February average earnings. By mid-year, earnings had not recovered to their pre-COVID-19 levels: on average, the total sample reported earning only 56 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 February earnings. However, as with work, the losses in earnings varied across the sample. In four cities where the national lockdown was full and long and where earnings losses were the greatest in April – Ahmedabad, Delhi, Lima and Tiruppur – the recovery of earnings was the slowest. In Tiruppur, where the entire sample was comprised of home-based workers who, pre-COVID-19, depended on factories to outsource work to them and where factories depend heavily on export demand, earnings in April and mid-2020 were only 6 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively, of pre-COVID-19 earnings. Most of those who were able to earn had found jobs in the factories after the migrant factory workers returned home. However, in four cities where the national lockdown was partial and/or relatively short – Bangkok, Durban, New York and Pleven – earnings were much

Figure 3 – Average Earnings (as a % of pre-COVID average earnings), by City: April and Mid-2020

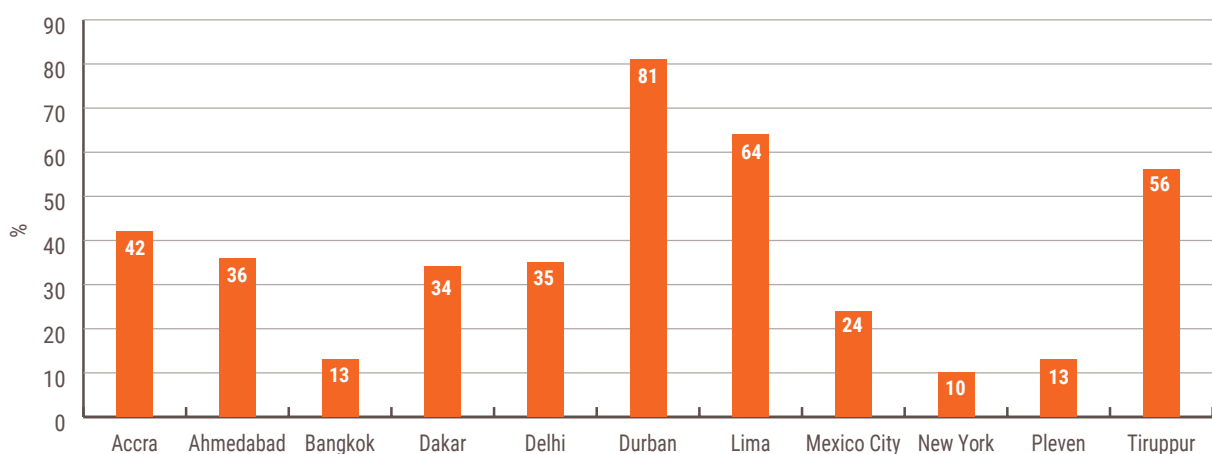
Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

higher in mid-2020 compared with April, but still somewhat lower than their pre-COVID-19 levels. In April in Durban, where one of the strictest lockdowns was enforced, average earnings had decreased to around 5 per cent of pre-COVID-19 earnings. Following the easing of restrictions after three weeks, average earnings in Durban recovered by mid-2020 to roughly three-quarters of pre-lockdown levels.

Given the scale of losses in work, working hours and earnings across the sample, it is not surprising that the ability of workers and their households to meet their basic needs was compromised. In 7 of the 11 cities, more than a third of workers reported at least some level of hunger in their household: see **Figure 4**. In three cities where full national lockdowns were imposed – Durban, Lima, and Tiruppur – the majority of respondents reported hunger in their households.

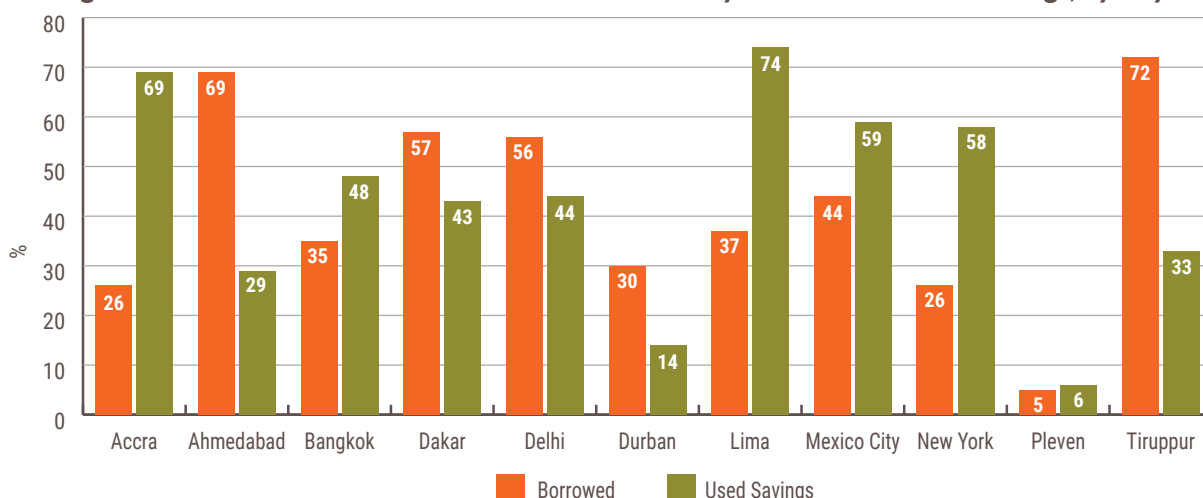
In response to the decline – or loss – of work and earnings and the need to buy food and pay for other essentials (rent, utilities, health care and education), the respondents and their families resorted to different coping strategies. The two most prevalent coping strategies across the sample were borrowing and drawing down savings (**Figure 5**).

Even in Dakar, where all respondents were able to work in April and mid-2020, well over half of the respondent households borrowed money and over 40 per cent drew down savings. In Bangkok, where over half of the respondents were able to work in April and all were working by mid-2020, 35 per cent of the respondent households borrowed money and 48 per cent drew down savings. Both borrowing and drawing down savings are likely to have long-term implications for the recovery of livelihoods and household well-being.

Figure 4 – Per Cent who Reported Household Hunger, by City

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Figure 5 – Per Cent whose Households Borrowed Money and/or Drew Down Savings, by City



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

In addition, across the 11 cities, many households of the respondents postponed paying rent, utility bills and school fees and were, therefore, facing a mounting debt with compounding interest. Overall the data from the study suggest that, in the absence of comprehensive government support, informal workers were forced to cushion the blow by depleting their already meagre savings or by going into debt and, in some cases, mortgaging or selling physical assets. It is likely that many of the informal workers in these and other cities have taken on unsustainable levels of debt.

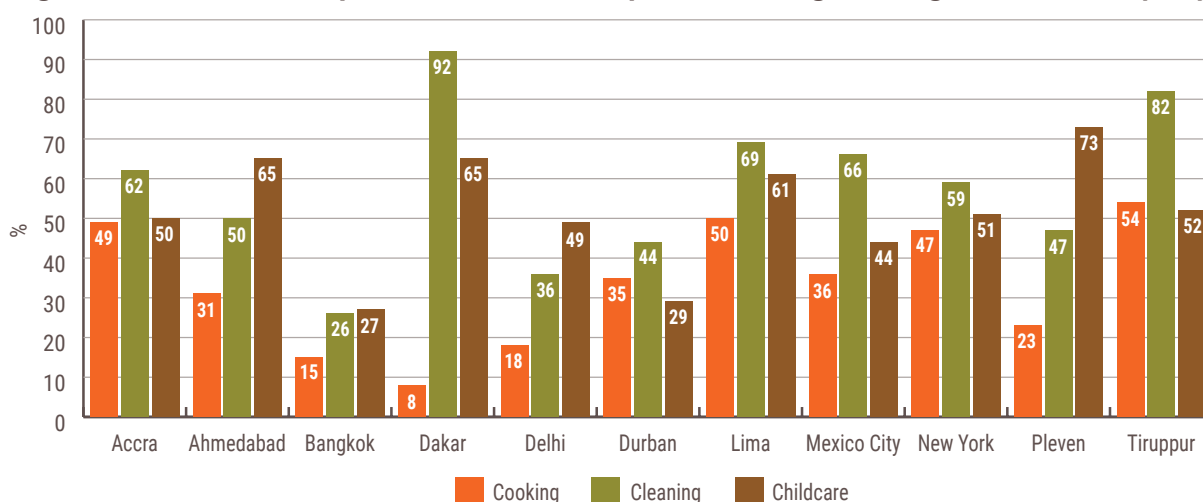
While time spent on paid work declined during the crisis, time spent on unpaid work increased. In six of the cities, more than half of the sample, both women and men, reported spending more time cleaning than they did before the pandemic (Figure 6). Given the closure of schools and day care centres, a particular feature of the COVID-19 crisis was the additional time spent on childcare,

including helping children with remote education. In eight of the study cities at least 50 per cent of workers, women and men, reported spending more time on childcare.

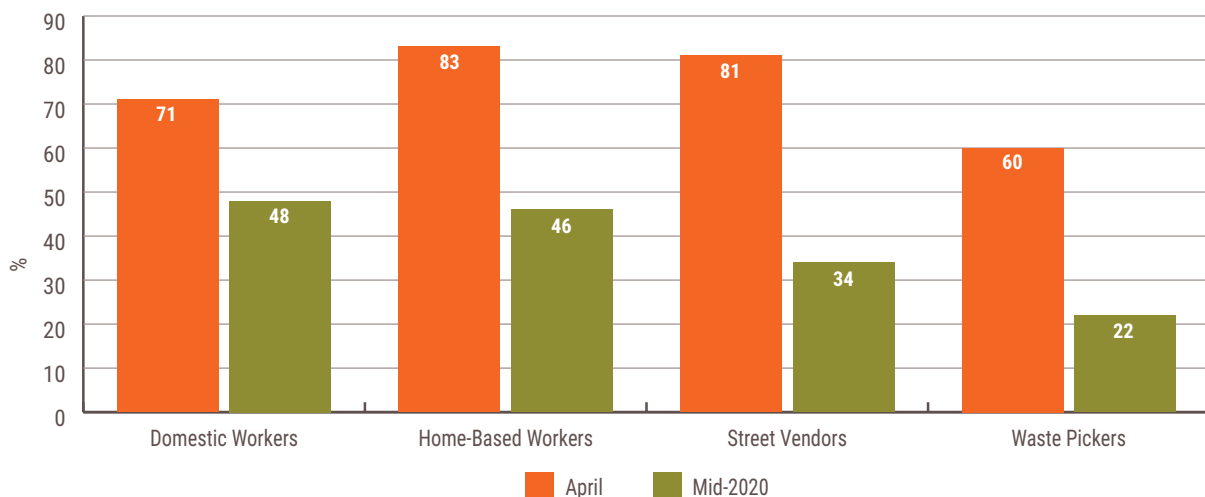
5. Distinct Pathways of Impact: By Sector and Within Sectors

While there is growing evidence – and recognition – that the pandemic and lockdowns or restrictions have had a disproportionate impact on informal workers compared to formal workers, there is limited understanding of the degree to which – and the ways in which – the crisis impacted different groups of informal workers. In this section, we trace the distinct pathways – or channels – through which the COVID-19 crisis impacted domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers and, within these sectors, we examine key differences by gender and other variables.

Figure 6 – Per Cent who Reported Increased Time Spent on Cooking, Cleaning and Childcare, by City



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Figure 7 – Per Cent Not Able to Work, by Sector: April and Mid-2020

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

5.1 Overall Impact by Sector

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on informal workers was not uniform: it differed across cities as well as between and within sectors. Home-based workers experienced a sharp decline in demand and work in April while over half were able to return to work by mid-year 2020. Street vendors faced decreased demand and sales even once they could return to work. Waste pickers faced a decline in access to waste and in market outlets and prices for reclaimed waste, in both periods. Overall, across the study sample, home-based workers and street vendors were the least able to work and had the lowest average earnings in both April and mid-2020.

The sector impacts varied considerably between cities, due in large part to the strictness of pandemic restrictions but also due to market or value chain dynamics and other variables within sectors (**Figure 7**). In Ahmedabad and Lima, informal workers in all four sectors experienced sharp declines in work and earnings in April and slow recoveries by mid-2020. In Delhi, where only one domestic worker in the sample was able to work in April, 42 per cent of domestic workers had resumed work by mid-2020 and were earning 75 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 earnings, on average. However, the average earnings of home-based workers in Delhi were around one-fifth of pre-COVID-19 earnings at both points of time. This may be the result of demand factors: For domestic workers, many employers were willing to rehire them and residential colonies allowed them to return to work. But, for home-based workers, demand from pre-COVID-19 buyers and contractors did not pick up and special orders for masks and hospital gowns (arranged

by the Self-Employed Women's Association, or SEWA) declined as commercial companies began producing them.

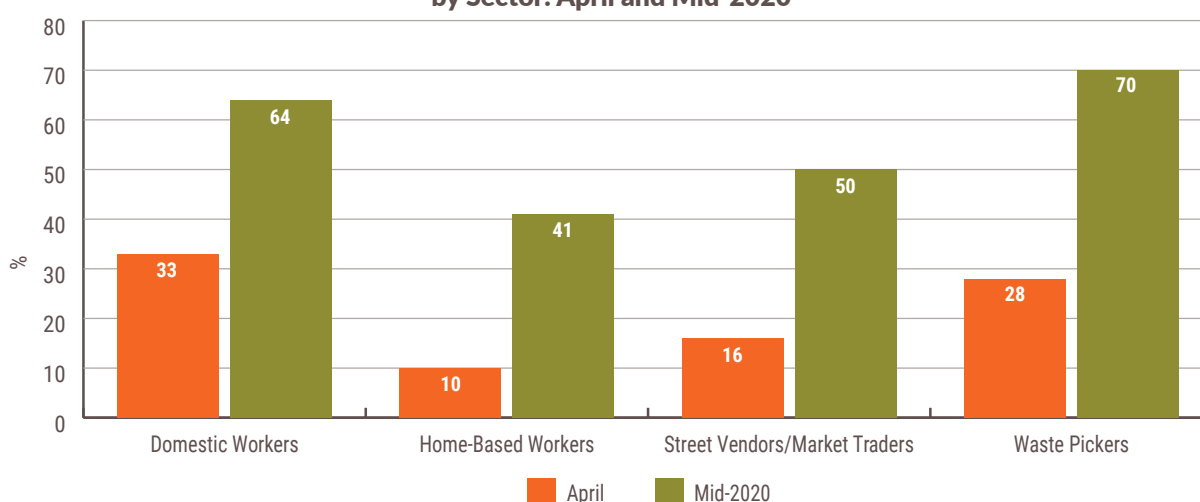
In April 2020, all four sectors cited government restrictions on movement and commerce as the most common reason for not working, and disruptions in markets and supply chains as the second most common reason: for domestic workers the disruption was changes in the hiring practice of their employer. By mid-2020, when restrictions had eased, disruptions in markets and supply chains had become the most significant factor for home-based workers and street vendors, employer hiring practices had become even more important for domestic workers, and health concerns had become most important for waste pickers unable to work (**Table 2**). It should be noted that a low percentage of respondents reported care and other household responsibilities as a reason for not being able to work, although that percentage had increased (especially among street vendors and waste pickers) by mid-2020 when more respondents were able to go back to work.

There was substantial variation in average earnings, relative to average earnings pre-COVID-19 (February 2020), across the four sectors in both April and mid-2020 (**Figure 8**). Home-based workers reported the greatest decline in April and the least recovery by mid-2020, followed by street vendors and market traders. Domestic workers reported the least decline in April and waste pickers reported the greatest recovery by mid-2020.

Table 2 – Per Cent Reporting Different Reasons for Not Working, by Sector: April and Mid-2020

	April				Mid-2020			
	Domestic Workers	Home-Based Workers	Street Vendors	Waste Pickers	Domestic Workers	Home-Based Workers	Street Vendors	Waste Pickers
Restrictions	56	75	85	75	33	46	52	46
Market/Supply Chain Disruptions	65	62	54	37	82	67	59	22
Transport Constraints	3	17	10	0	0	17	6	4
Health Concerns	12	26	39	40	17	21	42	50
Care & Other Household Responsibilities	0	6	0	6	0	6	7	14

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Figure 8 – Average Earnings (as per cent of pre-COVID-19 average earnings), by Sector: April and Mid-2020

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

5.2 Distinct Pathways of Impact: By Sector and Within Sectors

The rest of this section explores the distinct pathways of impact by sector, including changes in demand, supply, prices, wages or piece rates and other variables. It also explores differences within sectors by gender and by key sector variables, such as live-in versus live-out domestic workers, self-employed versus subcontracted home-based workers, food versus non-food street vendors and market traders, and collection sites for waste pickers.

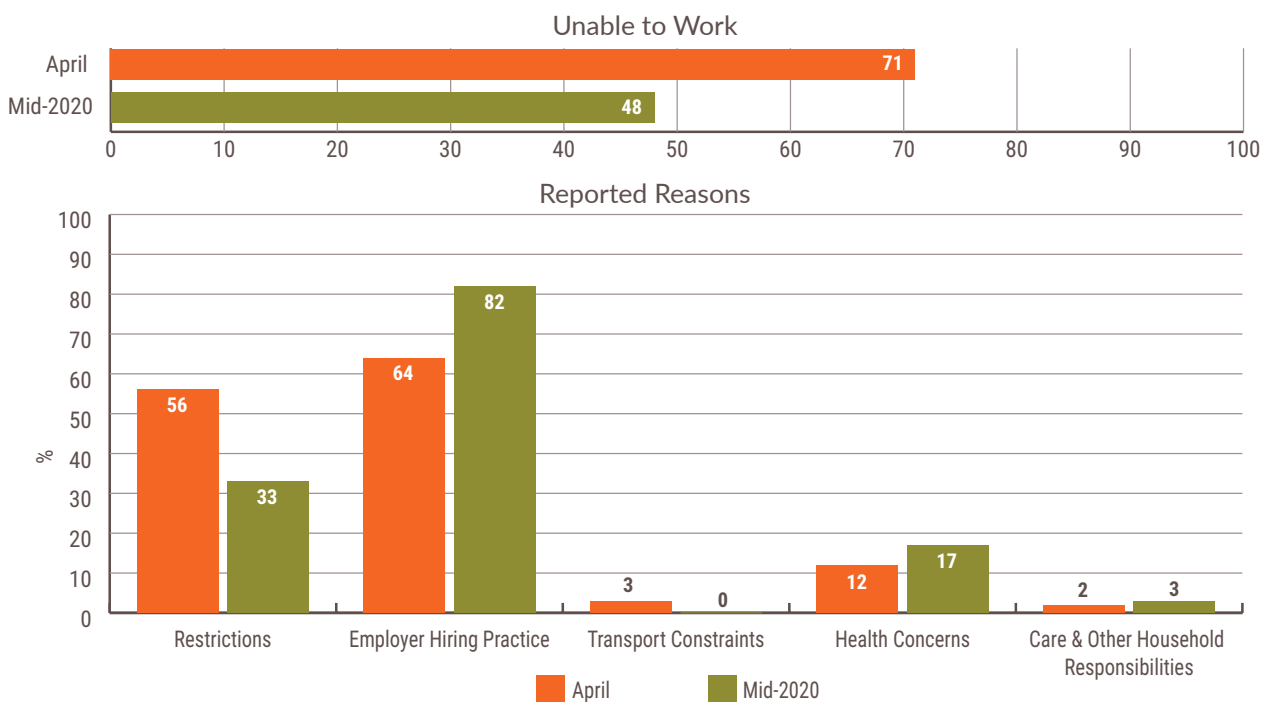
Domestic Workers

“I worked for a woman who is a single mother... She stopped calling because she was afraid that I would come to her house with the virus and, well, she fired me, she did not pick up the phone again. They see us as a source of transmission.” – Domestic Worker, Mexico City

Overall Impact on Work and Income

In April 2020, around 30 per cent (29 per cent) of the domestic workers were able to work: they worked 2.5 days per week on average and earned one-third (33 per cent) of their pre-COVID-19 earnings on average. In mid-2020, just over half (52 per cent) of the domestic workers were able to work: they worked 3 days per week on average and earned just over two-thirds (64 per cent) of their pre-COVID-19 earnings on average. At both points in time, among those who could not work – predominantly live-out domestic workers – the main reason cited was the hiring practice of their employer (**Figure 9**).

The ability of domestic workers to work during the peak restriction period (April 2020) and as the restrictions were being lifted (mid-2020) varied significantly across the study cities. In April, during the peak restrictions, none of the domestic workers in Delhi and only 5 per cent in Ahmedabad and 13 per cent in Lima were able to

Figure 9 – Domestic Workers: Per Cent Not Able to Work and Reported Reasons: April and Mid-2020

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

work, while 76 per cent of the domestic workers in Bangkok were able to work. Specifically in Bangkok, all live-in domestic workers, 70 per cent of live-out workers and most of the 15 migrant workers in the sample were able to work in April. According to a local informant, this was because many domestic workers in the Bangkok sample, including the migrant workers, are young, educated and employed by expatriates or professional Thais.

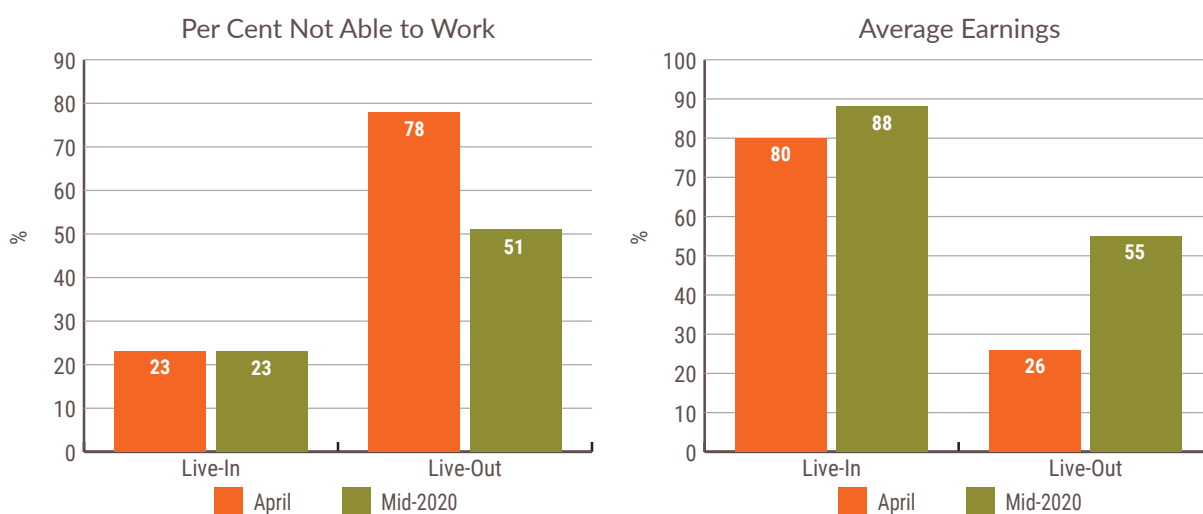
While domestic workers were the group most able to continue to work in April, those who lost their jobs in April were the least likely to be able to regain them by mid-year: only 16 per cent of domestic workers who were unable to work in April were able to work in mid-2020. Over 80 per cent (82 per cent) of domestic workers reported that this was due to employer attitudes and hiring practices. A domestic worker in Delhi reported: *“The three-month lockdown was so difficult for us... we’re in such a state that even if workspaces have opened up, employers are not letting us into their homes.....there’s no difference between the ‘lockdown’ and ‘unlock’, it’s exactly the same.”* By contrast, in Mexico City at the very end of mid-2020, the government allowed domestic workers to use public transportation to go to work, and the pandemic alert in the city changed from red to orange with fewer restrictions in general. Also, many domestic workers were called back to work by their employers or found another employer.

Distinct Pathways of Impact

The attitude and hiring practice of domestic worker employers differed significantly by whether the domestic worker lived in the employer’s home or not. In general, live-in workers were allowed to continue to work so long as they did not go out – except to shop for their employers – not even to visit their families. A domestic worker in Lima summarized the situation of live-in workers as follows: *“For the workers who have stayed in Lima and who wanted to keep their job, their employers have set conditions: ‘You decide: if you leave, you’re not coming back, and if you stay, you cannot leave the house.’”* A live-out domestic worker in Lima summarized her situation, and that of other live-out workers: *“My employer doesn’t want me to come until the pandemic is over.”* During the peak of lockdowns or restrictions, most live-out workers were not allowed to work unless, as in Ahmedabad and Delhi, the employer lived in a residential colony that had a daily screening system in place.

This differential treatment is reflected in the fact that live-out workers were less likely than live-in workers to work in both April and mid-2020: 78 per cent of live-out domestic workers did not work in April and 51 per cent were still out of work by mid-year (**Figure 10**). As a consequence, in both April and mid-2020, the average earnings of live-in domestic workers as a per cent of pre-COVID-19 earnings were far higher than those of

Figure 10 – Live-in and Live-out Domestic Workers: Per Cent Not Able to Work and Average Earnings (as per cent of pre-COVID-19 earnings): April and Mid-2020



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

live-out domestic workers. In April, on average, live-out workers earned around one quarter (26 per cent) of what they earned pre-COVID-19 (February) and just over half (55 per cent) by mid-2020. It is important to note that three-quarters of the domestic workers who were not allowed to work by their employer were not compensated by their employer. One domestic worker in Lima reported: *"I was laid off and was not paid a thing even after working three years for them."*

The following statements by two domestic workers in Bangkok capture the predicament of domestic workers who were laid off by one or more employers:

"My income is reduced since some of my employers' families returned to their home countries. My workdays per week have been reduced from six to four."

"I only have one job left, working for one family three days a week. It is difficult to find extra jobs due to the slow economy."

For the live-out domestic workers, the availability and cost of public transport as well as the fear of contracting the virus on public transport were major concerns. In Lima, to avoid possible contagion, some domestic workers began walking to work or taking only one bus rather than several, adding to the unpaid hours they spent in their daily commute and to the physical toll of their work. A key informant in Lima reported: *"Many domestic workers, in dialogue with their employer, decided to the extent possible if they weren't very far away that they would avoid taking public transport and they would walk. They would walk between 30 minutes to an hour and would end up with more pain*

in their body. They would walk to work, work, walk back – and ended up super-tired."

While live-in domestic workers did not suffer a significant decline in work or earnings, many faced additional demands on their time and energy: cleaning, cooking and tending to the many family members in their employer's home. Most were not allowed to leave their employer's home or visit their own families and faced reductions in time-off. As a domestic worker leader in Bangkok explained: *"During the first 1–2 months of lockdown, everyone complained that there was a lot of work to do because the employer was there, the children were there. Think about it, we had to stay with the children and the madam, and work all day, all night. The house I worked in, normally the wife would be home, the husband would be out working, but during lockdown, everybody was home."*

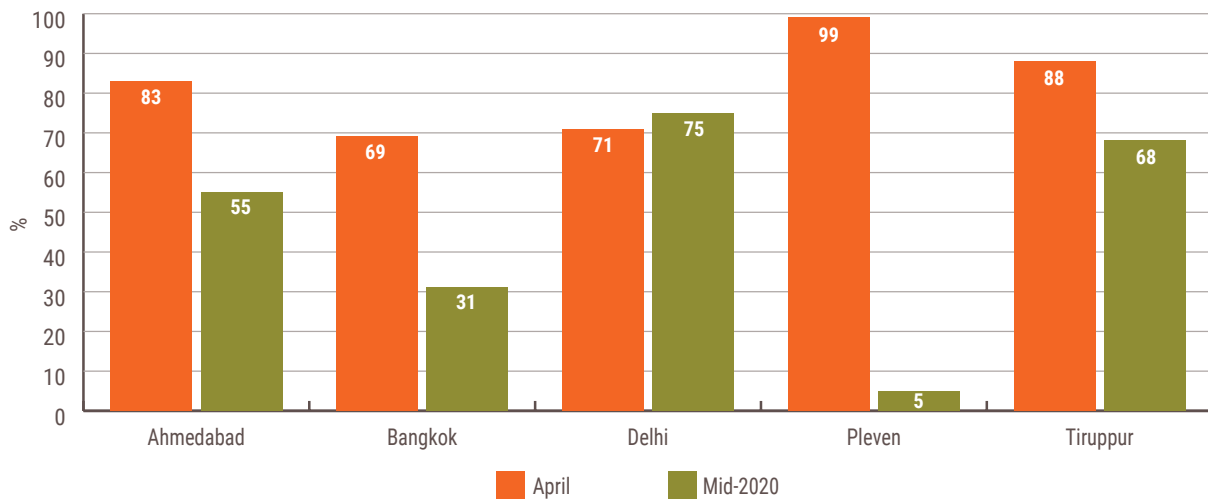
Home-based Workers

"We weren't able to work during the pandemic, more precisely, our city was under lockdown restrictions. We couldn't go out to sell our products." – Self-Employed Home-Based Worker, Pleven, Bulgaria

Overall Impact on Work and Income

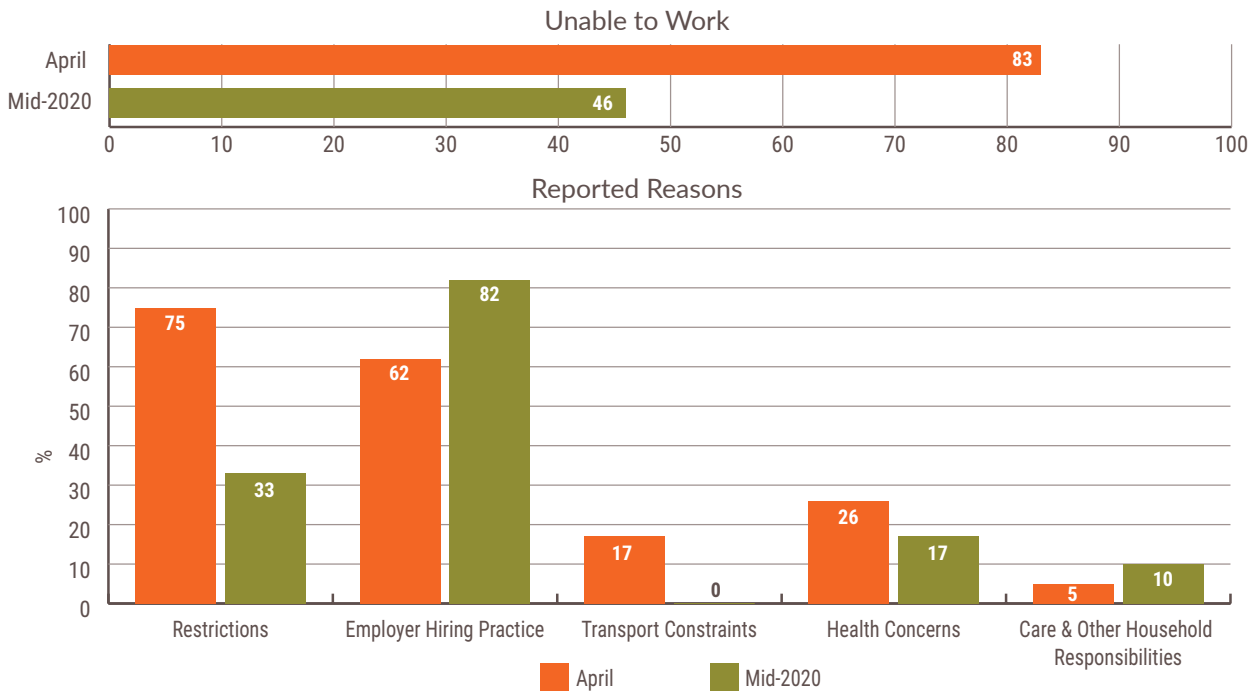
Among the four main sectors in the sample, home-based workers were least able to work during the peak lockdowns or restrictions, and the slowest to recover. In the five cities in which home-based workers were surveyed, more than 80 per cent (83 per cent) were unable to work during April (**Figure 11 and Figure 12**): nearly 100 per cent in Pleven and over 80 per cent in two Indian cities (Ahmedabad and Tiruppur). In Pleven, the stay-at-home restrictions were the most commonly cited reason for not being able to work.

Figure 11 – Home-based Workers: Per Cent Not Able to Work: April and Mid-2020



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Figure 12 – Home-based Workers: Per Cent Not Able to Work and Reported Reasons: April and Mid-2020



Note: respondents could report more than one reason. Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

In Ahmedabad and Tiruppur, disruption in markets and supply chains – notably reduced demand – was the most commonly cited reason.

- Across the home-based worker sample, average earnings in April dropped to less than 10 per cent of average pre-COVID-19 earnings and recovered to 41 per cent by mid-2020. Average earnings reflect not just the ability to work but also the number of days or hours worked, the volume of production and sales, the costs of production and the selling price. In mid-2020, 92 per cent of the home-based workers across the five cities reported

that the amount they were producing was less than pre-COVID-19. All of these factors are influenced by fluctuations in demand, supply, prices and other factors in the supply chain. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic and lockdowns, some home-based workers in several of the cities (Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Delhi and Tiruppur) received orders to make masks and hospital gowns: largely through local organizations of home-based workers and other informal workers. But as commercial mask-making ramped up, these orders declined.

Distinct Pathways of Impact

Demand – During the peak of lockdowns in April 2020, over one-quarter (26 per cent) of all the home-based workers in the sample reported that the reason they could not work was that they had no work orders or that their work orders were cancelled, and over one-fifth (21 per cent) reported that they had no buyers. In Delhi and Bangkok, a majority of the home-based workers (71 and 60 per cent, respectively) reported that the lack of customers, buyers or work orders prevented them from working. As one home-based worker in Delhi put it: *“Right now, I am not doing anything...I am just at home sitting...there’s no work at all...we’re not getting any work.”* And as one home-based worker in Ahmedabad who provides ironing services put it: *“Nobody came with clothes that need to be ironed. The housing society was in lockdown and, thus, my ironing work got closed.”* In mid-2020, roughly the same percentage of home-based workers (45 per cent) reported that lack of demand – i.e., customers, buyers or work orders – prevented them from returning to work.

Supply – In both Ahmedabad and Plevan, in addition to a lack of work orders or buyers, some home-based workers reported that a lack of raw materials contributed to their inability to work. A home-based worker in Ahmedabad described the situation of women who stitch garments: *“The biggest work-related problem is simply that women are not getting any work. So, if we go to other traders and ask them why they are not providing the work even though in many ways the lockdown has been lifted, they would reply that firstly, they don’t have any material, secondly, the textile markets have remained closed. For stitching work, the big traders buy cloth and after cutting it provide it to the sewing workers along with a sample so that we can understand how the fabric needs to be sewed. So, they notified us: ‘We are not getting any fabric, so how can we provide you work?’”* A home-based worker in Plevan described her own situation: *“In general, all products are affected by the crisis. I make souvenirs, gifts, embroidery. But during the crisis people were not able to buy or they were buying less. Most of them preferred to buy food, to pay their bills...And our incomes are reducing now. I didn’t have enough supply of raw materials because all shops and stores were closed.”*

Prices and Piece-Rates – Across the five cities, nearly 80 per cent of the home-based workers reported a drop in selling prices or piece rates for their finished goods compared to pre-COVID-19, while others reported that their selling prices or piece rates had stayed the same or increased. In India, 6 per cent of the home-based workers in

Ahmedabad and Delhi reported that their selling prices or piece rates had increased or stayed the same, while in Tiruppur 42 per cent reported that their piece rate had increased. According to a local informant in Tiruppur, this is because some of the home-based workers were able to get jobs in the garment factories when they began reopening in early June – as many of the migrant factory workers had returned home – and were paid more as factory workers than they had been paid pre-COVID-19 as home-based workers.

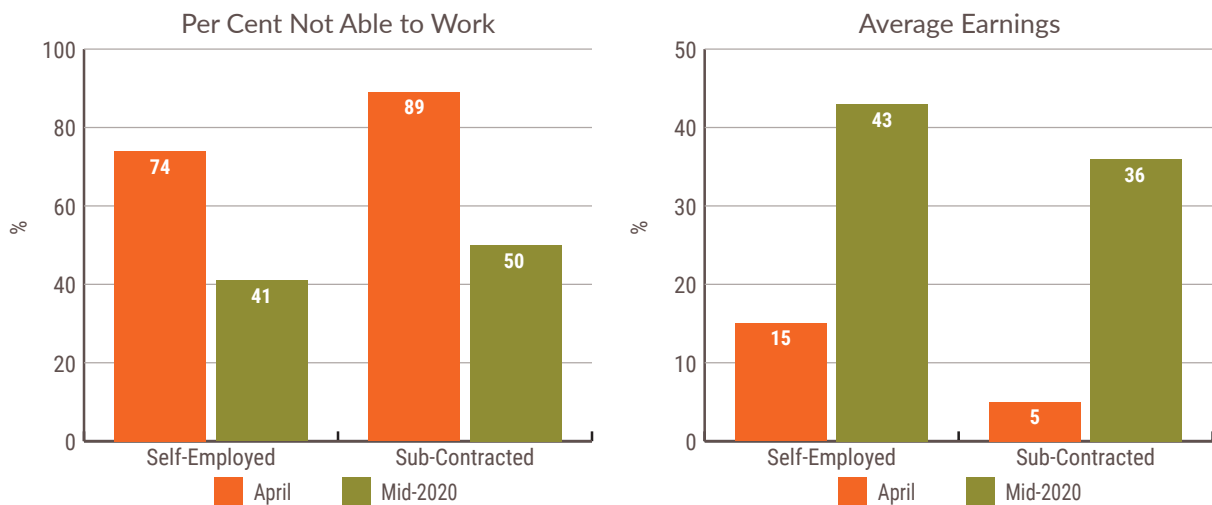
Key Variables – Among home-based workers it is important to distinguish between subcontracted workers, who depend on work orders from firms or their intermediaries, and the self-employed, who sell to individual customers or buyers. Among the home-based worker sample pre-COVID-19, 42 per cent were self-employed and 58 per cent were subcontracted. In April 2020, around one-quarter (26 per cent) of the self-employed home-based workers but only around one-tenth (11 per cent) of the subcontracted were able to work. By mid-2020, nearly 60 per cent (59 per cent) of the self-employed home-based workers and half of the subcontracted were able to work.

Compared to self-employed home-based workers, the average earnings of subcontracted home-based workers declined more in April and recovered less by mid-2020 (**Figure 13**).

Among subcontracted home-based workers, it is also important to distinguish between those who produce for domestic supply chains and those who produce for global supply chains. In Tiruppur, where most of the garment production is for export markets, all of the home-based workers, pre-COVID19, were subcontracted by textile and garment factories to do ancillary tasks: in normal times, these factories outsourced work to home-based workers when export orders were high. Only 12 per cent of the home-based workers in Tiruppur were able to work in April and nearly one-third (32 per cent) were able to work in mid-2020, after the easing of the lockdown had just begun. According to a local informant, as noted earlier, some home-based workers were hired by the garment factories when they reopened in early June, as many migrant factory workers had returned to their homes.

In Bangkok, a cooperative of home-based workers produces goods for both global and domestic supply chains. As the leader of that cooperative explained: *“In January or so, I knew the situation was dire. Starting from increasing infection in other countries, then I did not secure any orders and members worried that we do not have any jobs.”*

Figure 13 – Self-Employed and Subcontracted Home-Based Workers: Per Cent Not Able to Work and Average Earnings (as per cent of pre-COVID-19 earnings): April and Mid-2020



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Then, the government ordered the lockdown from March to April. Garment markets in Chatuchak, Pratunam, Phahurat, Bo-Bae, and provincial markets were closed.... At the end of March, there were no orders for garment products, then workers had nothing to eat.”

These dynamics resulted in a significant drop in local demand for subcontracted workers. A subcontracted home-based worker in Delhi reported: “I had no work in the months of March, April and May. I got work in the month of June only.” To make matters worse, some subcontracted workers had not been paid for work done before the lockdowns or restrictions. A subcontracted home-based worker in Ahmedabad reported: “My employer hasn't paid the wages/piece rates for work already done before the lockdown. He always delays payments by 2–3 months.” Delayed payments are a common practice by those who subcontract or outsource work: this practice has particularly harsh consequences when work orders are suspended during crises or during lean seasons.

Street Vendors and Market Traders

“We, the traders, are mostly subsistence traders living on our daily earnings, so in effect we spent all our little savings in this period. If you had credited goods and sold them and had to pay the creditor, you were forced to spend that too, because you did not have any other source of income to live on. So many went through difficulties.” – Anas Ibrahim, President of Informal Hawkers and Vendors Association of Ghana (IHVAG), Accra

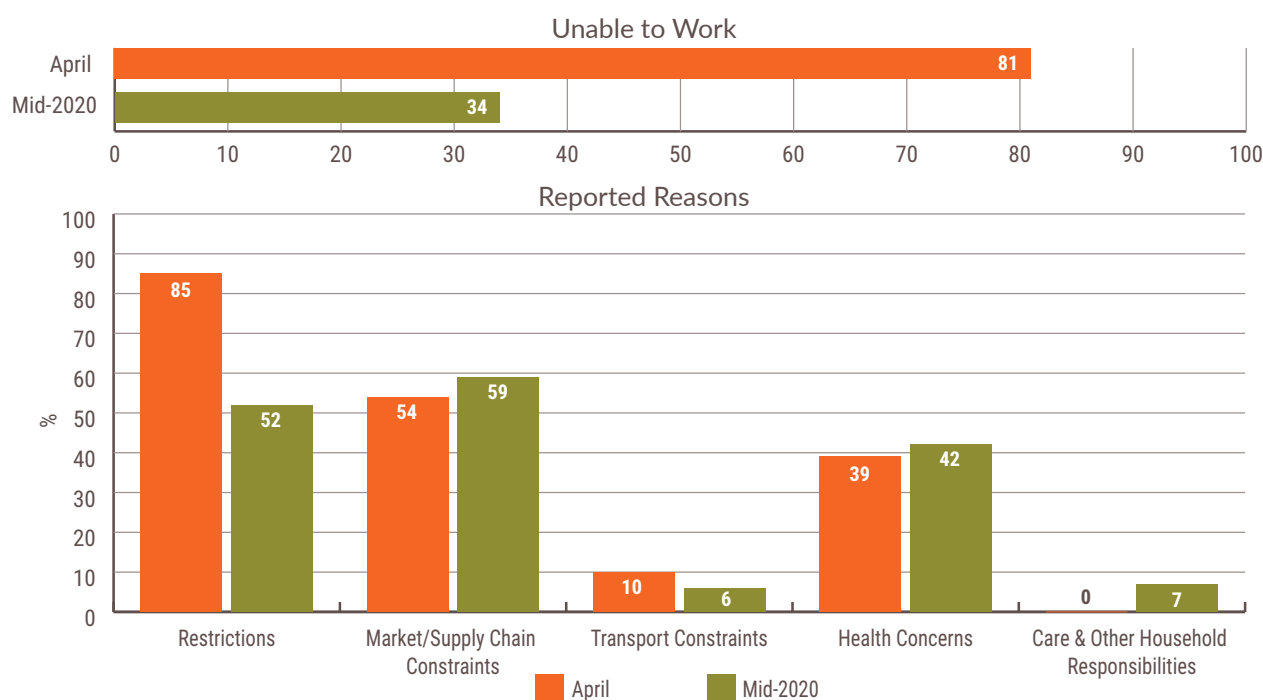
Overall Impact on Work and Earnings

Across the nine cities, the vast majority (81 per cent) of street vendors and market traders were

unable to work during the peak lockdowns or restrictions in April. But there was significant variation in the ability to work across the study cities. In Bangkok and Mexico City, where the lockdown was partial and fresh food vendors were able to operate, half of the street vendors and market traders were able to work in April. The lockdown in Mexico City was never as strictly enforced as in some other study cities, such as the three Indian cities and Lima. Also, although all open-air markets in Mexico City were supposed to close, those that sold essential goods were allowed to remain open. In Durban and Ahmedabad, where the lockdowns were full and long, nearly all (97 and 95 per cent, respectively) were not able to work in April. In South Africa, fresh food vendors were allowed by the national government to resume working after one week of the national lockdown. But the early morning market in Durban, where most of the respondents in this study worked, remained closed due to municipal requirements.

The most commonly cited reasons for not being able to work in April were stay-at-home orders or restrictions (85 per cent), disruptions in markets or supply chains (54 per cent) and health concerns and precautions (39 per cent). Among those who tried to work during the peak lockdown, around one-quarter (26 per cent) reported that they were prevented from doing so by local police or law enforcement officers. In Mexico City and New York City, around one-third of the street vendors reported that a lack of buyers was the main reason that they were not able to work in April. Among those able to work in April, many reported additional costs: especially for personal protective equipment (PPE) (66 per cent across 9 cities, 86

Figure 14 – Street Vendors and Market Traders: Per Cent Not Able to Work and Reported Reasons: April and Mid-2020



Note: respondents could report more than one reason. Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

per cent in Accra and 70 per cent in Mexico City), but also for transport (37 per cent across 9 cities, 76 per cent in Accra and 54 per cent in Lima). The net impact of some street vendors and market traders not being able to work and others facing additional costs, was that average daily earnings in April were 16 per cent of average earnings pre-COVID-19 (February 2020).

By mid-2020, across the nine cities, around two-thirds (66 per cent) of the street vendors and market traders had resumed working (**Figure 14**). But, again, there was significant variation between cities: while only 25 per cent of the street vendors in New York City – where there was a two-month partial lockdown – had resumed work, 94 per cent of the street vendors and market traders in Bangkok and virtually all street vendors and market traders in Accra – where the lockdowns were partial and short – had resumed work. The most common reported reason for not being able to resume work was the continued closure of markets and vending areas: 34 per cent of the total sample, 28 per cent of the New York City sample and 55 per cent of the Delhi sample. The lack of customers was also listed as a reason (24 per cent overall), mainly in New York (46 per cent) but also in Delhi (29 per cent).

While most street vendors and market traders in the Warwick Junction Market of Durban were able to return to work by mid-2020, their earnings

remained relatively low due to ongoing restrictions on those who pass through the market area, which is situated between the main transport node and the central business district of the city. As a market trader in Durban explained: “*Four primary gates [to the market area] were closed with only one gate opened, which meant that all traders located in places far from that entry gate lost a lot of money.*”

Distinct Pathways of Impact

Overall, although the majority of street vendors and market traders had resumed work by mid-2020, recovery was slow in other regards. Across the sample, 86 per cent reported that their sales were still low compared to pre-COVID-19 (February 2020) and 70 per cent reported that it had become harder to purchase stock, indicating persistent problems of supply, not only demand. Of those who reported that the price of their stock had increased, more than half reported that their selling price had not.

For example, street vendors and market traders in Accra (see **Box 2**) attributed their lower sales to reduced demand from individual buyers and from restaurants, bars and hotels due, in turn, to reduced purchasing power, bans on social gatherings and continued closure of schools. Some also mentioned that some potential customers expressed concern that the food – and, even, non-food – items they sell were infected with the COVID-19 virus.

Box 2 – Street Vendors and Market Traders in Accra, Ghana: Changes in Demand, Supply, Prices and Other Factors

Changes in Demand

“Chop bars, restaurants, hotels and schools who bought from me have all closed down or reduced their purchases drastically.”

“The restrictions on social gatherings, like funerals, parties, and weddings, have affected sales because people do not want to buy anything when they won’t have a use for it.”

“I sell at a vantage point where a school and a hostel are situated but because of the restrictions all schools and hostels were closed, leaving us alone with very few buyers.”

“Now, most of my customers who used to come from outside Accra are no longer coming.”

Changes in Supply

“A lot of the wholesalers who bring plantain and cassava into town were afraid to catch the virus and so very few of them brought in supplies. This shot up the prices so high that customers were buying in bits, instead of the bulk purchases before the virus came.”

“Since the lockdown, I do not have access to my goods: for example eggs. Also, about 20 crates of my eggs got spoilt because of the lockdown.”

Changes in Price of Stock

“Increase in the price of stock has really affected my trade so I cannot buy in bulk to sell.”

“Goods are scarce so they [wholesalers] have increased the prices.”

Public Health Concerns

“The fear that people have in dealing with us in the open market has made business difficult. Now they feel the malls and supermarkets are safer places than the markets.”

“I sell second-hand clothing. People were purporting that the clothes may be infected [by the virus] so sales went down even before the lockdown.”

“People are scared to buy cooked food from outside due to the notion that they will be infected by the virus and that they are better protected when they prepare their own foods. This has really affected my sales.”

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Demand – Across the nine cities, 86 per cent reported that their sales were lower in mid-2020 compared to their sales in February 2020. In Ahmedabad, all of the street vendors reported that their sales were lower mid-year. The decline in sales forced many street vendors to lower their selling prices. In Bangkok, 87 per cent of street vendors reported that they had to lower their selling price.

Supply and Prices – Furthermore, the goods that street vendors buy (to sell) were often in short supply and varied in price. Across the nine cities, 70 per cent of the street vendors and market traders reported that it became harder to purchase their stock and over half (52 per cent) reported that the price of their stocks had increased. Again, there was significant variation across cities, as 17 per cent reported that the price of stock had stayed the same and 19 per

cent reported that the price had decreased. In Mexico City, a high percentage of street vendors and market traders faced difficulty in buying stock (92 per cent) and a decline in sales (100 per cent). In Durban mid-year, over one-third (37 per cent) of the street vendors who were not able to work said that this was because the price of stock was too high. A street vendor in Durban reported: *“The prices have hiked almost double and it has been difficult to get commodities during this pandemic. We had to change commodities, sell what we were not selling before the pandemic, just to earn and make a living for a day, because it has been difficult to get produce.”* In Pleven, by contrast, 64 per cent of vendors reported that the price of stock had decreased.

Of those for whom prices of stock had increased, more than half reported that they were not able to increase their selling prices. Again, there was

significant variation across cities: while 84 per cent of street vendors and market traders in Accra and 53 per cent in Mexico City reported an increase in selling prices, 72 per cent in Pleven and 54 per cent in Ahmedabad reported a decrease.

Other Changes – In some cities, markets for specific products were closed. In Accra, during a partial and relatively short lockdown, most built markets which specialized in clothes, second-hand goods and consumer durables were closed, while markets for perishables – fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and fish – remained open. A street vendor in Accra explained: *“It was only perishable goods sellers that were allowed to sell but those who sell soap and detergents were also allowed to sell, because we need to bathe and eat, but things like clothing and the like were not allowed.”*

In Mexico City, all historic open-air markets (tianguis) were closed. A street vendor in Mexico City pointed out that: *“The government made it seem like trading in the public space was the only vector of the disease, the only problem to solve. And it was proven that when the tianguis were closed for a month, in Ixtapalapa and Iztacalco, the cases did not fall. On the contrary, the cases increased when there were no tianguis operating.”*

In Ahmedabad, the main wholesale market for agricultural produce and all the natural markets of street vendors were closed during the lockdown and were not allowed to reopen for some time thereafter. The street vendors who were able to sell fresh produce had to travel further to another wholesale market to buy stock, resulting in more hours of work and higher transport costs. SEWA collaborated with the Ahmedabad Municipal

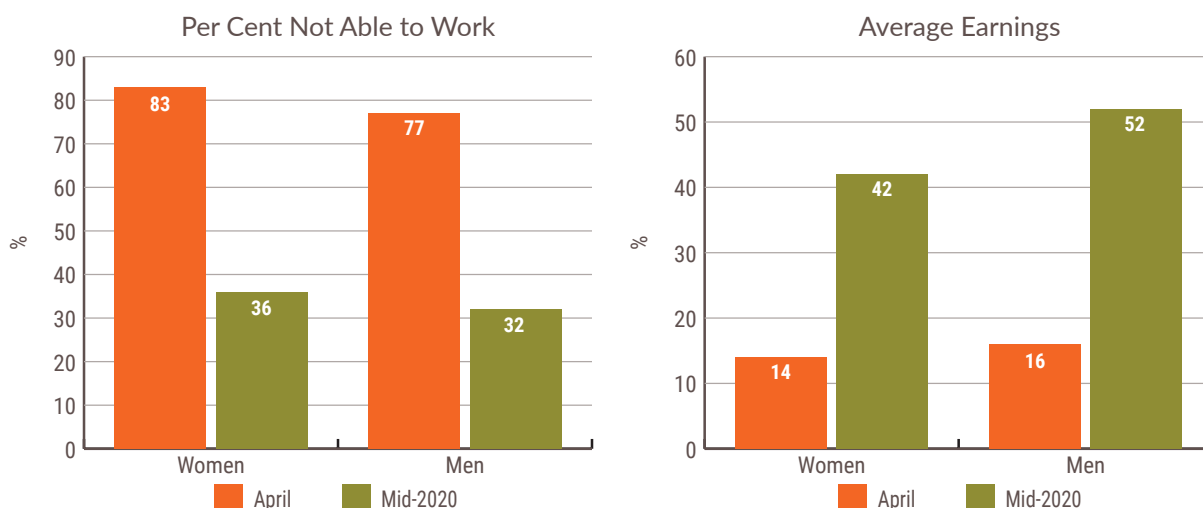
Corporation on a “Vegetables on Wheels” scheme: 65 SEWA vegetable vendor members were given an e-rickshaw and driver to take them along an assigned route in low-income neighbourhoods to sell vegetables.

Additionally in April, among all the street vendors and market traders across the nine cities, 27 per cent reported that their perishable goods had spoiled, 10 per cent that non-perishable goods had been damaged, 8 per cent that their goods had been confiscated and 4 per cent that their vending site had been destroyed. A street vendor in Mexico City explained why some street vendors and market traders who sold perishable goods had to lower their selling price during the lockdown period: *“All those products that had an expiration date of 2–3 months – candy, cookies – rotted. So the vendors had to sell all those products at very low prices because they were going to expire. Also, they had to take home something to eat, so they had to sell at almost half the price that they paid when they bought [the goods].”*

Key Variables – Especially in April but also mid-2020, a lower percentage of women than men street vendors/market traders were able to work. In April, the average earnings of both women and men street vendors/market traders had declined to roughly the same percentage (14 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively) of pre-COVID-19 average earnings. But by mid-2020, men vendors/traders enjoyed a higher recovery of average earnings.

Pre-COVID-19, across the nine cities, more than half of the street vendors and/or market traders sold food items, either fresh or cooked: 58 per

Figure 15 – Men and Women Street Vendors and Market Traders: Per Cent Not Able to Work and Average Earnings (as per cent of pre-COVID-19 average earnings): April and Mid-2020



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Table 3 – Food and Non-Food Street Vendors and Market Traders: Per Cent Not Able to Work and Monthly Earnings (as per cent of pre-COVID-19 monthly earnings): April and Mid-2020

	Not Able to Work				Average Earnings as Per Cent of pre-COVID-19 Average Earnings			
	April		Mid-2020		April		Mid-2020	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Food	76	69	33	35	21	21	38	44
Non-food	93	86	42	29	5	10	47	61

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

cent of women vendors/traders and 52 per cent of men vendors/traders. Also pre-COVID-19, the average earnings of non-food vendors were 84 per cent of the earnings of food vendors/traders. In April, those who sold food were more likely than those who sold non-food items to be able to work and also experienced a lower drop in earnings than non-food vendors/traders (**Table 3**). The gap reflects that, during the crisis, there was a greater demand for food than non-food products. Also, in several cities, local governments implicitly or explicitly recognized street food vendors as essential workers. The gap also reflects the decline in the tourist industry, especially in Bangkok and Plevan, as many tourists buy non-food gifts and souvenirs, not just street food.

However, by mid-2020, average earnings of both women and men food vendors/traders had recovered less than those of non-food vendors. Also, in mid-2020, the average earnings of women vendors/traders who sold both food and non-food items were less than those of men vendors/traders.

Waste Pickers

“Waste pickers were not able to collect or sell waste, and the waste they collected, when they could sell, it was for half the price.” – Waste Picker Leader, Ahmedabad

Overall Impact on Work and Earnings

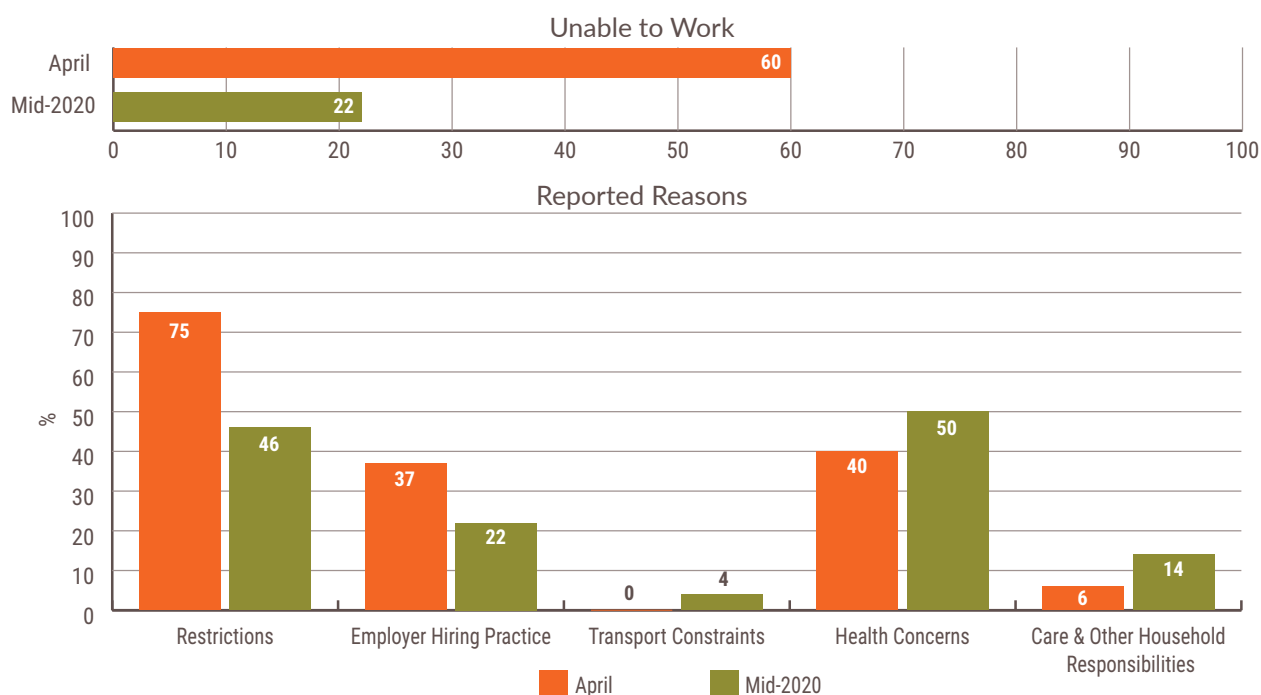
Across the nine cities which studied waste pickers, 60 per cent of the waste pickers were not able to work during the peak lockdowns or restrictions in April. The three main reasons cited were restrictions on movement and work (75 per cent of respondents), health concerns (40 per cent) and disruptions to the waste supply chain (including the closure of collection and sorting sites as well as waste dealerships) (37 per cent). The closure of collection and sorting sites was cited as a reason

by 22 per cent of all waste pickers: 30 per cent in Ahmedabad, 29 per cent in Delhi and 43 per cent in Durban. For instance, several dumpsites or landfills in Ahmedabad were closed. As one waste picker in Ahmedabad explained mid-year: *“Our work, which was going on at Amraiwadi and Kankariya in association with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), is currently closed. The sisters who were given permission used to pick garbage for their livelihood from these places [...] But as of today, the AMC permit given to these women to pick waste at the dumpsites was revoked and, as of today, remains revoked. So, women cannot go there for work.”* In Accra, waste pickers were not prohibited from working at dumpsites so that those that lived near or around the dumpsites were able to continue to work. But most of those who had to commute to the dumpsites were not able to do so because of restrictions on mobility. In a show of mutual support and solidarity, many waste pickers who lived near the dumpsite opened up their homes to waste pickers who lived elsewhere to stay and work.

In Dakar and Mexico City, nearly all waste pickers (94 and 97 per cent, respectively) were able to continue to work, even though neither city designated waste pickers as essential workers. In Dakar, as noted earlier, the sample is comprised entirely of waste pickers: all of whom work at, and live near, a single dumpsite that remained open. In Mexico City, all of the waste pickers in the study sample work alongside formal sanitation workers on the same routes. Called *“trabajadores voluntarios”*, they receive no contracts or protections from the city but have to rely on tips from customers who use their services and on the sale of recyclable materials that they reclaim. During the crisis, they continued to work alongside formal sanitation workers who were declared essential.¹¹

¹¹ The public waste management service in Mexico City is composed of 14,000 formal workers with contracts and 10,000 informal waste pickers without contracts, who live off informal recycling and tips from citizens. Although the *voluntarios* were not recognized or declared essential during the pandemic and lockdowns, the local authorities did not try to stop them as they recognize that their role as recyclers is essential to the city. This irony was repeatedly pointed out in the media, in large part because the local WIEGO team raised awareness about the issue.

Figure 16 – Waste Pickers: Per Cent Not Able to Work and Reported Reasons: April and Mid-2020



Note: respondents could report more than one reason. Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Overall, by mid-2020, 78 per cent of the waste pickers had returned to work. Again, there was significant variation between cities: 91 per cent had returned to work in Accra – where the lockdown was partial and short – compared to only 24 per cent in Lima – where the lockdown was full and long. The ranking of main reasons for not being able to work had shifted since April: by mid-2020, health concerns were the major concern for half of the waste pickers, followed by continuing restrictions on movement (46 per cent) and disruptions to collection and sorting sites (22 per cent) (Figure 16).

Across the four sectors, waste pickers experienced the greatest recovery of average earnings by mid-2020: to 70 per cent of pre-COVID-19 earnings. In part, this is because most waste pickers are self-employed and can operate below the radar of the municipal government. However, it should be noted that, pre-COVID-19, they earned the least of all sectors in most of the nine cities. However, six of the nine cities did not have home-based workers in the sample and four did not have domestic workers. In two cities which studied all four groups, Ahmedabad and Delhi, home-based workers earned less on average than waste pickers pre-COVID-19. Also, domestic workers earned less than waste pickers in Ahmedabad but more than waste pickers in Bangkok, on average: reflecting the fact that, in Bangkok, most domestic workers are educated and most of their employers are expatriates or well-off Thais.

Distinct Pathways of Impact

By mid-2020, compared to pre-COVID-19 and despite the overall recovery in ability to work, 72 per cent of all waste pickers reported that it had become more difficult to access waste; 57 per cent reported that the number of waste dealerships or buy-back centres had decreased; and 70 per cent reported that the prices for recycled waste had decreased. The one exception to decreased prices was New York City where, under the New York State’s Returnable Container Act, designated waste recyclables are redeemable for a fixed price.

Supply – Nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of waste pickers reported greater difficulty in accessing waste over the past calendar month at both points in time. In Bangkok and Durban, most waste pickers (94 and 92 per cent, respectively) reported that it had become more difficult to access waste. A waste picker in Durban explained: “Accessing waste has been the biggest challenge after lockdown. Most of the areas where we access our recyclables do not allow us to collect waste anymore. When we try and collect somewhere, the police take our recyclables away and say we are littering.”

Demand – The closure of dumps and dumpsters and sorting sites was not the only pathway of impact on waste pickers. The closure of recycling centres and waste dealerships and the lack of buyers led to a decrease in demand and prices for recyclable waste. Across the sample, over

half (57 per cent) of waste pickers reported a decrease in the number of buy-back centres or scrap dealerships while one-third (34 per cent) reported the number remained the same. Considered another way, waste pickers reported a decrease in the number of buy-back centres or scrap dealerships in seven of the nine cities. The two exceptions were Accra and Bangkok, where most waste pickers reported that the number had remained the same.

In Dakar, where the dump site remained open, the waste pickers complained about a lack of buyers due, in part, to restrictions on movement and transport in and out of Dakar. While some waste pickers were able to store the waste they reclaimed to sell later, at a better price, others had to sell at lower prices. As one waste picker in Dakar explained: *“The disease has caused us a lot of difficulties because in Mbeubeuss [dumpsite] there is plastic but we can no longer export it. So we are having difficulty selling the product and the intermediaries are taking advantage to lower the prices. So, we are obliged to sell at their price because we need to support our families.”* Another waste picker in Dakar summed up the dynamics in the recycled waste market as follows: *“The power of buyers [i.e., both recycling firms and their intermediaries] has increased while the negotiating power of the waste pickers has weakened because of the urgency to earn some [immediate] income.”*

Prices – In mid-2020, across the sample, 70 per cent of waste pickers reported that the price of recyclables had decreased. However, in New York City, where a state law fixed the price of certain recyclables, 84 per cent reported that the price stayed the same although redemption centres were closed for some time. By contrast, in Delhi, where all the junk shops were closed, virtually all waste pickers (98 per cent reported a decrease in the price of recyclables. A Delhi waste picker reported: *“What I was going to sell for five rupees per kg, I had to sell for three rupees per kg.”* Similarly, a waste picker in Ahmedabad explained: *“Because of the onset of monsoon, the scrap prices have decreased. Besides, the goods are not getting sold further up the supply chain, so even the scrap shop owners accept lesser goods and whatever they are accepting is at lower prices.”*

Other Changes – Over sixty per cent (61 per cent) of the waste pickers reported that they faced greater occupational health risks mid-2020 than pre-COVID-19. More than half of the waste pickers reported additional costs for transport and for security measures, to protect their waste materials from being stolen; and just over one-third (37 per cent) reported additional fines

and fees. Also, 41 per cent of the waste pickers reported loss of – or damage to – the waste materials they had collected and/or sorted; and 8 per cent reported destruction or demolition of their sorting and storage spaces. There was also significant variation between cities in regard to additional costs: those who reported additional costs for transport ranged from 90 per cent in Bangkok and 60 per cent in Dakar to less than 10 per cent in Delhi and Durban; and those who reported additional fines and fees ranged from 100 per cent in Ahmedabad and Lima to 5 per cent in Mexico City.

In regard to the impact of the increased cost of transport, a waste picker in Dakar explained: *“We used to work until late [at night] but that is no longer possible because we face transportation problems and we lack money.”* In Accra, waste pickers started sleeping near the dumpsite to spend less on the commute from their households. Their earnings were reduced so much that the cost of the bus ride had become too expensive. As one waste picker in Accra explained: *“Those that live far from the landfill area now have to build small kiosks around the site and they live there. When it's the weekend they will go home because they cannot go everyday. I, myself, am doing that. So, there are a lot of difficulties especially with the transportation to the site because you will use more than 15 cedi to 20 cedi to the work site and you earn only 10 cedi; it is very bad.”* One waste picker in Bangkok summed up the situation as follows: *“I cannot make a living.”* In Ahmedabad, 11 per cent of the waste pickers reported that they were not able to work because transport to and from the site where they sorted and/or collected waste was simply not available.

Key Variables – The waste picker sample is comprised almost equally of women (51 per cent) and men (49 per cent). Key differences between waste pickers are what tasks they perform and where they collect, sort and store waste. Women waste pickers tend to be concentrated in primary collection and sorting and are less likely than men waste pickers to be involved in processing or trading in recyclables. Among the sample, a higher per cent of women waste pickers (41 per cent) than men waste pickers (33 per cent) collected and sorted waste at dumpsites; and a lower percentage of women waste pickers than men waste pickers collected waste from homes (35 per cent and 47 per cent, respectively) and from businesses (11 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively).

Box 3 – Waste Pickers in Accra, Ghana: Changes in Supply, Demand and Prices

Decreased Supply

“Fewer waste trucks are now tipping at the dump site compared to the pre-pandemic period. Meanwhile we are many at the dump site. You have to hustle or struggle hard otherwise you won't get any materials to sell.”

“Most of the trucks that used to come from Accra have stopped. Now we rely on the trucks that come from Tema zone. In fact it is the tricycle operators (Taxi Borla) that are sustaining our work here. The quantity of materials has also dropped.”

“Most of the waste trucks from material-rich locations in Accra to the dumpsite have stopped coming. Those coming from Ashaiman [a low-income community] lack valuable materials.”

Decreased Demand

“We are not getting markets for our goods as was the case in the past. The buyers are not buying. Our goods are just sitting there.”

“Our materials are not being bought. The buyers select which materials to buy. They are not buying PET plastic.”¹²

“The recycling companies have also closed down; the prices have fallen. However, we have new buyers who are buying paper and cardboard. This is because of the high demand for tissue paper.”

Decreased Selling Price

“The work is not moving the way it used to be. We are not getting good prices for our goods. There is a drastic drop in income.”

“My major concern is with the decrease in prices of our goods. Previously I used to sell 1 kg of iron for 1 cedis, now the same quantity sells for 80 pesewas.”

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Box 4 – Waste Pickers in Durban, South Africa: Changes in Supply, Demand and Prices

“It is now hard to get recyclables because most waste generators are not fully operational, especially liquor outlets.”

“Most companies and shops were not operating and, therefore, fewer recyclables were generated.”

“The economy has declined and workers are being retrenched, which results in less waste being generated.”

“We are unable to access most private properties because of the stigma that recyclers always roam around...waste generators are becoming hostile towards recyclers.”

“The prices for recyclables have been dramatically reduced.”

“It will take us years to recover.”

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

In April, a lower percentage of women waste pickers (39 per cent) than men waste pickers (45 per cent) were able to work. By mid-year, the gender gap had become wider: 71 per cent of women waste pickers and 84 per cent of men waste pickers were able to work. In mid-2020, the main reasons for not working cited by both

women and men waste pickers were that the local government did not permit them to work and/or had closed their collection sites (**Table 4**). But it should be noted that, in mid-2020, some women waste pickers reported three types of constraints that no men waste pickers reported: transport was not available or had become too expensive

¹² PET is the acronym for polyethylene terephthalate, the chemical name for polyester.

Table 4 – Women and Men Waste Pickers: Per Cent Reported Different Reasons for Not Being Able to Work: April and Mid-2020

Reported Reasons for Not Being Able to Work	April			Mid-2020		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
Not Permitted	71	80	75	45	49	46
Closure of Collection Sites	21	22	22	12	13	13
Not Enough Buyers	14	13	13	11	5	9
Reduced Amount of Waste	7	5	6	3	5	4
No Waste Available	15	6	11	4	5	5
Transport Not Available	6	2	4	3	0	2
Transport Too Expensive	1	0	1	5	0	4
Fear of Getting Virus	40	31	36	47	41	45
Became Ill	7	2	5	12	5	10
Need to Care for Children	5	1	3	15	0	10
Need to Care for Other Family Members	4	1	2	4	3	4
Need to Do Household Chores	4	0	2	5	0	4

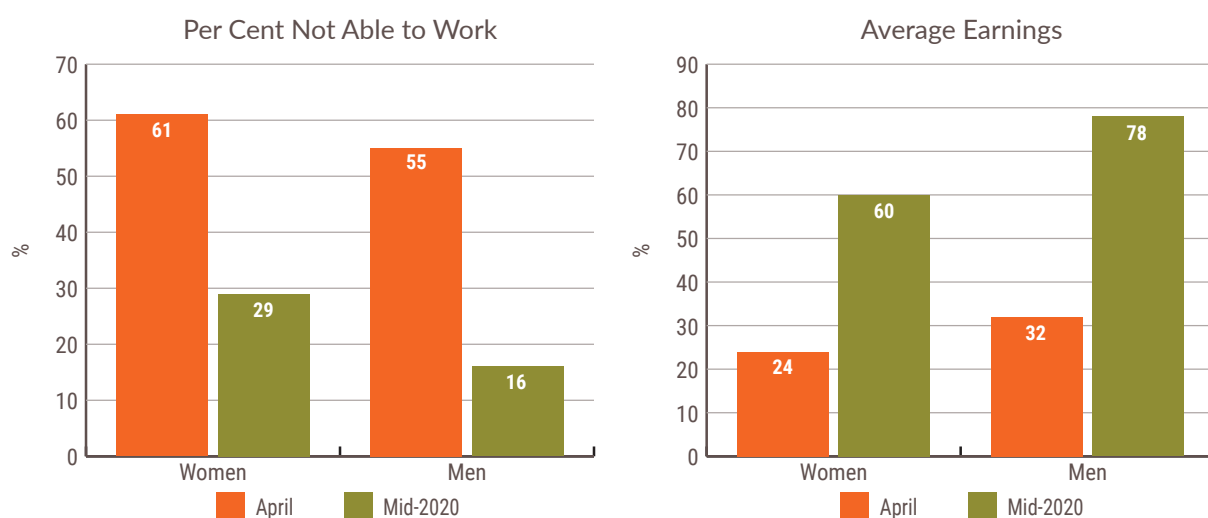
Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

(8 per cent of women waste pickers), need to care for children (15 per cent), and need to tend to other household chores (5 per cent).

By mid-year, the gender gap in average earnings between women and men waste pickers (as a percentage of pre-COVID-19 earnings) had increased: reflecting the gender gap in work rates (**Figure 17**). But other factors also contributed to the gender gap in average earnings among waste pickers. In April, a roughly equal percentage of women and men waste pickers reported that they had to spend more on storage (6 per cent and 7 per cent) and on fees and fines (98 per cent and 100 per cent) than pre-COVID-19; but

a significantly higher percentage of women waste pickers (51 per cent) than men waste pickers (32 per cent) spent money on PPE.

Consider the case of waste pickers in Dakar where the average earnings of women waste pickers were 20 per cent of those of men waste pickers pre-COVID-19. This was attributed by local informants to the disadvantaged status of women waste pickers, relative to men waste pickers, including: the physical disadvantage that women face in competing with men for the waste dumped by trucks and in transporting waste; the fact that women are less likely to be self-employed and more likely to work for another waste picker;

Figure 17 – Women and Men Waste Pickers: Per Cent Not Able to Work & Average Earnings (as per cent of pre-COVID-19 average earnings): April and Mid-2020

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

and the shorter workweeks and workdays of women due to their unequal burden of care and household responsibilities and the lack of day care facilities near the dumpsites.

6. Relief Measures

6.1 Government Relief Measures

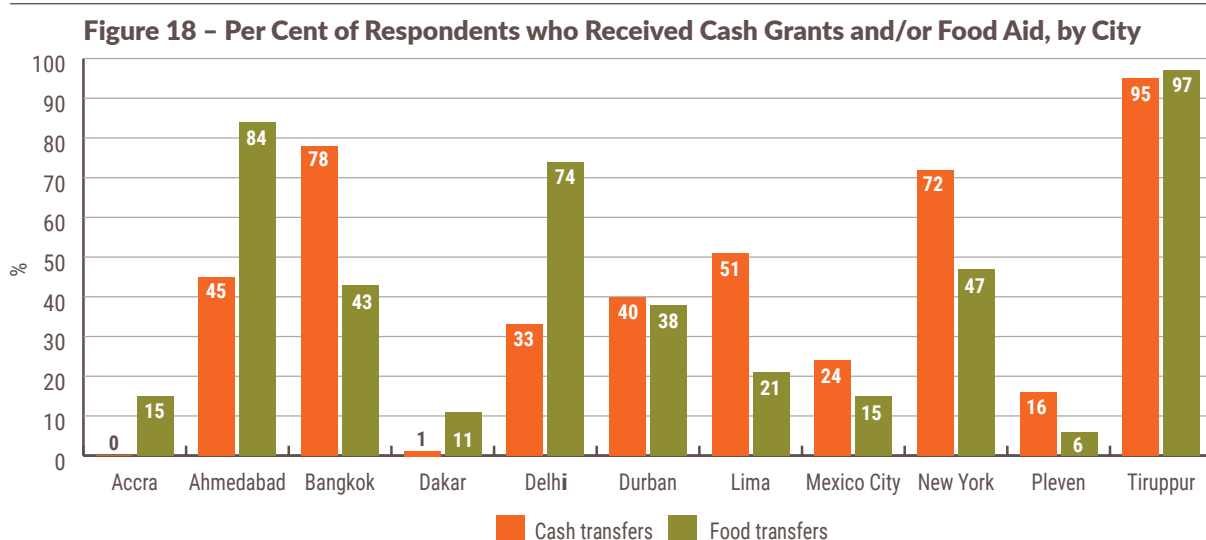
To help cushion the impact of the crisis, there was a rapid, if uneven, expansion of relief measures from governments: often targeted at vulnerable households or individuals but sometimes targeted at informal workers per se. **Box 5** details the different types of government relief measures which reached at least some informal workers in the 11 cities between March and July 2020. The amount of relief, not just the type, varied widely. Consider the cash grants by national governments: which ranged from a one-time cash grant of 500 rupees (USD 6.6) in India to a six-time cash grant of rand 350 (USD 20) in South Africa, to a three-time cash grant of 5,000 baht (USD 159) in Thailand.

However, the study findings show that the promised expansion or scaling-up of relief measures to reach vulnerable households or individuals, and informal workers in particular, was generally not matched in reality (**Figure 18**). Overall, just over 40 per cent of the sample reported access to a cash grant (41 per cent) and food aid (42 per cent). However, access differed widely depending on the existing social protection infrastructure, the policy context, and the capacity of membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers to provide “last mile” services connecting their members to the benefits on offer. For example, in Bangkok and Tiruppur, access to both cash and food relief measures was

relatively high, due to a combination of relatively strong pre-existing social protection infrastructure and the work of local organizations of informal workers to ensure that their members were able to overcome barriers to access, including those presented by digital registration platforms. However, most home-based workers in Tiruppur did not receive relief targeted at informal workers from the Tamil Nadu state Labour Welfare Ministry, as they were not registered with the state’s Manual Workers Welfare Board.

In Mexico City, by contrast, the coverage of government relief measures was relatively low. According to a local informant, this is because access to government relief depended in large part on the occupation of informal workers and, also, eligibility criteria. Cash grants from the city government were available only for non-salaried workers (which includes shoe shiners, vendors of old magazines, organ players, artisans and musicians) and only after they protested for relief – specifically, a cash grant of USD 75 – to be delivered. A one-time loan of USD 1250 from the federal government was made available to domestic workers and street vendors. In the case of domestic workers, they had to be affiliated to a social security pilot program, but only 28,000 out of a total of 2.4 million domestic workers in the country are affiliated to that program. In the case of street vendors, the government used its own database, rather than those maintained by local organizations of street vendors, which resulted in many street vendors not being able to access the federal loan.

In some cities (Dakar, Delhi, Durban, Lima and Mexico City), women and workers with children were more likely to be reached by relief measures. In Bangkok, Delhi, Lima and Mexico City, informal



Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

Box 5 – Government Relief Measures Accessed by Informal Workers in the Study Cities: March-July 2020

Study Cities	Relief Cash Grants	Top-Ups to Existing Cash Grants	Food Aid	Waivers on Payments	Loans
Accra			for market porters (<i>kayayei</i>) ¹³	free water bills from April–June 2020 + some utilities forgiveness for ultra poor	
Ahmedabad	one-time small cash grant of 500 INR (USD 6.6)		food aid, including pre-existing ration system	3-month waiver of utility bills	
Bangkok	cash transfers of THB 5,000 (USD 159) per month for three months (April–June 2020) for workers not covered by social security			one-year suspension of loan repayments, mortgages and credit card debt by Thai banks for eligible individuals	
Dakar			X		
Delhi	one-time small cash grant of 500 INR (USD 6.6)		food aid, including pre-existing ration system	3-month waiver of utility bills	
Durban	special COVID-19 relief grant of SAR350 (USD 20) per month for six months	X			
Lima	cash grants for 1–2 months				
Mexico City ¹⁴	two-month cash grant to “non-salaried workers” ¹⁵				loans for domestic workers and street vendors
New York City	under Federal CARES Act, provisions for one-time stimulus checks + under Pandemic Employment Assistance Program, unemployment supplements for some self-employed workers – but exclusion of undocumented workers and their families under both				
Pleven	X		X		X
Tiruppur	one-time small cash grant of 500 INR (USD 6.6)		food aid, including pre-existing ration system	3-month waiver of utility bills	

Notes:
1 – This table is based on information from local partner organizations and informal worker leaders. However, it was not always possible to discern which government relief measures reached at least some informal workers in each city sample, especially state and local government relief measures.
2 – X = accessed by some informal workers in the city samples but information on the amount, duration and frequency of benefit is not available

Source: WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study (2020)

¹³ The *kayayei* are all women, mostly young migrants from the rural north of Ghana. They are extremely vulnerable and suffered greatly during the pandemic and lockdown in Ghana. Some food aid was extended to the *kayayei* after a video was featured in the media of government workers forcing a bus, filled with *kayayei* fleeing to their home villages, to turn around and go back to Accra.

¹⁴ In Mexico City, only “non-salaried” workers were eligible for cash grants under a city-supported program, whereas domestic workers and street vendors could apply only for loans under a national program.

¹⁵ In Mexico, the term “non-salaried workers” is used for those workers who are paid by fees, commissions, tips and other modalities which are different from a fixed wage or salary and, also, from earnings from self-employment.

workers living in informal settlements were more likely to receive food relief than those living outside informal settlements. However, across the cities, informal workers living outside of informal settlements were also impacted by the pandemic, earning only 25 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 earnings in April and 60 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 earnings in mid-2020.

Differences in access to relief between and within occupational sectors were also apparent. In Ahmedabad, waste pickers were the most likely to receive both cash and food relief because they were seen as particularly needy and tend to live in informal settlements. By contrast, less than a third of domestic workers in Ahmedabad had access to cash relief. In Durban, waste pickers had the least access due to the fact that many are homeless and, therefore, hard to reach. In Mexico City, a dedicated cash relief program was extended to non-salaried workers, but only after widespread demonstrations by these workers at the start of the crisis.

It is important to note that cash grants and food aid, however welcome and essential, were viewed as insufficient to meet expenditures on basic needs. Referring to the relatively generous three-month emergency grant received by many informal workers in Bangkok, a street vendor noted that *“for those who rent a place, this amount is sufficient just for the rental fee, but insufficient for food expenses”*. This perception is confirmed by the study findings. Across most of the study cities, those that received cash grants and/or food aid were not less likely to report adult and child hunger at home. The exceptions were the Indian cities of Ahmedabad and Delhi, where those who received food assistance were less likely to report hunger than those who did not receive food assistance. This is likely due to the fact that, in India, food aid included both food packets or cooked food as well as free rations (including grains, cooking oil, sugar and salt) through the pre-existing Public Distribution System.

Finally, it is important to highlight, as worker leaders and key informants pointed out, that punitive government actions like evictions, destruction of workplaces, confiscation of merchandise, and generalized stigmatisation strongly outweighed the benefits from government relief measures. In Accra, waste pickers **were abruptly locked out** of the dumpsite where they had recycled the city’s waste for years when it was decommissioned without consultation or livelihoods safeguarding. In Ahmedabad, the natural markets of street vendors and the main agricultural wholesale market were not allowed to reopen until well after malls and retail stores

were allowed to reopen. In Dakar, the centuries-old Sandaga market **was completely destroyed** without agreement on relocation plans for the traders. Overall, 8 per cent of street vendors reported that their goods had been confiscated and 4 per cent that their vending site had been destroyed; and 22 per cent of the waste pickers reported that their collection and/or sorting and storage sites had been closed or destroyed.

6.2 Relief Role of Organizations of Informal Workers

From the start of the COVID-19 crisis, membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers in all of the cities worked quickly and creatively on two broad fronts: outreach to members to support them to cope with the crisis and advocacy with governments to make visible the impact of the crisis on their members and to communicate the needs of their members. Subsequently, in cases where government relief was made available to informal workers, many MBOs played a role in supporting members to access the relief. When relief was not provided or was insufficient, many MBOs supplemented it. In this way, MBOs played a critical bridging role between strained local and national governments lacking on-the-ground knowledge of vulnerable worker groups and informal workers who lacked information and, often, the tools needed to apply for or access much-needed relief. At the same time that MBOs worked to “close the gap” between governments and informal workers to secure relief, they also made efforts to protect workers’ livelihoods – including through securing essential work permissions and work orders.

From the onset of the crisis, as governments struggled to put out clear guidance and misinformation spread, MBOs played a critical role in providing their members with reliable and accessible information about health and safety protocols as well as relief. This work was enabled by long-standing relationships of trust between MBO leaders and members, existing knowledge of the informal economy, and extensive communication networks (often on WhatsApp or other platforms).

Forty per cent of domestic workers, street vendors and waste pickers across the cities reported that their MBOs served as their primary source of information on the COVID-19 virus and on guidelines for protection. As a waste picker leader from Accra explained: *“We are not receiving much education from anybody; nobody is giving us any education on the landfill. So whatever we hear, we also try to let our members hear.”*

In the process of communicating with their members, MBO leaders gathered grassroots intelligence on the experiences, risks and needs of informal workers, which they subsequently shared with local governments. Worker leaders in Accra, Dakar, Durban, Lima and Plevn reported efforts to engage and problem-solve with local governments and ministries around the needs of workers in markets and public spaces, where long-standing deficits in basic infrastructure access compounded the health and safety risks in the pandemic context. Communications with MBO members served the additional critical function of providing emotional and moral support at a time of fear, uncertainty and devastating loss. Worker leaders reached out to members, providing them with a sense of reassurance. A home-based worker in Plevn acknowledged the importance of moral support: *“The truth is, the only person who was interested in our lives is the chairman of the organization. Moral support is very important for all of us... It is essential [that] someone stand behind us and our art.”*

As noted above, major barriers existed to rolling out and accessing relief – including historic lack of data on informal workers, complicated administrative procedures involved in the application process, as well as limited access to digital technologies and low digital literacy levels among informal workers. MBOs in Lima and Mexico City worked to fill the data gap by offering to provide governments with member databases. MBOs in Accra, Ahmedabad, Delhi, Lima and Mexico City supported members to apply: informing them of relief schemes as they became available, providing guidance on application procedures and in some cases filling out applications on their behalf.

Where government relief was not provided – or where it was not sufficient – many MBOs supplemented government relief by raising funds, seeking relief from other non-governmental sources and channelling it to their members or providing mutual aid. Over half (53 per cent) of workers across the cities reported having received food aid from – or through – their MBO.

The crisis and associated lockdowns have posed unprecedented threats to informal livelihoods, especially as the response of the local government in some cities has been to further repress informal workers in the name of crisis management, public health and economic recovery. In response, MBOs have made efforts to draw attention to the essential nature of informal work and to secure the right to work – as well as the right to work safely – for their members. For example, in Durban, market trader leaders facilitated the

essential worker permit application process for other traders, as one trader explained: *“Traveling to and from town on a daily basis to process papers was quite costly, thus, they [MBO leaders] helped in a tremendous manner, so that when we came to [the business support unit] offices, we knew exactly all needed documents and processes involved.”*

For home-based workers who did not receive work orders from contractors, factories or firms up the supply chain, MBOs in Ahmedabad, Bangkok, Delhi and Plevn negotiated bulk orders for home-based workers to make masks and/or supported online training for home-based workers to adapt skills to producing new products. For domestic workers who had been abruptly fired by employers without compensation or support, the domestic workers union in Mexico City provided legal support to individual workers in filing wrongful termination claims – and extended this benefit to non-members during the crisis in response to a high demand for the service. As noted earlier, in Ahmedabad, India, SEWA partnered with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation on an innovative **“Vegetables on Wheels”** scheme which enabled 65 SEWA members to sell fruits and vegetables in designated areas from e-rickshaws provided by the municipality. Much of this work to secure livelihoods during the immediate crisis extended into advocacy agendas for longer-term recovery and reforms in support of informal livelihoods.

7. A Better Deal for Informal Workers

7.1 Defining Moment: Three Possible Future Scenarios

The findings from the 11 cities in this WIEGO-led study confirm that informal workers were severely impacted by the pandemic and lockdowns and deepen our understanding of the different pathways and degrees of impact on distinct groups of informal workers. The findings also underscore that the ability of informal workers and their households to recover was triply-handicapped by the COVID-19 crisis: their meagre resources were depleted by drawing down or depleting savings and pawning or selling assets to meet basic necessities; they went further into debt by borrowing money for basic necessities (including buying food on credit) and postponing payments (often with compounding interest) of rent, utility bills and school fees; and they faced continued – if not intensified – restrictions and other punitive measures on their livelihoods, including destruction of their workplaces and infrastructure.

For these and other reasons, when the pandemic eventually subsides, it will take a long time for informal workers and their livelihoods to recover. Going forward, the recovery of informal livelihoods is essential to bringing poverty levels and the rate of poverty reduction back to pre-COVID-19 levels. Moreover, economic recovery will be slower and less robust unless it includes informal workers and their livelihoods.

The world is facing an existential crisis that poses challenging questions: whether to put the working poor before owners of capital; whether to protect the rights of the disadvantaged or the interests of the elite. It is very important to take advantage of this defining moment to call for economic justice for the working poor in the informal economy and to reset the structures of discrimination and disadvantage that they face on a daily basis. Post-COVID-19, the world could well return to the Bad Old Deal which discriminated against and disadvantaged informal workers. But the world could easily resort to a Worse New Deal for informal workers, which is a very real threat as governments and corporations around the world seek to take advantage of the concern for public health and economic recovery to promote their own interests. This concluding section calls for a Better New Deal for informal workers.

7.2 Building Recovery from Below

Common Demands of Informal Workers

What kind of recovery measures do informal workers need to revive their economic activities? The organizations of informal workers which collaborated on the 11-city study voiced common demands for recovery and reforms going forward, which can be categorized as follows:

- financial assistance to pay off debts and restore savings and assets;
- cash grants and stimulus packages, including government procurement, to support the recovery of informal livelihoods and enterprises;
- policy and legal reforms, at both the national and local levels, to create an enabling environment for the informal economy; and
- universal comprehensive social protection that provides both social insurance and social assistance to informal workers.

See informal workers' [Common Platform of Demands](#).

This agenda is not only desirable but also feasible. Since April 2020, in New York State in the USA,

a coalition of “excluded workers” who were left out of COVID-19 relief measures (including construction workers, street vendors and laundry workers) made thousands of calls to elected officials, held dozens of collective actions, took over two bridges simultaneously, and held a 23-day hunger strike in New York City and elsewhere in New York state to demand relief and recovery measures. Through their efforts, on April 6, 2021, the coalition won the establishment of the USA's first-ever \$2.1 billion Excluded Workers Fund: it entitles undocumented New Yorkers to retroactive payments to help compensate for an entire year without work or government support. In the words of a member of The Street Vendor Project who joined the hunger strike with her nephew:

“This fight, this win, is a win for all of the working people. For all of my people who struggled to survive through this last year, who have organized through loss, through fear, through hunger to demand New York State recognize and support us! I am so proud to have been a part of this amazing group of leaders, of immigrant women, of mothers who fought for change... And I will keep fighting with my whole body for the rights for all workers, for street vendors, for our state to know that we are here and we are essential, and to never exclude us again!”¹⁶

Pathways to Recovery

For specific groups of informal workers, the pathway to recovery needs to reverse the pathways of impact, as detailed in Section IV. **Box 6** presents the different pathways of impact and recovery. Going forward, comprehensive and inclusive recovery for informal workers and their livelihoods needs to increase demand and supply, promote fair prices and wages/piece rates, promote appropriate and fair regulations, and provide basic infrastructure and transport services.

Again, this sector-specific agenda is not just desirable, but feasible. Here are some examples from the study cities of how the pathways of impact have been addressed or reversed. Consider the case of street vendors. In Ahmedabad, SEWA created a direct link between farmers and street vendors to improve the flow of fresh produce from farms to the urban poor (increased supply). In New York City, The Street Vendor project campaigned successfully for the lifting of the cap on street vendor permits (which had created an underground market for permits at high prices) and for shifting the regulation of street

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/StreetVendorProject/posts/10158623622423519>

Box 6 – Pathways of Impact and Recovery

	Demand	Supply	Prices/Wages	Regulations	Public Services
Home-Based Workers: Self-Employed	customers & buyers	raw materials – purchased	prices of raw materials + prices of finished goods	zoning regulations + housing tenure	basic infrastructure services at home=workplace + public transport services
Home-Based Workers: Subcontracted	factories & firms	raw materials – supplied by factories/firms	zoning regulations + housing tenure + labour regulations	3-month waiver of utility bills	basic infrastructure services at home=workplace + public transport services
Street Vendors	customers	wholesale markets + producers of goods	buying price of stock + selling price of goods	access to public space + regulation of natural markets + license/permit system	basic infrastructure services at vending site/natural market + public transport services
Market Traders	customers	wholesale markets + producers of goods	buying price of stock + selling price of goods	plans for + regulation of built markets	fire safety + basic infrastructure services at built markets + public transport services
Waste Pickers	waste dealerships	generators of waste + sites of waste disposal	prices for recycled waste	solid waste management systems & rules	sorting areas or buildings + equipment + public transport services

vendors out of the New York Police Department to the Department for Commerce and Citizen Relationships (fair regulations). This means that more street vendors will be able to operate in New York City and that fewer street vendors will face harassment or ticketing. In Pleven, the city government eventually agreed to provide affordable retail space in the centre of the city which informal workers can use for exhibitions, fairs, festivals and other cultural events. Informal workers can access the space with a small payment (\$1.25 per square metre). However, if they sell certain special products, they can use the space for free: this can be negotiated by the street vendors.

In Thailand, the government piloted a program known as the "50/50" scheme to support both low-income consumers and informal workers, in which the government covers half of each purchase from a street vendor, small business, or transportation service like motorcycle taxi drivers. Each day, through a digital wallet, the consumer receives 150 baht (about 5 US dollars), which they can use to spend up to 300 baht per day for up to 3000 baht (100 USD) total. At each place of purchase, the consumer receives a 50 per cent discount and the government reimburses the vendor/small business/transportation provider via the digital wallet. This scheme encourages consumers to shop from informal businesses rather than formal businesses and online stores (that have done relatively well during the pandemic).

Moreover, the local organizations of informal workers in each of the study cities are engaged in on-going advocacy on behalf of their members. Consider the case of waste pickers. In New York City, Sure We Can is campaigning for increasing the redemption value of cans and expanding the types of materials that could be redeemed, through revising the [existing bottle bill policy](#). In Ahmedabad, SEWA is supporting waste picker cooperatives to bid on waste management contracts alongside large private companies. In Accra, waste pickers are asking for industry funds to be allocated to the provision of contracts and facilities for recycling through [extended producer responsibility schemes](#).

7.3 Real Threat of Worse New Deal: Countervailing Forces

Past crises have demonstrated that powerful interest groups are able to take advantage of crises to advance their own interests: often further entrenching the inequalities that left societies, households and individuals vulnerable to crisis in the first place. The COVID-19 crisis is no exception. Around the world, governments are fast-tracking policy and legal reforms that undermine informal workers and their livelihoods and they are destroying informal settlements and markets in the name of public health. At the same time, corporations are exerting influence in the reform process in order to capture the lion's share of recovery funds and benefits. Meanwhile, calls for austerity coupled with fiscal deficits will

only further tempt governments to collude with economic elites in the post-crisis recovery process.

Consider two countries where the WIEGO-led study was carried out: India and Senegal. The Government of India has used the COVID-19 moment to fast-track reforms that the current administration had long wanted to introduce, at a time when not all members of parliament or civil society advocates could meet in person to negotiate: the **Farmers' Bill** and the **Labour Code** which, if passed, would roll-back protections for farmers and labour. Also, corporations in India were able to persuade the government to raise the ceiling on investment and turnover of medium enterprises, so that some large enterprises would qualify for recovery funds targeted at micro, small and medium enterprises.

Although the Government of Senegal has emphasized its commitment to improving the working conditions of informal workers, including through the extension of social protection, its policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic represent important threats to informal livelihoods. Notably, under the National Development Plan, informal livelihoods – particularly in public spaces – are seen as signs of underdevelopment and obstacles to the structural changes envisioned for the country. The government's operational plan for priority actions, presented in September 2020, contains a call to reform the Labour Code to reduce labour costs to attract foreign investment. Also, to increase the fiscal base of the country, the government is planning a tax reform in which registration and taxation of informal enterprises is a key objective. The tax reform also calls for fiscal decentralization which will create greater pressures on local governments to raise local revenue which, in turn, will create greater pressures on informal operators to pay local taxes, levies and licensing fees. The government is also trying to stop legal actions against large infrastructure projects, including the restructuring of the large local dump in Dakar where the members of the study sample work, under the National Project on Waste Management. Further, in April 2021, the government announced that the national agency responsible for solid waste management will be disbanded and its responsibilities will be transferred to a private corporation.

As noted earlier, in many of the study cities, the workplaces or work equipment of informal workers have been destroyed, both during and after the peak lockdowns. In many contexts, local governments are clearly using the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunistic moment to do what

they have long wanted to do and what they could now justify as being in the interest of "public health". In Accra, waste pickers **were abruptly locked out** of their place of work, the Kpone Landfill, after it was decommissioned without any measures to safeguard livelihoods. Market evictions displaced traders in Dakar, Delhi, and Lima. Mobile street vendors in Mexico City had **their tricycles confiscated** en masse. Workers across most cities experienced or witnessed police harassment and violence, even after lockdown measures were lifted and when workers had permission to return to work.

In addition to evictions, destruction of worksites, harassment and confiscations, more insidious forms of harm have also taken root: policies and practices that privilege formal businesses and serve to exploit or, in some cases, effectively eliminate informal livelihoods. For example, food delivery platform work has surged in New York City during the pandemic, but the platforms (such as GrubHub and Seamless) download the costs and risks of delivery work to the drivers without providing any protections in return. Drivers have been denied support in purchasing e-bikes, insulated bags and other necessary equipment, and **many drivers report** that the platform that they work for has been withholding a portion of their tips. These delivery platforms in Bangkok have undermined the pre-existing delivery services offered by motorcycle taxi drivers.

7.4 A Better New Deal for Informal Workers

The increased recognition during the COVID-19 crisis of informal workers as essential workers should be translated into an agenda for transformative change, as outlined above, to protect and support these workers and their livelihoods. To ensure a better deal for informal workers going forward, the global community, national and local governments and other policy makers should follow three guiding principles:

Do No Harm – stop the harassment, evictions, confiscation of goods and the criminalization of informal workers and their livelihoods

Leave No One Behind – provide recovery support to all sizes of enterprises and unemployment compensation to all types of workers

Nothing for Us, Without Us – invite leaders of organizations of informal workers to the policymaking processes that design and monitor recovery and stimulus schemes, social protection, economic plans and local development plans

None of these guiding principles require large additional investments of money. Rather, they require a change in mindset and political will: a recognition that informal workers and their livelihood activities represent the broad base of the economy producing essential goods and services not only for low-income customers but also for the general public and for the formal economy.

To conclude, there is both a poverty reduction and economic growth imperative to building recovery from the bottom up by reducing harm to informal workers and their livelihoods, targeting recovery and stimulus packages to informal livelihoods, and inviting informal worker leaders to the policy table. This is a moment to be bold – to reset the structures that create inequities, injustices and indignities for the working poor in the informal economy.

Cited References

- Alon, Titan, Matthias Doepke, Jane Olmstead-Rumsey, and Michèle Tertilt. 2020. “The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Gender Equality.” *Covid Economics Vetted and Real-Time Papers*. 4: 62–85.
- Balde, Racky, Mohamed Boly, and Elvis Avenyo. 2020. “Labour Market Effects of COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa: an Informality Lens from Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal”, MERIT Working Paper 2020-022. United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (MERIT).
- Bonnet, Florence, Joann Vanek, Martha Chen. 2019. “Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Brief”. Geneva, Switzerland: ILO and Manchester, UK: WIEGO.
- Casale, Daniela and Dorrit Posel. 2021. “Gender inequality and the COVID-19 crisis: Evidence from a large national survey during South Africa’s lockdown”. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*. 71 (2021). Elsevier Ltd.
- Chen, Martha, Joann Vanek, Francie Lund, James Heintz with Renana Jhabvala and Christine Bonner. 2005. *Progress of the World’s Women: Women, Work and Poverty*. New York, USA: UNIFEM.
- Deshpande, Ashwini. 2020. “The COVID-19 Lockdown in India: Gender and Caste Dimensions of the First Job Losses”. Working Papers id:13085, eSocialSciences. Available at <https://ideas.repec.org/s/ess/wpaper.html>
- Durizzo, Kathrin, Edward Asiedu, Antoinette van der Merwe, Attie van Niekerk, and Isabel Günther. 2020. “Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poor Urban Neighbourhoods: the Case of Accra and Johannesburg”. *World Development*, 137: 105175. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105175>
- Egger, Dennis, Edward Miguel, Shana S. Warren, Ashish Shenoy, Elliott Collins, Dean Karlan, Doug Parkerson, et al. 2021. “Falling living standards during the COVID-19 crisis: Quantitative evidence from nine developing countries.” *Science Advances* 7(6).
- Frye, Jocelyn. 2020. “On the Frontlines at Work and at Home: The Disproportionate Economic Effects of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Women of Color.” Report, Center for American Progress. Available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/04/23/483846/frontlines-work-home/> (accessed 08 05 2021.)
- Holder, Michelle, Janelle Jones, and Thomas Masterson. 2021. “The Early Impact of COVID-19 on Job Losses Among Black Women in the United States.” *Feminist Economics*. 27(1–2). DOI: 10.1080/13545701.2020.1849766.
- Horn, Zoe Elena. 2009. “No Cushion to Fall Back On; The Global Economic Crisis and Informal Workers”. Synthesis Report, Inclusive Cities Project Study. WIEGO. Available at https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Horn_GEC_Study_2009.pdf (accessed 08 05 2021.)
- Horn, Zoe Elena. 2011. “Coping with Crises: Lingering Recession, Rising Inflation, and the Informal Workforce.” Synthesis Report, Inclusive Cities Project Study. WIEGO. Available at https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Horn-Global-Economic-Crisis-2_0.pdf (accessed 08 05 2021.)

ILO. 2018. *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture* (3rd Edition). Geneva: International Labour Organization. Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm

ILO. 2020. "COVID-19 and the world of work: Updated analysis and estimates". *ILO Monitor 3rd Edition*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. Kabeer, Naila, Shahra Razavi and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers. 2021. "Introduction". Special issue of *Feminist Economics* on "Feminist Economic Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic". Vol. 27, Issue 1-2.

Kazeem, Yomi. 2020. 'Staying Alive: Across Africa, a Reliance on the Informal Sector Threatens Effective Coronavirus Lockdowns'. *Quartz Africa*. Available at: <https://qz.com/africa/1831785/coronavirus-citizens-in-africas-informal-economy-try-to-survive/> (accessed 29 11 2020.)

Khamis, Melanie, Daniel Prinz, David Newhouse, Amparo Palacios-Lopez, Utz Pape and Michael Weber. 2021. "The Early Labor Market Impacts of COVID-19 in Developing Countries: Evidence from High-Frequency Phone Surveys." World Bank. Jobs Working Paper: Issue # 58. World Bank: Washington, DC, USA.

Rahman, Hossain Zillur, Atiya Rahman. Umama Zillur. Imran Matin. Sabrina Miti Gain, Fatema Mohammad and Shakil Ahmed. 2020. "Livelihoods, Coping and Recovery during COVID-19 Crisis". *PPRC-BIGD 2nd Rapid Response Research Report*.

Rogan, Michael and Caroline Skinner. 2020. "The Covid-19 crisis and the South African informal economy: 'Locked out' of livelihoods and employment". NIDS-CRAMS. Available at: <https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Rogan-Covid-crisis-and-the-South-African-informal-economy.pdf> (accessed 08 05 2021.)

Schotte, Simone, Michael Danquah, Robert Darko Osei and Kunal Sen. 2021. "The labour market impact of COVID-19 lockdowns: Evidence from Ghana". WIDER Working Paper 2021/27. World Institute for Development Economic Research (UNU-WIDER).

Skinner, Caroline, Jane Barrett, Laura Alferts and Mike Rogan. 2021. "Informal Work in South Africa and COVID 19: Gendered Impacts and Priority Interventions". *WIEGO Policy Brief No. 22*. Manchester, UK: WIEGO. Available at: <https://www.wiego.org/publications/informal-work-south-africa-and-covid-19-gendered-impacts-and-priority-interventions>

Verick, S. 2010. "Unravelling the Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on the South African Labour Market". *International Labour Organization Working Paper No. 48*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

Appendix I: Local Partner Organizations and Research Teams plus WIEGO COVID-19 Crisis Study team

Partner and collaborating organizations

Accra: Greater Accra Markets Association (GAMA); Informal Hawkers and Vendors of Ghana (IHVAG); Kayayei Youth Association; Kpone Landfill Waste Pickers Association

Ahmedabad: Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), SEWA's Indian Academy of Self-Employed Women and some grassroots researchers from the SEWA Union

Bangkok: Federation of Informal Workers Thailand (FIT); HomeNet Thailand; Jaravee Association for the Conservation of Thai Massage

Dakar: Bokk Diom

Dar es Salaam: Conservation, Hotels, Domestic, Social Services and Consultancy Workers Union (CHODAWU)

Delhi: Delhi Roundtable of Waste Pickers (DRT); Jan Pahal; SEWA Delhi

Durban: Asiye eTafuleni

Lima: Asociación La Parada; Central Única de Autoempleados de La Victoria, Rumbo a la Formalización (CETRAFOR); Confederación de Instituciones de Ambulantes y Afines de la Región Lima y Callao (CONFIAR); Federación Nacional de Recicladores del Perú (FENAREP); Federación Nacional de Vendedores de Diarios, Revistas y Loterías del Perú (FENVENDRELP); Frente Nacional de Recicladores Ambientalistas del Perú (FRENARA); Instituto de Promoción y Formación de Trabajadoras del Hogar (IPROFOTH); Red Nacional de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores Autoempleados (RENATTA); Sindicato de Trabajadoras del Hogar del Perú (SINTRAHOGARP); Sindicato de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar de Lima (SINTTRAHOL).

Mexico City: Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar (SINACTRAHO); Trabajadores Voluntarios y Desempleados de la Ciudad de México (TVDCM); Unión de Aseadores de Calzado de la Ciudad de México (UACCM).

New York: Street Vendor Project; Sure We Can

Pleven: The Bulgarian Trade Union of Self-Employed and Informal Workers (UNITY)

Tiruppur: Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE)

Research Teams:

Accra: Owusu Boampng, Owusu; Kweku Kyere, Lydia Boateng-Pobee

Ahmedabad:

- SEWA Academy Team: Namrata Bali, Bansari Buha, Archana Dave, Jignasa Dave, Basanti Khanayat, Shanta Koshti, Gita Naila, Jayshree Panchal, Ramesh Parmar, Jasu Rathod, Khyati Shah
- SEWA Union Team: Rashim Bedi, Anjana Koshti, Mayuri Baldevbhai Parmar, Niruben Ashokbhai Parmar, Mumtaz Shaikh, Rekhaben Vaghela

Bangkok: Pakavadee Boonkacha, Jantana Ekeurmanee, Puttinee Gopatta, Wichaya Komin, Puttinee Kophatta, Boonsom Namsonboon, Kantarose Pinthong, Borvorn Subsing, Poonsap Tulaphan

Dakar: Aida Ba, Maguette Diop, Adama Soumare

Dar es Salaam: Paulina Alex, Christopher Gallus, Geoffrey Mayombo, Leyla Mohamed, Erick Shigela, Said Wamba

Delhi: Malavika Narayan, Avi Maijithia, Shalini Sinha

Durban: Richard Dobson, Sarah Heneck, Misiwe Maphumulo, Sithulisile Moyo, Patric Ndlovu

Lima: Edith Anampa, Themis Castellano, Guillermo Perez, Carmen Roca

Mexico City: Yuleina Carmona, Tania Espinosa, Erick Serna Luna, Natalia Torres

New York: Mohamed Attia, Charla Beauvais, Chicago Crosby, Luo Guannan, Chris Hartmann, Christine Hegel, Beki Kabanzira, Sari Kisilevsky, Clay Martin, Nasif Mia, Rosa Mite, Talia Salas, Camila Salvagno, Husam Zaid, Irlanda Zea Marino

Pleven: Svetla Ilieva, Plamena Tsonova, Violeta Zlateva

Tiruppur: S. Anandhi, Aloysius Arockiam, R. Chitra, M. Pandeewari, Mary Viyakula

WIEGO Covid-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy Study Advisory Team:

Michael Rogan (Chair), Sarah Orleans Reed (Coordinator), Laura Alfes, Martha Chen, Taluah Girard, Erofil Grapsa, Jenna Harvey, Kendra Hughes, Ghida Ismail, Ana Carolina Ogando, Sally Roeber, Shalini Sinha, Marcela Valdivia

Appendix II: City Profiles

Accra – capital city of Ghana

Country: low middle-income; GNI per capita PPP of US \$5,530 (2019); gini index 43.5 (2016)

Economy: leading commercial center

Population (metropolitan area): 2,556,972 (2021)

Informal Employment: 90 per cent of total employment and 84 per cent of urban employment in Ghana; 83 per cent of total employment in Greater Accra¹⁷

National Government Lockdown/Restrictions¹⁸:

March – May 2020: school closures and ban on public gatherings; June – July 2020: some limited restrictions

National Government Relief Measures¹⁹: food aid for kayayei (head porters) + free water bills from April – June 2020 + some utilities forgiveness for the poorest of the poor

Sample: street vendors, market traders, waste pickers & kayayei (head porters)

Ahmedabad – Gujarat State, West India

Country: low middle-income; GNI per capita PPP US \$6,920 (2019); gini index 35.7 (2011)

Economy: historically, cotton textile center; currently, financial and IT services plus chemicals and pharmaceuticals manufacturing

Population: 7.4 million; largest city in Gujarat state and 7th largest city in India

Informal Employment: 90 per cent of total employment and 79 per cent of urban employment in India²⁰

National Government Lockdown: March 24 – May 31, 2020: strict national lockdown

National Government Relief Measures: one-time small cash grant + food aid, including pre-existing ration system + 3-month waiver of utility bills

Sample: domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers (all women)

Bangkok – capital city of Thailand

Country: upper middle-income; GNI per capita PPP of US \$18,570 (2019); gini index 34.9 (2015)

Economy: tourism, financial services and manufacturing

Population (metropolitan area): 16.2 million.²¹

Informal Employment: 56 per cent of total employment and 42 per cent of urban employment in Thailand; 28 per cent of total employment in Bangkok²²

National Government Lockdown: March 21 – April 4, 2020: state of emergency – closure of schools and universities, markets, restaurants, massage parlours, and other venues + city curfew between 10 pm and 4 am. Fresh food markets and vendors permitted to operate. Post April 4: restrictions gradually lifted

National Government Relief Measures: cash transfers of THB 5,000 (USD 159) per month for three months (April – June 2020) for workers not covered by social security + one-year suspension of loan repayments, mortgages and credit card debt by Thai banks for eligible individuals

Sample: domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, waste pickers + motorcycle taxi drivers, massage therapists

Dakar – capital city of Senegal

Country: low middle-income; GNI per capita PPP of US \$3,470 (2019); gini index 40.3 (2011)

Economy: regional hub for shipping and transport plus headquarters for banks and other institutions which serve all of Francophone West Africa

Population (metropolitan area): 3,938,358 (2021)

Informal Employment: 91 per cent of total employment in Senegal²³

National Government Lockdown/Restrictions:
National Government Relief Measures: food aid

Sample: waste pickers

¹⁷ https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO_Statistical_Brief_N21_0.pdf

¹⁸ Only national government lockdowns or restrictions are included here. In most cities, local government also imposed restrictions, including curfews and closure of open-air markets, dumpsites or landfills and other sites of informal economic activity.

¹⁹ Only national government relief measures that were available to informal workers are included here. But most informal workers did not receive these relief measures for a variety of reasons: notably, lack of information, registration, documentation and bank accounts.

²⁰ Raveendran and Vanek. 2020. Informal Workers in India: A Statistical Profile. WIEGO Statistical Brief # 24.

²¹ <https://www.citypopulation.de/en/thailand/prov/admin/>

²² https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/Informal%20Workers%20in%20Urban%20Thailand%20WIEGO%20SB%202020_1.pdf

²³ ILO 2018: Appendix B.

Delhi – capital city of India

Country: low middle-income; GNI per capita PPP US \$6,920 (2019); gini index 35.7 (2011)

Economy: service-based economy,

Population (metropolitan area): 26,454,000 (2016); 13th largest city among states and union territories of India

Informal Employment: 90 per cent of total employment and 79 per cent of urban employment in India; 81 per cent of total employment in Delhi²⁴

National Government Lockdown: strict national lockdown (March 24 – May 31, 2020)

National Government Relief Measures: 1-time small cash grant + food aid, including pre-existing ration system + 3-month waiver of utility bills

Sample: domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, waste pickers

Durban – Kwa Zulu Natal Province, South Africa

Country: upper middle income; GNI per capita PPP US\$ 12,670 (2019); gini index: 63 (2014)

Economy: port city and center for maritime industry, transport and logistics + manufacturing and tourism

Population: 2, 996,000 (projected for 2020)²⁵

Informal Employment: 34 per cent of total employment in South Africa²⁶; 24 per cent of total employment in 8 metro areas and 26 per cent of total employment in Durban²⁷

National Government Lockdown/Restrictions: March 27 – April 17, 2020: strict lockdown – ban on sale of all non-essential items prohibited, including alcohol and cigarettes, fresh food vendors granted permission to operate after one week of the lockdown (but local government in Durban prohibited Early Morning Market, where many of the respondents worked, from opening)

National Government Relief Measures: top-ups to existing cash grants + special COVID-19 relief grant of R350 (+- US\$23) per month for six months

Sample: street vendors, market traders and waste pickers

Lima – capital city of Peru

Country: upper middle-income; GNI per capita PPP US \$12,790 (2019); gini index 41.5 (2015)

Economy: leading commercial center

Population: 10,882,757 (2021)

Informal Employment: 69 per cent of total employment in Peru²⁸

National Government Lockdown: March – July, 2020: total lockdown

National Government Relief Measures: cash grants for 1–2 months + food aid

Sample: street vendors, market traders and waste pickers

Mexico City – capital city of Mexico

Country: upper middle-income; GNI per capita PPP of US 20, 310 (2019); gini index 45.4 (2018)

Economy: commercial and financial center of Mexico; largest city in Mexico; one of the largest urban economies in Latin America

Population (metropolitan area): 21,782,000 (2020)

Informal Employment: 56 per cent of total employment and 45 per cent of urban employment in Mexico and 51 per cent of total employment in Mexico City²⁹

National Government Lockdown/Restrictions: March 23 – May 30, 2020: lockdown with ban on all non-essential activities

National Government Relief Measures: two-month cash grant to “non-salaried workers”³⁰ + small loans to domestic workers + food vouchers

Sample: domestic workers, non-salaried workers, street vendors, waste pickers

²⁴ Raveendran and Vanek. 2020. WIEGO Statistical Brief. Informal Workers in India: A Statistical Profile. # 24.

²⁵ https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/files/documents/2020/Oct/unpd_2014_wup-report.pdf, p 343

²⁶ ILO 2018: Appendix B.

²⁷ Rogan. 2019. WIEGO Statistical Brief. Informal Workers in Urban South Africa: A Statistical Snapshot. # 19

²⁸ ILO 2018: Appendix B

²⁹ https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO_Statistical_Brief_N22_Mexico_0.pdf

³⁰ In Mexico, the term “non-salaried workers” is used for those workers who earn by fees, commissions, tips and other modalities which are different from a fixed wage or salary and, also, from earnings from self-employment.

New York City – New York State, USA

Country: high income; GNI per capita PPP of US \$66,080 (2019); gini index 41.4 (2018).

Economy: finance, real estate, advanced services, technology, creative industries

Population (metropolitan area): 19 million³¹

Informal Employment: 19 per cent of total employment in USA³²

State Government Lockdown/Restrictions: March 22 – June 22, 2020: New York State “On Pause” requiring all non-essential workers to stay home. Food vendors considered essential workers and permitted to operate. Post June 22: gradual lifting of some restrictions

National Government Relief Measures: under Federal CARES Act, provisions for one-time stimulus checks + under Pandemic Employment Assistance Program, unemployment supplements for some self-employed workers – but exclusion of undocumented workers and their families under both

Sample: street vendors, waste pickers

Pleven - Bulgaria

Country: upper middle-income; GNI per capita PPP US \$24,900 (2019); gini index 41.3 (2018)

Economy: light manufacturing, including textiles

Population: 98,500 (2016)³³

Informal Employment: 16 per cent of total employment in Bulgaria³⁴

National Government Lockdown/Restrictions: March 13 – May 13, 2020: national emergency - closure of schools, day-care centres and non-essential commercial activities + city-level closure of parks, kindergartens, playgrounds and other public spaces

National Government Relief Measures: some loans + food aid

Sample: home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors

Tiruppur – Tamil Nadu State, South India

Country: low middle-income; GNI per capita PPP US \$6,920 (2019); gini index 35.7 (2011)

Economy: major textile and knitwear center, known as the “T-shirt capital of the world”

Population: around 1.5 million

Informal Employment: 88 per cent of total employment in India³⁵

National Government Lockdown/Restrictions: March 24 – May 31, 2020: strict national lockdown

National Government Relief Measures: 1-time small cash grant + food aid, including pre-existing national system + 3-month waiver of utility bills

Sample: home-based workers in garment industry (both women and men)

³¹ New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA Metro Area, 2019 estimates. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-total-metro-and-micro-statistical-areas.html#par_textimage_1139876276

³² ILO 2018: Appendix B.

³³ <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/16417/basic-page/urban-audit-city-pleven>

³⁴ ILO 2018: Appendix B.

³⁵ ILO 2018: Appendix B.



Market Trader in Accra (Benjamin Forson), Home-based Worker in Ahmedabad (SEWA Video), Street Vendor in Bangkok (Pattarapon Virat), Waste Picker in Dakar (Marta Moreiras), Domestic Worker in Delhi (Avi Majithia), Street Vendor in Durban (Misiwe Maphumulo), Street Vendor in Lima (Victor Mallqui), Waste Picker in Mexico City (César Parra), Canner in New York City (Carlos Rivera), Street Vendor in New York City (Leticia Ochoa), Domestic Worker in Plevan (Svetlin Ivanov), Home-based Worker in Tiruppur (SAVE).

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



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.



Canada