



Women in Informal Employment:  
Globalizing and Organizing

July 2021

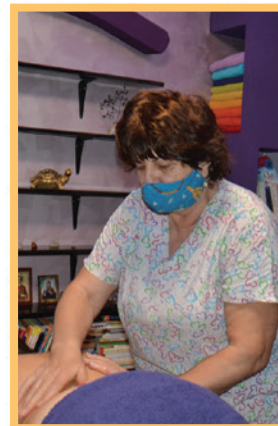
# COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy:

## Round 1 Global Summary

The COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy is a WIEGO-coordinated 12-city longitudinal study that assesses the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on specific occupational groups of informal workers and their households, with a focus on domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, and waste pickers.



*Bigué Cissé, waste picker in Dakar. Photo credit: Marta Moreiras*



Market Trader in Accra (Photo: Benjamin Forson), Home-based Worker in Ahmedabad (Photo: SEWA Video), Massage Worker in Bangkok (Photo: Pattarapon Virat), Domestic Worker in Dar Es Salaam (Photo: Fanuel Halelwa), Domestic Worker in Delhi (Photo: Avi Majithia), Street Vendor in Durban (Photo: Misiwe Maphumulo), Street Vendor in Lima (Photo: Victor Mallqui), Waste pickers in Mexico City (Photo: César Parra), Canner in New York City (Photo: Carlos Rivera), Street Vendor in New York City (Photo: Leticia Ochoa), Domestic Worker in Pleven (Photo: Svetlin Ivanov), Home-based Worker in Tiruppur (Photo: SAVE).

# Introduction

Informal employment accounts for over 60 per cent of all global employment, representing roughly two billion workers, and 90 per cent of employment in developing countries (ILO 2018). Early in the COVID-19 crisis, the ILO projected that 1.6 billion informal workers would be among those most severely affected and that they would lose 60 per cent of earnings during the first months of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The ILO forecasted that this would lead to a sharp growth in relative poverty levels among informal workers from 26 to 59 per cent globally, and a staggering 18 to 74 per cent among informal workers in low-income countries (ILO 2020). In regions that have experienced the worst effects of the pandemic and which have a high prevalence of informal employment, progress in reducing income poverty could be set back by 30 years (Summer et al 2020).

Given the sheer size of the informal workforce, informal workers' vulnerability to falling into poverty, and the disproportionate impact they have suffered during the COVID-19 crisis, economic recovery for informal workers should be the cornerstone of national and global recovery plans. In order to achieve this, policymakers need to consider the barriers and pathways to getting two billion workers back on their feet and to rebuilding an economy for all, from the bottom up.

**The COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy** is a WIEGO-coordinated<sup>2</sup> 12-city longitudinal study that assesses the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on specific occupational groups of informal workers and their households, with a focus on domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, and waste pickers. This Global Summary presents the key findings of the first round of the survey and interviews—conducted in June and July 2020 (mid-year)—across all 12 cities. It accompanies Fact Sheets which provide city-level results in greater detail.<sup>3</sup> A second round of field research will be conducted in June and July 2021 to measure the ongoing impacts of the crisis.

## Key Findings

- The impact on earnings among informal workers was as dire as projected by the ILO and other observers.
- The extent of disruption and its impact on different occupations varied considerably between cities, reflecting differences in intensity of restrictive measures and impacts on supply chains and markets.
- Occupational sector and differentiated characteristics within these sectors strongly influenced how the COVID-19 crisis impacted workers.
- Results confirm a disproportionate impact on women workers' livelihoods.
- Increased reliance on asset-depleting coping mechanisms and household responsibilities have put considerable economic and emotional strain on the households of the working poor.
- In the absence of sufficient local government support, informal workers took their own health and safety initiatives and invested in protective protocols in spite of heavily constrained resources.
- Government relief efforts were an important source of support where they reached workers, but were limited and uneven in reach, and frequently undermined by local anti-worker policies.
- MBOs (Membership-Based Organizations) played a crucial role in providing support to workers to mitigate the economic, physical and mental health impacts of COVID-19.

<sup>1</sup> Findings from surveys across the world have since confirmed the severity of the impact on employment in general and informal employment in particular (See for instance Action Aid Association India 2020, Balde et al 2020, Casale and Posel 2021, Egger et al 2021, Rahman et al 2020).

<sup>2</sup> The WIEGO-led COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy Study was carried out with generous support from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) 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).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wiego.org/covid-19-crisis-and-informal-economy-study-city-fact-sheets>

## Key Recommendations

The findings demonstrate the need for bottom-up, worker-centered approaches to recovery, focused on the protection of livelihoods in the informal economy. This type of recovery requires proactive action by and alignment between national and local governments. Many potentially transformative policies proposed by informal worker organizations require no additional state spending, but rather a commitment to end local government actions such as harassment, confiscations and evictions that threaten workers' livelihoods.

Other proposals require governments to target stimulus packages to the segments of the economy where informal workers and their activities are concentrated where small investments in small business can make a big impact. These investments are crucial for getting the majority of the workforce back on their feet. **This is not a time for austerity.** Organizations of informal workers should be invited to help design, implement and monitor relief, recovery and reform efforts.

**The types of government intervention required by informal workers and demanded by their organizations include:**<sup>4</sup>

- Financial assistance to pay off debts and restore savings and assets
- Recovery support for work and livelihoods
- Social protection for informal workers
- Enabling national and local urban policy and legal environments
- Fair terms of employment and trade
- Fundamental demands of recognition and dignity, freedom from harm by the state and owners of capital, legal and social protections, equal access to rights and benefits, and representative voice in policy making and rule setting processes

## Focus Sectors:

Domestic Workers	Home-based Workers	Street Vendors and Market Traders	Waste Pickers

## Methodology and the Study Timeline

Survey data was collected between June and July 2020. Respondents were asked about the pre-COVID period (February 2020<sup>5</sup>), the period during which cities were under the heaviest restrictions (April 2020), and the current period (June/July 2020) when restrictions had at least partially lifted. The latter is referenced as “mid-year 2020” in all graphs. Qualitative interviews with key informants were conducted in July, August, and September 2020.

In every city with the exception of Dar es Salaam,<sup>6</sup> workers in most occupations were restricted from working during the lockdown in their city. Out of the 12 cities, the strictest COVID-19 restriction measures were found in the three Indian cities (Ahmedabad, Delhi, Tiruppur), Lima (Peru) and Durban (South Africa) where most workers were unable to leave their homes during the period of restrictions.

<sup>4</sup> A Summary of Demands from worker organizations involved in the study is available at [bit.ly/DemandsForIW](https://bit.ly/DemandsForIW)s

<sup>5</sup> In Bangkok the pre-COVID reference period was December 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Unlike in other study locations, Tanzania had very limited restrictions on work or mobility, and lifted these restrictions more quickly. Because of this and an unusually large sample size in Dar es Salaam, data from this city are sometimes excluded from the analysis, as indicated.

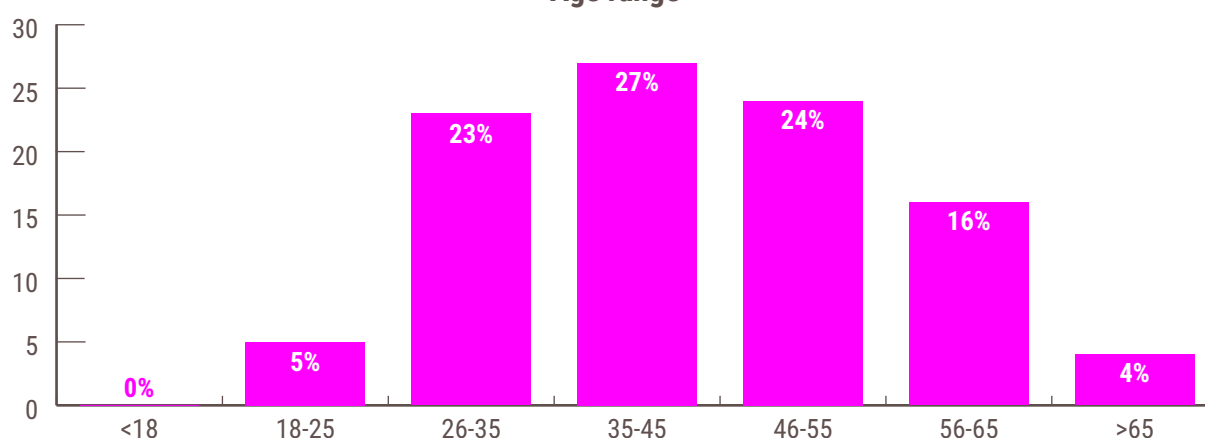
## Sample

Researchers in the 12 cities surveyed a total of 2,292 workers from 10 different sectors of informal work.<sup>7</sup> The study also included in-depth interviews with informal worker leaders and other key informants from worker organizations, government, civil society and academia. Samples from each city used a purposive quota approach and were designed to reflect the key characteristics of the membership of the informal worker organizations partnering in the study. The data are not intended to be representative of informal workers in each city or even of the membership of each organization. As members of local organizations of informal workers, the sample is likely to be older, have more years of experience as informal workers, and have higher earnings than other workers in their occupational sectors. This group should be of considerable interest to policy makers, since it has high capacity to absorb recovery measures and contribute to economic development within their households and communities, though it should also be recognized that their working conditions may be better than those of other workers.

**Sample Composition: Locations, Sector, and Gender**

	No.	Domestic Workers	Home-based Workers	Street Vendors/ Market Traders	Waste Pickers	% Women
Accra	193					73%
Pleven	176					68%
Dakar	77					61%
Ahmedabad	249					100%
Delhi	270					65%
Mexico City	163					59%
New York	118					53%
Lima	216					66%
Durban	185					56%
Dar es Salaam	283					97%
Tiruppur	60					93%
Bangkok	302					70%
<b>% Women</b>		98%	88%	64%	51%	63%

**Age range**



<sup>7</sup> The four main sector groups across the 12 cities include: domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers. However, other types of workers were also sampled in some cities and these include, inter alia: "non-salaried" workers in Mexico City, newspaper vendors in Lima, kayayeis (head porters) in Accra, market vendors in Durban, and motorcycle taxi drivers and massage therapists in Bangkok.

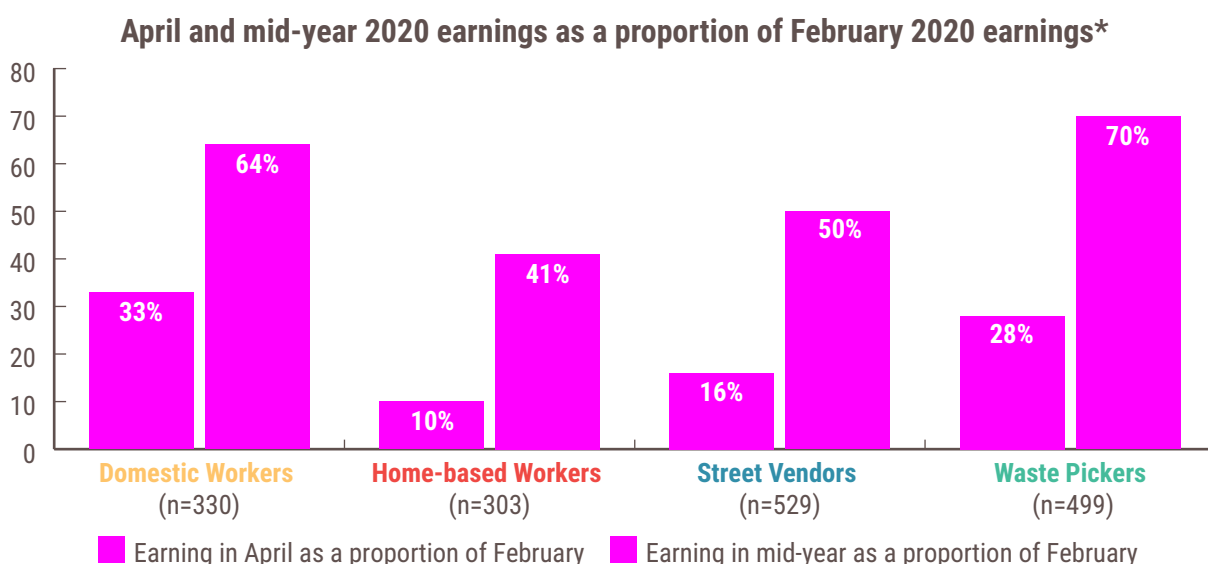
# Findings

## 1. Work and Income

“The main issue is that there is less work and, because most waste pickers live by the day, only if you work you eat. ‘Stay home’? If we stopped working, it’d be game over for us.” – **Waste Picker, Mexico City**

The spread of the pandemic and the accompanying government restrictions prevented three-quarters (74%) of respondents from working in April, during the period of heaviest restrictions. Average earnings in April were only 21 per cent of pre-COVID earnings across the 11 cities, excluding Dar es Salaam. There was substantial variation in the loss of earnings among the four main sector groups, with home-based workers and street vendors reporting the largest drop in income in April.

The severity of impacts reflects how, as one respondent put it, restrictions under the first waves of the COVID-19 period were intended for “the formal city,” and did not sufficiently account for large segments of the informal workforce that rely on daily earnings and lack social protection.



\*excludes Dar es Salaam

By mid-2020 – when restrictions had eased – over two-thirds of the respondents (65%) had returned to work at least partially, though at much reduced hours, and their average earnings were at only 55 per cent of average earnings pre-COVID. This shows the longer-term challenges for economic recovery for informal workers.

In most cities, losses in earnings both during the heavy restrictions period and subsequent period were gendered. In seven of the nine cities in which both women and men were sampled, earnings losses in April and June were greater for women than for men, irrespective of the sector of employment. By mid-year, women’s and men’s earnings had recovered to about 50 per cent and 65 per cent of their pre-COVID levels respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The extent of disruption and its impact on different occupations varied considerably between cities. In Lima and Ahmedabad, workers across sectors experienced similarly drastic reductions in earnings and slow recoveries. In other cities, the impact varied greatly by sector. In Delhi, domestic workers were earning 75 per cent of pre-COVID earnings by mid-year on average, after losing *all earnings* in April, whereas the average earnings for home-based workers was around one-fifth of pre-COVID levels in both periods.

<sup>8</sup> Excluding respondents from Dar es Salaam.

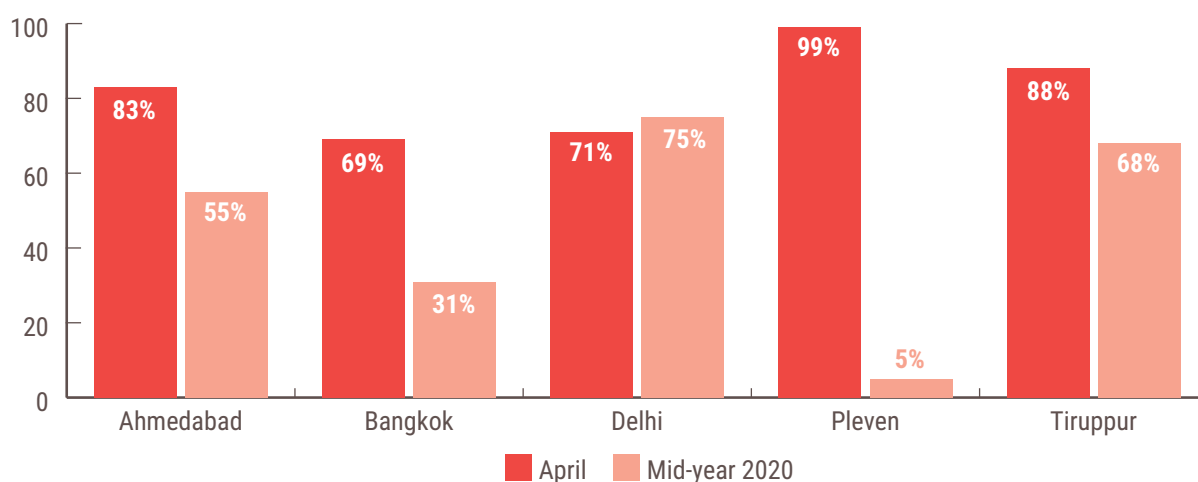
## Home-based workers

*“In January, I knew the situation was dire. First there was an increasing number of infections in other countries, then I did not secure any orders and members worried that we would not have any jobs. Then, the government ordered a lockdown in March and April. At the end of March, there were no orders for garment products, then workers had nothing to eat.” – Home-based Worker, Bangkok*

Home-based workers (along with street vendors) experienced the largest drop in earnings, and the slowest recovery of the four occupations. The impacts experienced by this predominantly female workforce are stark. In the five cities where home-based workers were surveyed, more than 80 per cent did not work in April; in Pleven, virtually all (99%) did not work. Across the cities, average earnings during this period dipped to less than 10 per cent of February earnings.

By mid-year, home-based workers were making only about 41 per cent of pre-COVID earnings. The vast majority of home-based workers in the three Indian cities (Ahmedabad, Delhi, and Tiruppur) were still unable to return to work.

### Percentage of respondents not working in April and mid-year 2020: Home-based Workers



Low earnings reflect the slow pace of supply chain recovery. Across the five cities, 92 per cent of workers reported that the amount they produced had decreased, and 80 per cent reported a drop in selling prices or piece rates. More than 75 per cent in all cities reported lower levels of home production. In four out of five cities the selling prices for produced goods had decreased.

Among home-based workers, subcontractors depend on work orders from firms or intermediaries, whereas self-employed workers sell to individual customers or buyers. The average earnings of subcontracted home-based workers declined more and recovered more slowly than the average earnings of self-employed home-based workers. Subcontracted workers' average earnings were only five per cent of pre-pandemic levels in April and 36 per cent by mid-year, whereas self-employed workers were 15 per cent of pre-pandemic levels in April and 43 per cent by mid-year.

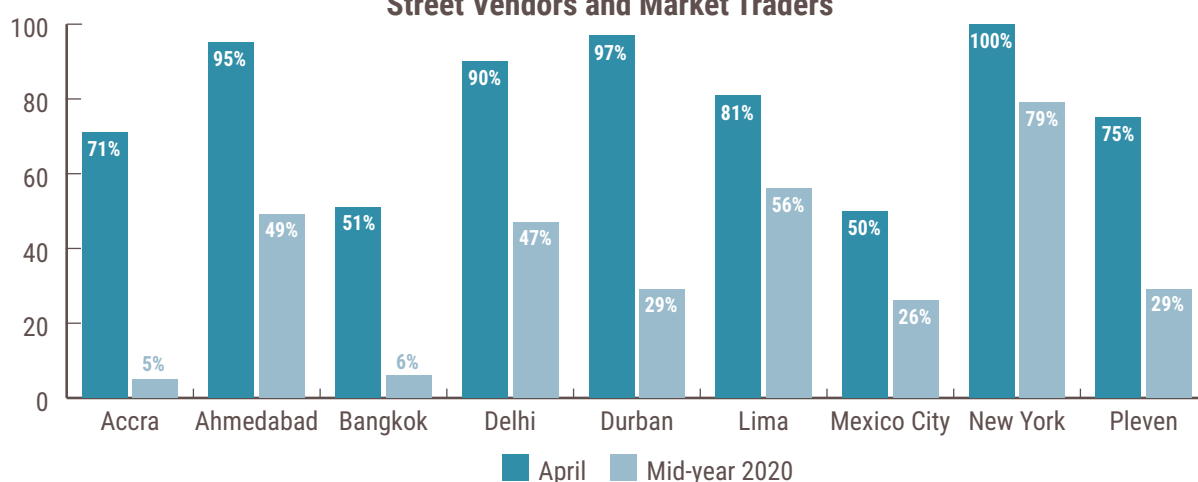
## Street vendors and market traders

*“We, the traders, are mostly subsistence traders living on our daily earnings so, in effect, we spent all our little savings in this period.” – Street Vendor Leader, Accra*

In five of the nine cities in which street vendors and market traders were surveyed, more than 80 per cent were unable to work in April; in no city were more than 50 per cent of vendors working. Across the sample, average daily earnings in April slumped to 16 per cent of February earnings.

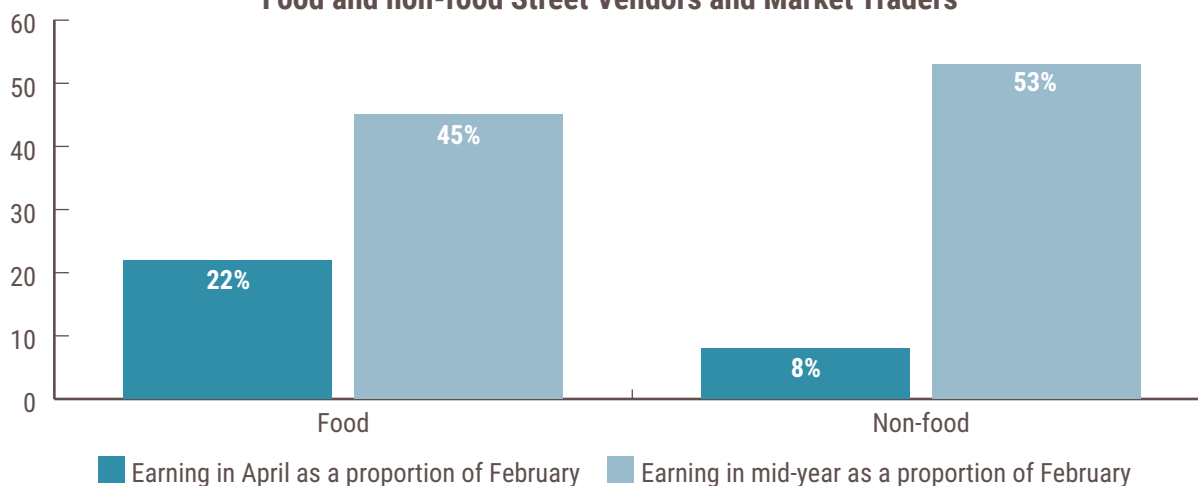
The ability to return to work mid-year ranged from almost all vendors and traders in Accra, to only 21 per cent in New York City. Overall, 86 per cent reported that their sales decreased compared to the pre-COVID period and 70 per cent reported that it became harder to purchase their stock, indicating persistent problems on the supply as well as the demand side. Of those who reported that the price of stock increased, more than half reported that, in contrast, their selling price had not.

**Percentage of respondents who reported not working in April and mid-year 2020: Street Vendors and Market Traders**



Across the sample, food vendors were more likely than non-food vendors to work in April and they experienced a less dramatic dip in earnings compared to non-food vendors. The divergence reflects in part the higher demand for food than non-essential products, as well as a disruption to the tourist industry in cities like Bangkok and Pleven.<sup>9</sup> In Bangkok, Mexico City, Ahmedabad, and Pleven, the gap between food and non-food vendors in terms of ability to work persisted through mid-year.

**April and mid-year 2020 earnings as a proportion of pre-COVID earnings: Food and non-food Street Vendors and Market Traders**



<sup>9</sup> In several cities, national or state governments implicitly or explicitly recognized food traders as essential workers.

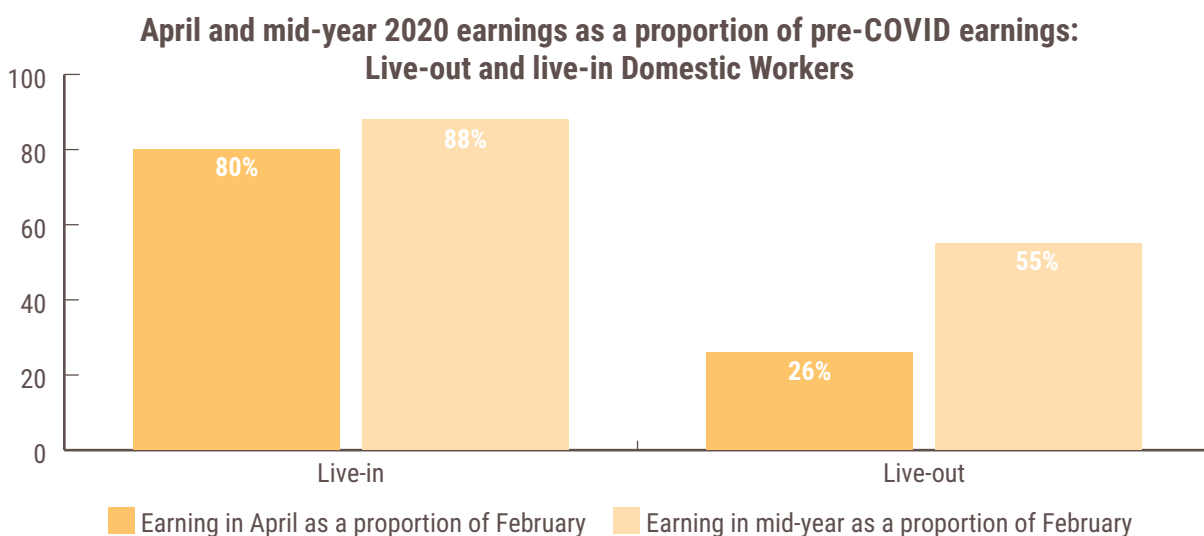
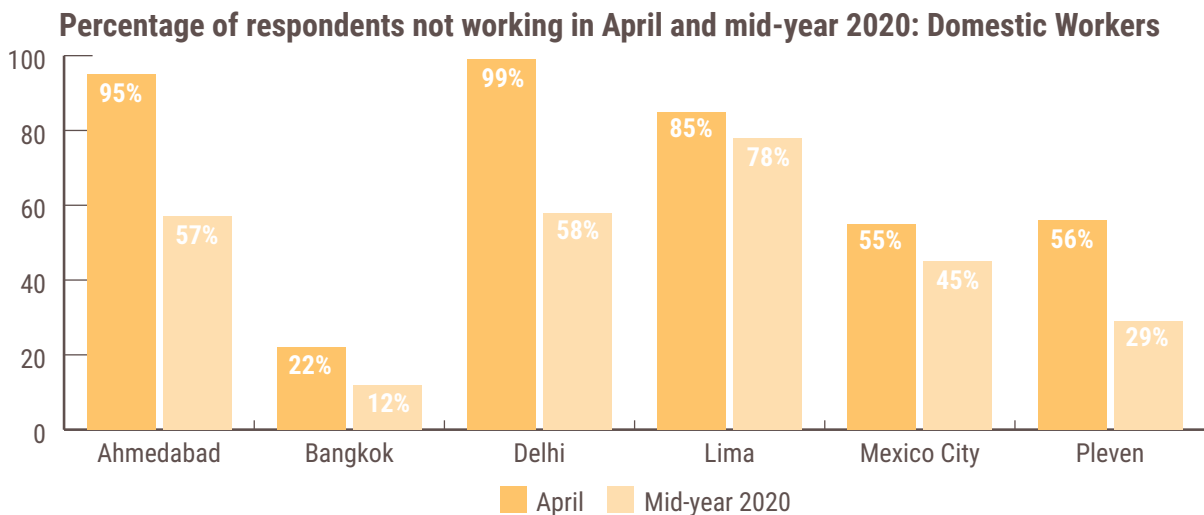


## Domestic Workers

*“I worked for 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 like a source of transmission.” – Domestic Worker, Mexico City*

The most significant factor in economic outcomes for domestic workers was whether they “live-in” with their employers or “live-out.” Live-out workers reported that employers suspended or terminated their employment due to fears of infection, and that restrictions prevented them from continuing their work. Seventy-eight per cent of live-out domestic workers did not work in April, and 51 per cent were still out of work by mid-year.<sup>10</sup> In cities like Ahmedabad and Delhi, where almost all domestic workers are live-out, almost none were able to work. Average earnings in April sunk to 26 per cent of pre-COVID earnings and recovered to 55 per cent by mid-year for this group.

In contrast, live-in domestic workers experienced less shock to their earnings. Yet, they reported deteriorating working conditions, with increasing employer demands for cleaning and to tend to multiple family members at home, prohibitions on leaving the home or visiting family, and a reduction in time off. These workers also described considerable stress around risks associated with COVID-19 infection at their places of work.

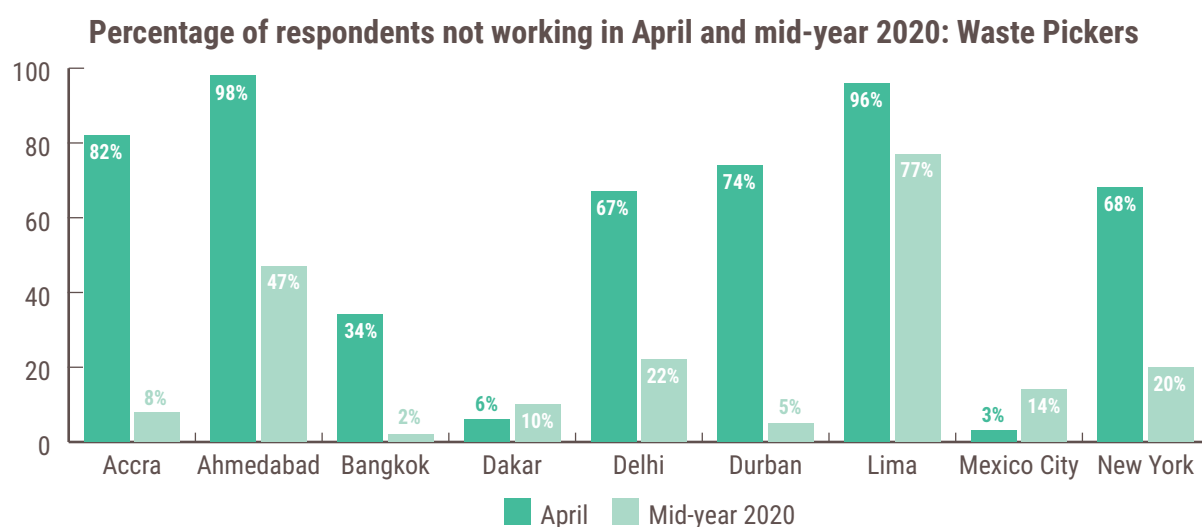


<sup>10</sup> These figures exclude domestic workers in Dar es Salaam, because of a disproportionately larger sample size in a city with very limited restrictions. In Dar es Salaam, all live-in domestic workers continued to work during April, compared to 78% of live-outs.

## Waste Pickers

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

The ability of waste pickers to work during the early months of the crisis depended largely on local policy contexts. Waste collectors in Accra, Ahmedabad, Delhi, Durban and Lima experienced the most severe restrictions in April and the majority were deprived of their livelihoods. In contrast, only six per cent and three per cent of waste pickers were unable to work in Dakar and Mexico City, respectively. Although they were not recognized officially as “essential” workers, local governments in these two cities allowed them to continue working. By mid-year, the vast majority of waste pickers in all cities, except Ahmedabad and Lima, had returned to work.



However, waste pickers across cities experienced similar, and severe, value chain disruptions on both the supply and demand side. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of waste pickers reported greater difficulty in accessing waste, and the majority of waste pickers in all cities except New York<sup>11</sup> reported that the price of recyclables decreased. In several cities, a large number of waste pickers had to pay additional costs for transportation and security to protect their recyclables; in Bangkok, virtually all the waste pickers (97%) reported these extra costs.

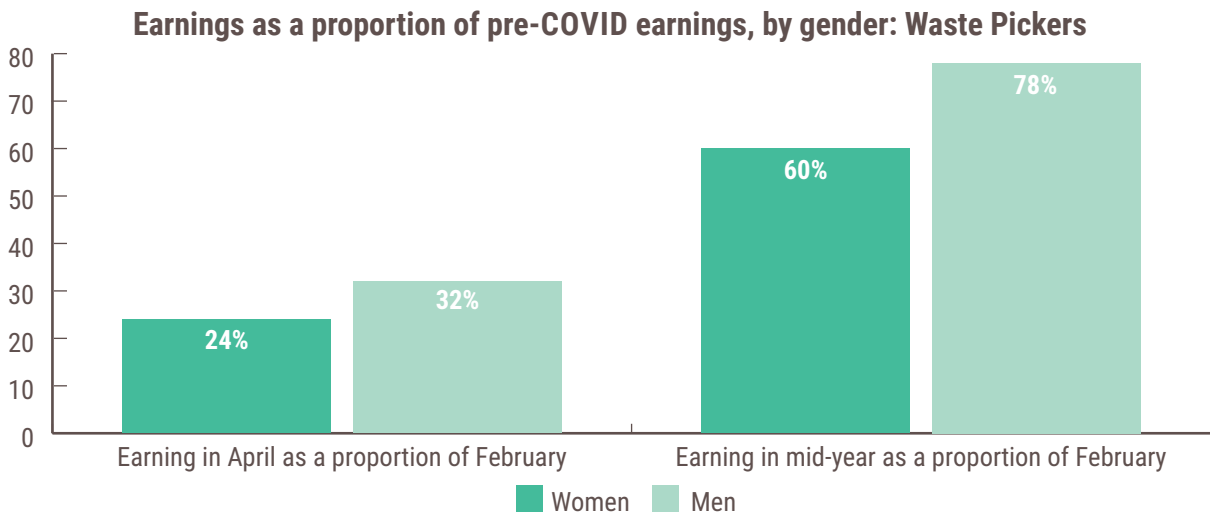
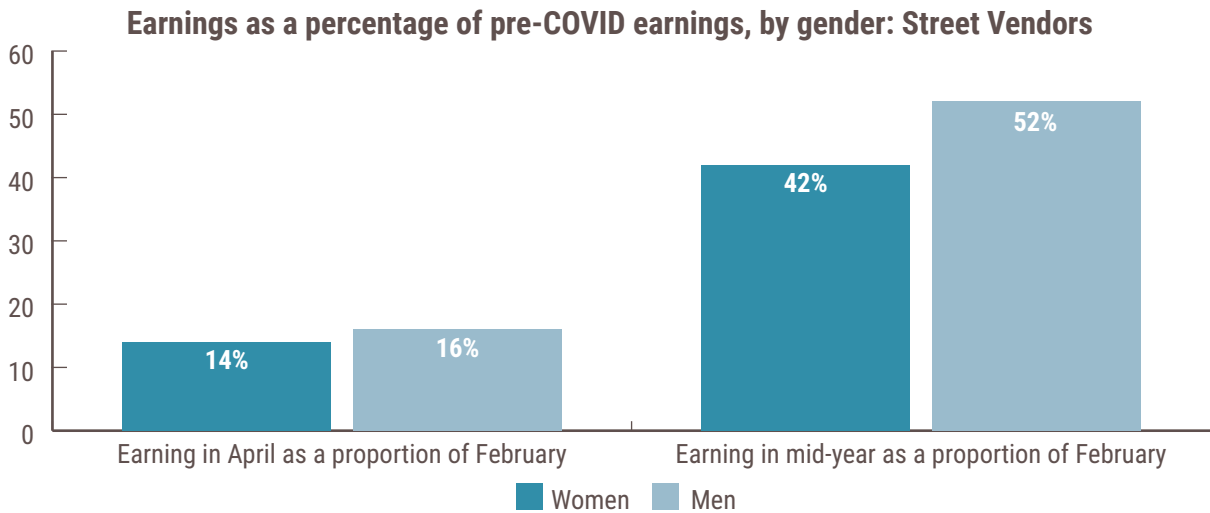
Waste pickers saw the largest relative recovery of earnings between April and mid-year among the sectors (70 per cent of pre-COVID earnings in mid-2020); however, this reflects that they earned the least of all sectors in all cities pre-COVID (except in Ahmedabad and Delhi where home-based workers and domestic workers earned less). For waste pickers, and other low-earning sectors, any reduction in earnings translates into severe challenges in meeting basic needs.

<sup>11</sup> Under New York State’s Returnable Container Act, certain waste recyclables are redeemable for a fixed price.

## Gender Impacts on Earnings

**Home-based workers**, mainly women, suffered among the largest drops in earnings and the slowest recovery of the four occupations. Their experience demonstrates that perceived economic benefits of “working from home” during the crisis did not apply to women workers at the bottom of the supply chain, and confirms that home-based workers constitute an underappreciated component of the pandemic’s “she-cession.” The drop in incomes experienced particularly by live-out **domestic workers**, and the deteriorating working conditions of those with little choice but to live-in, similarly spotlight the challenges faced by predominantly female worker groups.

**Women street vendors** experienced a greater impact on earnings in both April and June compared to men vendors.



Similarly, **women waste pickers** were almost twice as likely as men to have not returned to work by mid-year. Their earnings in both April and mid-year reflect their more greatly reduced earnings power in both periods as compared to men.

### Gendered outcomes for waste pickers in Dakar

In Dakar, women waste pickers’ pre-COVID daily earnings were less than half of men’s. Their meager earnings dipped to roughly half in April compared to their February earnings, and had slumped slightly farther by mid-year. Women’s lower status within the supply chain, the difficulty of overcoming men in the physical challenge of accessing waste dumped by trucks in the landfill, and the unequal care burden shouldered by women all contribute to these gendered outcomes.

## 2. Household Tensions, Responsibilities, and Coping Mechanisms

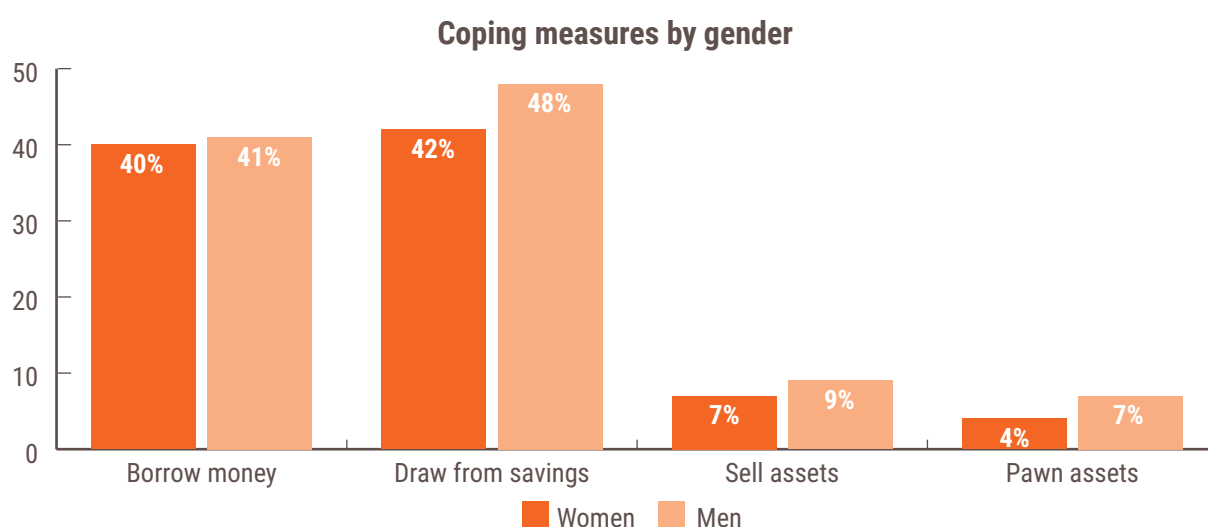
### Coping and Adaptation Strategies

*“Many informal workers had to take loans with very high interests and now they don’t know how to return this money.” – Leader of UNITY, Pleven*

In the absence of comprehensive relief measures, workers and their households were often forced to resort to coping mechanisms which could reduce their capacity to recover from the crisis.

Respondents were likely to deploy at least one asset-depleting coping mechanism such as drawing down savings (44%), borrowing (41%), or selling or pawning household assets (10%).<sup>12</sup> This included taking loans from informal lenders at high interest rates, or selling or pawning productive assets like vehicles or sewing machines (as described in Lima and Bangkok). Other actions taken to cope included eating less, borrowing from friends and family, renegotiating loan payments, forgoing needed services or conveniences (including phone or internet services), and skipping rent and utility payments. Some workers coped by living with extended families, which in itself created additional tensions in households.

Across the sample, women and men were equally likely to report borrowing, whereas men were more likely to withdraw money from savings and sell or pawn assets. This may reflect the more limited access to savings and assets among women workers.



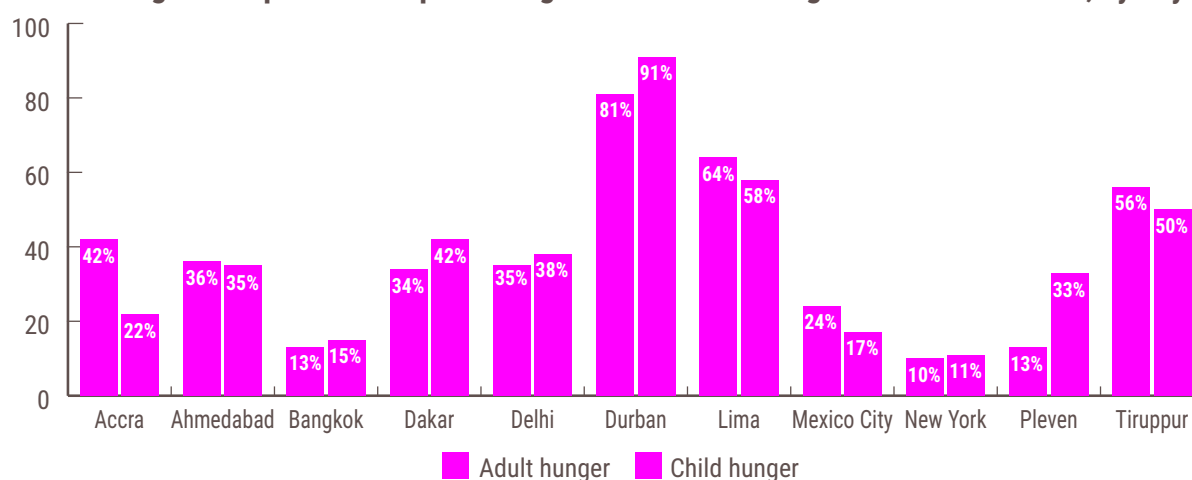
<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these three central coping strategies, see Roever and Rogan (2020) Informal Workers See Long Road to Recovery Ahead – Unless Governments Act. WIEGO. <https://www.wiego.org/resources/informal-workers-see-long-road-recovery-ahead-unless-governments-act>

## Hunger

“The single most important impact of COVID-19 was going to bed hungry.” – Domestic Worker, Dar es Salaam

When asked about food provision in their household, 36 per cent of respondents reported that an adult had gone hungry in the past month and 44 per cent of workers living with children reported that a child had gone hungry. Reported levels of hunger were particularly high in some cities. **The majority of respondents in Lima (more than 58%), Tiruppur (more than 50%) and Durban (more than 81%) reported that both adults and children<sup>13</sup> in their household had gone hungry in the month after the April lockdowns.<sup>14</sup>** 90 per cent of workers who reported household hunger said that the hunger was due to a lack of money.

Percentage of respondents experiencing adult and child hunger in their household, by city



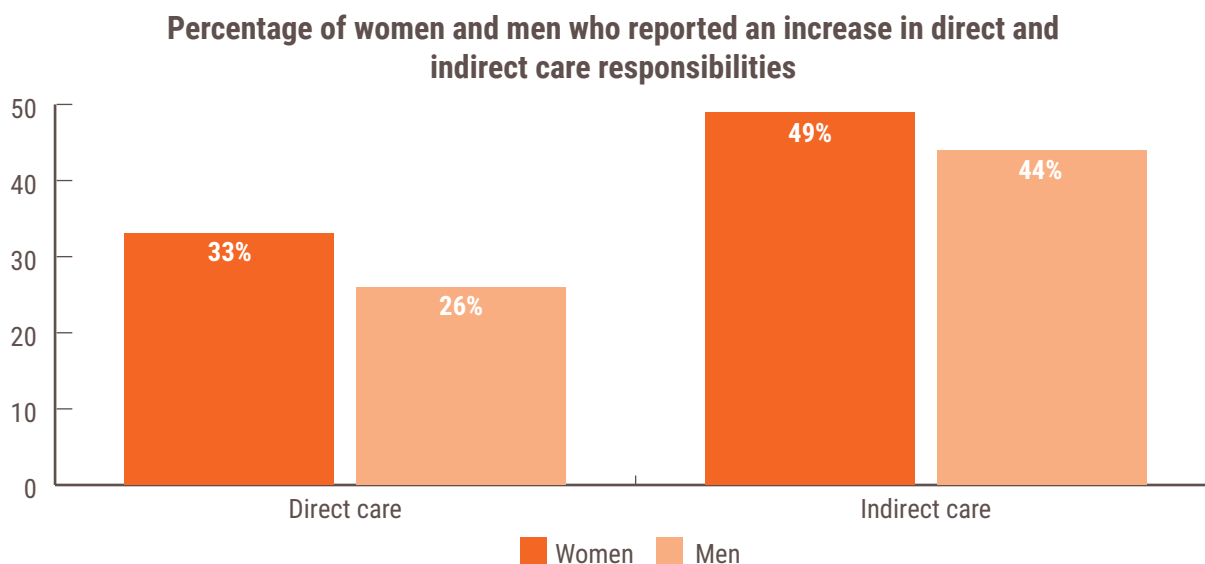
<sup>13</sup> For households with children.

<sup>14</sup> There are two important qualifications on comparing hunger levels across study locations. The first, experiences of hunger reflect the “positionality” of respondents, which will vary significantly by geography, culture, gender, or other characteristics (Sen 1993) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2265443?seq=1>. Secondly, researchers in several cities reported that respondents were reluctant to report hunger, even if they subsequently described having altered or diminished diets to cope with economic impacts.

## Care and Other Household Responsibilities

*“I am forced to reduce my working hours to get home very early. Sometimes I don’t go to work so that I can better look after the children. If you don’t have the necessary means, it’s better to protect yourself than to get sick. Because if you get sick, everyone will be in trouble, especially our children.” – Waste Picker, Dakar*

COVID-19 restrictions have been accompanied by a significant increase in the burden of both direct and indirect care work.<sup>15</sup> Women were more likely than men to report increases in direct care for children, elderly, or ill family members, and indirect care, such as cooking and cleaning.



Respondents who suspended work completely in April did not frequently report care responsibilities as a main reason for not working. Nevertheless, in interviews women workers referenced reducing or changing work hours, leaving children at home alone, taking children to work despite city restrictions and safety guidelines, or choosing not to work at all.

By mid-year, both men and women with increased care responsibilities were working less than their counterparts. Increases in care work were also associated with a substantially higher likelihood of not working mid-year (44% of women and 30% of men).

Men, irrespective of whether their responsibilities had increased, and women without increased care responsibilities reported earnings at about 60 per cent of pre-COVID levels by mid-year. In contrast, women with increased direct care responsibilities were earning only about 42 per cent of pre-COVID levels (see Ogando et al 2021).

### Schooling and Digital Infrastructure

Interviews with women workers highlight the contradictory pressures of devoting more time to support their children’s learning, with the need to scramble for earnings under lockdown to provide the basic digital infrastructure. This was particularly noted in interviews with women workers in Ahmedabad, Delhi, Mexico City and Lima. Concerns about school tuition were also prominent.

*“Earlier they used to send their children to school and work freely at home. But, nowadays, they have to take care of their children...Earlier, the elders used to look after the children. But now the women have to take care of everything.” – SEWA Home-based Worker Leader from Ahmedabad, India*

<sup>15</sup> In this study, direct care refers to care for children, elderly, or sick individuals, whereas indirect care refers to cooking or cleaning.

### **Mental Health Strains**

The combined pressures of lack of or reduced work and earnings, health and safety concerns, asset-depleting coping mechanisms, and increased household responsibilities created additional mental stress for workers. Issues of mental health were reported by workers in all sectors, pointing to possible medium to long-term implications for workers' well-being.

*"Families are receiving support from community kitchens in order to survive, others don't have cell phones or internet access. Many are in debt, completely in debt with their water and electricity bills... So this is a horrible situation, it causes despair and anguish because we don't know how long COVID will last."*—**Waste Picker, Lima**

*"Many of our colleagues are the heads of their households and have children to care for. So they double, triple their workloads and the additional pressure leads to a stronger physical burden, as well as a mental or psychological one because they can't go out."* — **Domestic Worker, Mexico City**

*"The accumulation of unpaid rent is unbearable."* — **Street Vendor, New York City**

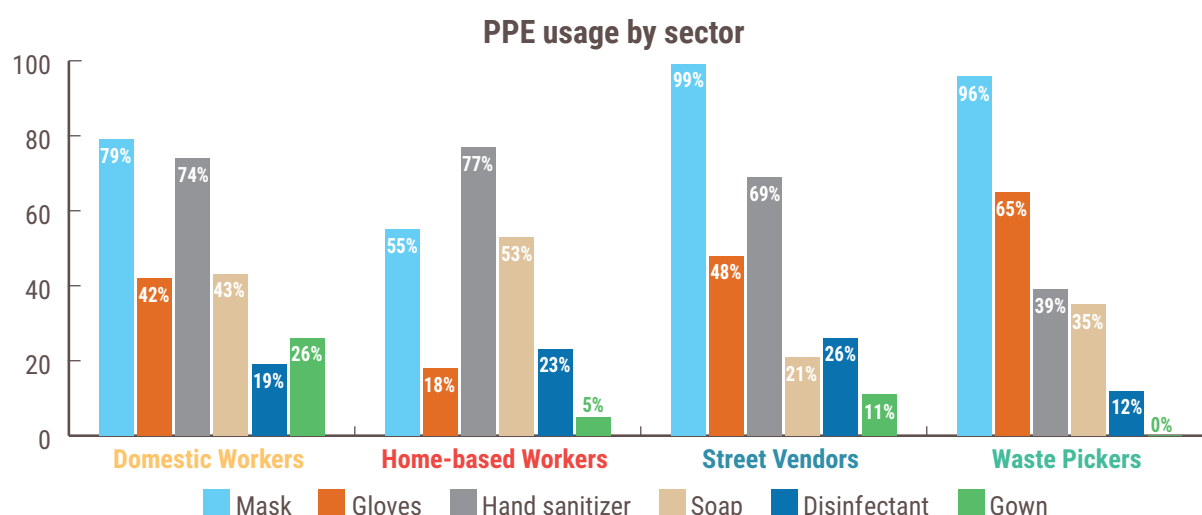
### 3. Health and Safety

#### Access to PPE

*“It’s been quite a difficult task to adapt to the changing working environment and circumstances... Hand sanitizer is quite expensive together with all other PPE clothing needed to survive during this pandemic. We, however, work closely as a community and share the resources available.” - Durban, IW Leader, Market Trader*

When they were able to work, workers faced very real health risks as frontline or essential workers in the provision of affordable goods and services and in the provision of critical waste recycling services. Many informal workers did not have access to PPE or could not afford to buy it due to the reduction in their earnings.

The vast majority of informal workers used masks and over 70 per cent, except for waste pickers, used hand sanitizer. Less than 40 per cent of waste pickers and street vendors reported using soap — one of the most critical measures to protect against viral transmission — which is likely explained by the fact that 57 per cent of street vendors and 40 per cent of waste pickers do not have access to water at their work site. This highlights the fact that workers cannot fill the state role of infrastructure provision. Where governments do provide such support, the safety benefits were evident (see Braham and Ogando 2021).



#### Workers’ Efforts to Uphold Safety Protocols

In **Accra**, the local government worked with market traders to set up hand washing stations using “Veronica buckets”, and to provide soap and sanitizers. Worker leaders shared safety information and encouraged traders to use masks and comply with protocols.

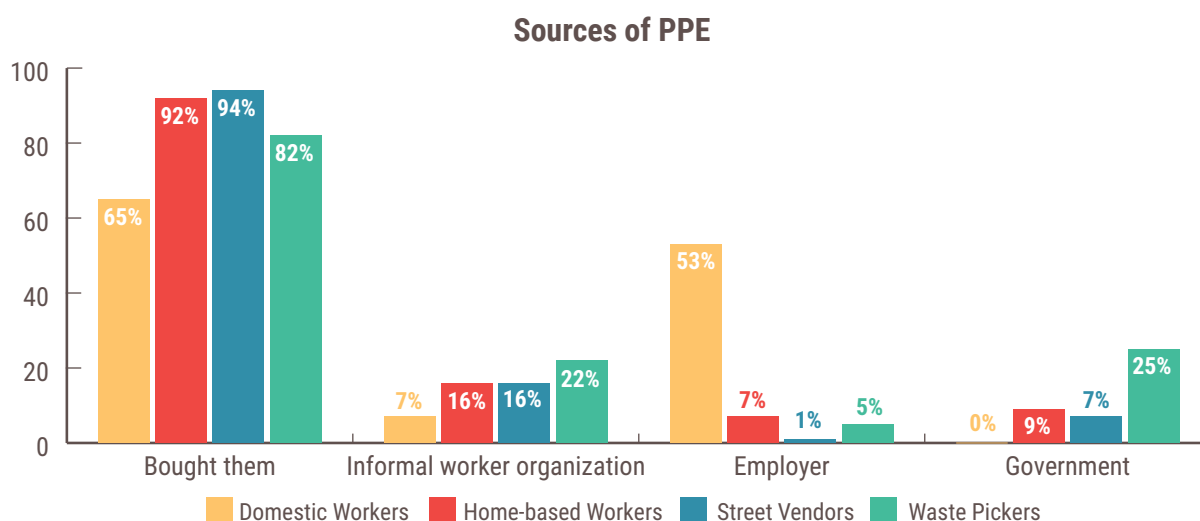
In **Lima**, street vendors in the markets of “Los Tumbos” and “San Juan de Lurigancho” designed plastic coverings to protect their products and themselves while selling goods. They made masks and distributed them to other vendors who could not afford to buy PPE. Waste pickers used PPE to handle recyclable materials, and applied disinfectant on recyclable bags before handling them.

In **Mexico City**, waste picker leaders provided masks, sanitizers, soap and gloves to protect waste pickers. Street vendors established standard hygiene practices and kept a daily registry of worker temperatures and possible COVID-19 related symptoms in order to avoid any spread of the illness.

*“As we speak we haven’t recorded a surge in COVID infections in the markets, which means that the traders have really done well in complying. I urge the government to factor in all these issues when building new markets: considering spaces and water access to aid healthy living. [The pandemic] also brought a lot of cost to the traders, so traders resorted to buying water to wash their hands from sellers because they know that they won’t have access to water where they work.” — Market Trader Leader, Accra*



On the whole, informal workers were responsible for their own provision of PPE. **More than 80 per cent of home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers bought PPE themselves**, while just over half (53%) of domestic workers were given the PPE by their employer. The second most prevalent source of PPE was worker organizations. Only in Bangkok (45%) and Dakar (70%) was the government a significant source of PPE.



## Worker health challenges

*“The problem is that (...) everyone is afraid of going to a public hospital, so many of my fellow workers, the ones that have been infected, have treated themselves with their own means, with a private doctor from the neighborhood or colony, which is not as expensive as going to a private hospital.” – Non-salaried worker leader from Mexico City*

The highest rates of COVID-19 symptoms were reported among workers and their households in cities where the virus had already spread significantly by the time the study took place. In Mexico City, 25 per cent of domestic workers reported that a person living in their household had COVID-19 or related symptoms; in New York this was 25 per cent of street vendors and 20 per cent of waste pickers; and in Lima it was 20 per cent of domestic workers.

Informal workers in most cities reported difficulties in accessing health care services for COVID-19 related health concerns and other, longer term chronic needs. This was caused by fear of entering hospitals due to concerns about contracting the virus or being quarantined, the cost of seeking private care, lack of trust in the quality of health providers, and a general unease that informal workers were stigmatized and discriminated against. In five cities, migrant workers in all sectors were more likely than locals to report they did not work because they were concerned about becoming ill, which may reflect concerns about whether they were eligible for health care access (see Ismail and Valdivia 2021).

## 4. The State: Relief and Restrictions

### Government Relief Measures

*“The food distribution by the government was not well done. In my neighborhood many people were not able to benefit from the food relief. Those who did get it, redistributed it among their neighbors. This was the case of my father, for example. The head of the neighborhood had not counted him. It was after complaints were made [...] that they put my father on the list of beneficiaries” – Waste Picker, Dakar*

Government relief efforts were an important source of support where they reached workers, but were limited and uneven in reach. Even in cities where cash relief or food relief reached the majority of workers, workers viewed them as essential supplements that were insufficient to meet household needs.

Government relief measures took multiple forms. In the cities surveyed, several measures built on existing social protection infrastructure (for example, food relief and cash transfers), but they also included interventions outside of the social protection system such as low-interest or interest-free loans and utility waivers.

#### Key COVID-19 relief measures accessible for informal workers available as of June/July 2020\*

Utilities waivers	Loans	New COVID-19 Cash grants/transfers	Top-ups to existing cash grant programmes	Food staples/meals/kits
Accra, Ahmedabad, Dakar, Delhi, Tiruppur	Mexico City	Bangkok, Durban, Lima, Mexico City, <sup>16</sup> New York, Tiruppur	Ahmedabad, Delhi, Durban, Tiruppur	Accra, Ahmedabad, Dakar, Delhi, Lima, New York, Tiruppur

\*Based on interviews and policy review

About 41 per cent of workers received a government cash relief grant and 42 per cent reported receipt of government-provided food relief. This varied considerably by city. Deficient and inflexible registries, complex application procedures, and distribution challenges ultimately determined the outcome of COVID-19 relief policies. More successful relief efforts were seen in those places with a combination of stronger existing social protection infrastructure, complemented by grassroots organizations supporting “last mile” services to overcome major barriers, including those related to the use of digital platforms (Alfers et al 2020).

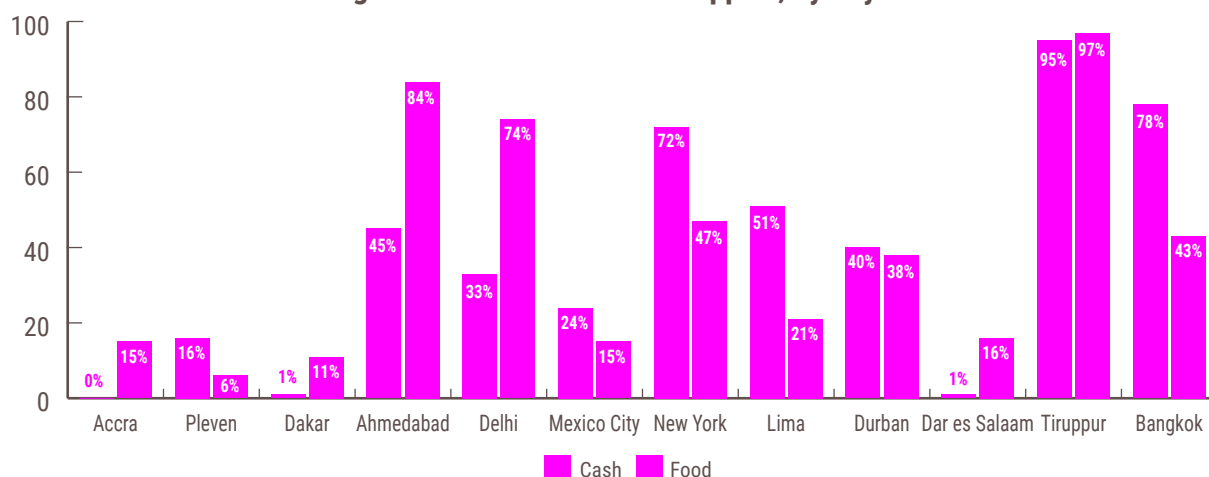
In the three Indian cities of Ahmedabad, Delhi and Tiruppur, food distribution was successful due to partnerships between government and worker organizations for reaching workers, and infrastructure for delivering staples via the pre-existing Public Distribution System. High rates of cash relief grants in Tiruppur and Bangkok likewise reflect in part the role of worker organizations in supporting workers to apply for benefits.

In Durban and Lima, cash grants built off existing social protection infrastructure. The lower number of recipients is indicative of more burdensome application processes, incomplete registries and technological barriers to access leading to exclusion errors. In Lima, for instance, despite months of successful advocacy by worker organizations for *bonos* for informal urban workers, only 50 per cent of respondents received them, even though most who did not receive the payment considered themselves to be eligible.

In Accra, Dakar, Plevelen and Dar es Salaam, cash relief was limited or non-existent. Government food programs in Accra and Dakar were haphazard and not rooted in existing social infrastructure. In several cities, respondents felt they were bypassed because of political corruption or favoritism.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

### Percentage of respondents reporting that they received government cash or food support, by city



Differences in relief access between occupational sectors were also apparent; in Ahmedabad, waste pickers were the most likely to receive both cash and food relief, compared to only a third of domestic workers with access to cash relief—whereas in Durban waste pickers had the least access due to their highly marginalized status. In Mexico City, a dedicated cash relief program was extended to non-salaried workers<sup>17</sup> after widespread demonstrations at the start of the crisis.

The relief they received was not sufficient to replace lost earnings. Referring to the three-month emergency grant received by many informal workers in Bangkok, a street vendor described that “for those who rent a place, this amount is sufficient just for the rental fee, but insufficient for food expenses.” As one waste picker leader from Lima expressed:

*“I was lucky enough that my wife received a subsidy of 350 soles.... With those 350 soles, we had to survive, to buy food. There were some days where we had to eat soup and we had a single meal for the whole day...You cannot live with 350 soles during the whole lockdown. We had to ask for loans, sell our products, our working materials, because we couldn’t manage the situation any longer.”—Waste Picker Leader, Lima<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>17</sup> Non-salaried worker is a legal category of workers in Mexico which covers a diverse range of occupational groups in public space, including shoe shiners and mariachi musicians, among others.

<sup>18</sup> Webinar: La Crisis de la COVID-19 y la economía informal: Trabajadoras y trabajadores en empleo informal en Lima, Perú. Lima, 18 February 2021. WIEGO

## Government Harm and Support to Worker Livelihoods

*“We vendors would rather have our occupation back than to receive financial support...The THB 5,000 handout helped us survive for the time being. But if we are able to work and get a good location to sell, vendors will have income to buy food, pay rent and car installments, and to spend. If we cannot sell goods, we will continue to suffer for a long time.” – Street Vendor Leader, Bangkok*

Across cities, workers’ demand for cash or food relief was far overshadowed by their demand to return to work and their concerns about punitive actions and policies by local governments. Yet, many local governments continued their long assault on informal workers—undermining any marginal benefits provided through relief measures. In other cases, local governments or national agencies worked to support workers to regain their livelihoods.

<b>Punitive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Street vendors in Delhi and New York City complained of fines; vendors in Delhi, Durban, Lima, and Mexico City reported confiscations or destruction of equipment or merchandise.</li> <li>● In Delhi, workers experienced regular beatings by police officers for leaving their homes during the lockdown.</li> <li>● In Accra, the government of Ghana decommissioned the Kpone landfill where waste pickers have worked for years, without consultation or livelihoods safeguarding measures.</li> </ul>
<b>Neglectful</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● South Africa revised its Disaster Management Regulations on April 2 to recognize informal food vendors who had written permission from a municipal authority as essential workers. Yet, in cities like Durban, food traders reported that they were unable to obtain permits.</li> <li>● In June 2020, in response to public protests against police brutality, New York City’s Mayor announced a cessation of oversight of vending regulations by the New York Police Department (NYPD). Notwithstanding, he had little public reaction when vendors began reporting ticketing again by the NYPD several months later.</li> </ul>
<b>Supportive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The Thai government instituted a “50/50” scheme, whereby consumers would be reimbursed for half of their expenses when purchasing goods from street vendors or other small businesses. This was later extended to cover transportation services, including motorcycle taxi drivers.</li> <li>● In Pleven, the municipality granted informal workers’ requests to provide free retail space, after workers presented findings from this study showing the challenges faced by street vendors and home-based workers during the crisis.</li> <li>● In Lima, the Municipality Independencia established health and safety standards for street markets to return to work, although as a prerequisite vendors had to purchase their own plastic stalls.</li> </ul>

## 5. Role of MBOs

*“I’ve been in workshops [with my organization] that have helped me a lot. I wanted to pull out my hair and they’ve taken the time and, with empathy, have put themselves in our shoes to see how all this has affected us. They help us see how to react and how to get out of this situation” - Domestic Worker, Mexico City*

Local informal worker organizations provided multiple forms of support to their members and other informal workers to mitigate the economic, physical and mental health impacts of COVID-19. From facilitating negotiations with government agencies and local municipalities to supporting workers’ registration for relief measures, worker organizations rapidly mobilized much needed resources and reliable information for informal workers. They highlighted the essential goods and services that informal workers provide as well as the pre-existing structural injustices and inequalities, which were exposed and exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis. They also gathered information on the experiences, risks and needs of their members.

Main Forms of MBO Support	City Examples
<p><b>Policy advocacy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitation of dialogue with national and local governments on needed relief measures for informal workers</li> <li>Negotiation of work permits for essential workers</li> <li>Support to acquire ID cards for informal workers</li> </ul>	<p><b>In Accra</b>, trader organizations negotiated with the government to design identification cards so that traders could travel to other towns to purchase goods in bulk.</p> <p><b>In New York City</b>, the Street Vendor Project advocated to the City Council successfully for new regulations allowing outdoor restaurant dining to be inclusive of street vending. Along with a broader coalition, the organization fought for and won state-level legislation that provides relief for undocumented workers excluded from national relief programs.<sup>21</sup></p> <p><b>In Bangkok</b>, the Federation of Informal Workers and HomeNet Thailand helped facilitate dialogues between the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority and street vendors about restoring access to vending areas and markets.</p>
<p><b>Support to access cash and/or food relief</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support to help informal workers register for relief measures online</li> <li>Support with opening a bank account</li> </ul>	<p><b>In Lima</b>, the organization of waste pickers, <b>FENAREP</b>, provided a list of its members to the municipality to increase the coverage of government relief.</p> <p><b>In Tiruppur</b>, Anuhatham union and SAVE helped Anuhatham members to access state government grants of 2,000 rupees by helping those who were unregistered or did not have bank accounts.</p>
<p><b>Support returning to livelihoods</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitating market linkages</li> <li>Support for selling products on online platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp</li> <li>Online training for the production of goods</li> <li>Purchase of informal worker products</li> </ul>	<p><b>The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad and Delhi</b> linked workers to bulk orders for masks and supported training on mask making.</p> <p><b>In Pleven, the union of informal workers UNITY</b> purchased goods from home-based workers in bulk, for sale at events in the future. They also circulated online trainings created by workers throughout their network, so that members could learn how to make alternative products.</p>

<sup>19</sup> <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2021/04/10/undocumented-immigrants-excluded-workers-fund-pandemic-relief/>

<p><b>Access to information and provision of PPE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dissemination of information on health and safety measures and protocols</li> <li>• Dissemination of information on COVID-19</li> <li>• Provision and/or distribution of PPE</li> <li>• Support to set up hand washing facilities</li> </ul>	<p><b>In Durban, Asiye eTafuleni (AeT)</b> raised awareness about COVID-19 and safety protocols for informal workers. AeT also developed and installed portable hand washing stations for street vendors and traders in Warwick Junction Market and for waste pickers.</p> <p><b>In Dar es Salaam, the Conservation, Hotel, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHODAWU)</b> initiated health awareness campaigns targeting domestic workers and employers via radio and TV, emphasizing the importance of personal protective measures and calling on employers not to discriminate against or stigmatize domestic workers.</p> <p><b>In Dakar, the waste picker organization Bokk Diom</b> provided information about health and safety in the landfill site and distributed PPE to workers.</p>
<p><b>Moral and psychological support</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased communication with workers experiencing stress and anxiety during COVID-19</li> </ul>	<p><b>In Delhi, SEWA</b> conducted health awareness sessions for workers feeling greater anxiety and stress throughout the pandemic.</p> <p><b>In Mexico City</b>, the organization of domestic workers <b>SINACTRAHO</b> provided workshops which were important sources of moral support for domestic workers.</p>

## 6. Recovery and Beyond: Informal Worker Needs & Demands

### | “No Economic Recovery Without Us!” - StreetNet International

Findings underline that, without strategic government support and investment, countries and cities are witnessing large segments of their working classes slip into poverty as a result of COVID-19. Centering these workers and their businesses in recovery plans and investments is a good policy choice—indeed, the only good policy choice—since the recovery of informal livelihoods is essential both for reducing poverty and stimulating economic growth.

In the short-term, governments must recognize that lockdown-style restrictions are inappropriate for societies with large working poor populations. Across cities, the most significant demand voiced by informal worker respondents was the ability to return to work.

A just, effective recovery will require deliberate action from both national and local governments, targeted to strengthening earnings within the occupations where informal workers actually work. Many potentially transformative policies proposed by informal worker organizations come at little or no state cost; rather, they require commitments to stop actively harming workers’ livelihoods through punitive policies and behaviors. Others involve a need for governments to reprioritize away from debt repayment, austerity measures or stimulus investments directed at the corporate private sector—instead directing those toward grassroots businesses and workers that can distribute such support much more equitably across populations.

#### Recovery demands from worker organizations<sup>20</sup>

<b>Guiding Principles</b>	An immediate end to harassment, extortion and other penalization of informal workers, and evictions or demolition of worker homes or workplaces (“Do no harm”) Organizations of informal workers should be invited to help design, implement and monitor relief, recovery and reform efforts (“No recovery without us”)
<b>Financial Assistance to Pay Off Debts &amp; Restore Savings and Assets</b>	Short-term cash grants Moratoriums on payments (e.g. utility bills, rent) and debt forgiveness Low interest loans to rebuild businesses
<b>Recovery Support for Work and Livelihoods</b>	Recovery cash grants Recovery stimulus packages—reduced taxes, reduced interest rates, increased government expenditure—targeted at informal workers Reopening of natural markets of street vendors and sorting areas/spaces for waste pickers Government quotas for procuring essential goods and services from informal workers Employment guarantee schemes Skills and business training and certification Elimination of red tape: simplification of procedures to obtain licenses and work permits Priority vaccinations for informal workers

<sup>20</sup> A full Summary of Demands with specific examples directed at local and national governments from the 12 cities is available at <http://bit.ly/DemandsForIW.s>.

<b>Social Protection</b>	<p>Expand and upgrade existing social assistance programmes by increasing benefit levels and expanding to new groups</p> <p>Reform contributory social protection systems to be more inclusive of informal workers</p> <p>Provide child care services and school feeding programs for children of informal workers</p>
<b>Enabling Policy and Legal Environment: Urban</b>	<p>Provide regulated access to—and right to work in—public spaces</p> <p>Moratoriums on permits and fees</p> <p>Basic infrastructure services at workplaces, including water, sanitation, and protective equipment</p> <p>Transport between home, markets and workplace</p> <p>Decriminalization of informal workers and their livelihood activities, with legal protections against abuse by police, local authorities, and employers</p>
<b>Enabling Policy and Legal Environment: National</b>	<p>Promotion of a labour-intensive economic growth strategy that is inclusive of informal workers and their livelihood activities</p> <p>Integration of informal workers and their livelihood activities into economic planning for recovery and beyond: at the national, provincial/state and local levels</p> <p>Extension of labour and commercial rights to, respectively, informal wage workers and informal self-employed</p> <p>Registration of informal workers in social registries and labor force registries</p>
<b>Fair Terms of Employment and Trade</b>	<p>Regular work and work orders</p> <p>Fair wages and piece rates, with regular on-time payments</p> <p>Fair prices for goods and services</p>
<b>Fundamental Demands</b>	<p>Recognition and dignity as legitimate economic actors who provide essential goods and services</p> <p>Freedom from harm by the state or by the owners of capital</p> <p>Equal access as formal workers to worker rights and benefits</p> <p>Representative voice in policy-making and rule-setting processes</p>



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**Partner and collaborating organizations:** Asiye eTafuleni; Asociación La Parada; Bokk Diom; CETRAFOR - Central Única de Autoempleados de La Victoria, Rumbo a la Formalización; CONFIAR - Confederación de Instituciones de Ambulantes y Afines de la Región Lima y Callao; Conservation, Hotels, Domestic, Social Services and Consultancy Workers Union (CHODAWU); Delhi Roundtable of Waste Pickers (DRT); Federation of Informal Workers Thailand; FENAREP - Federación Nacional de Recicladores del Perú; FENVENDRELP - Federación Nacional de Vendedores de Diarios, Revistas y Loterías del Perú; Frente Nacional de Recicladores Ambientalistas del Perú; Greater Accra Markets Association (GAMA); HomeNet Thailand; Informal Hawkers and Vendors of Ghana (IHVAG); IPROFOTH - Instituto de Promoción y Formación de Trabajadoras del Hogar; Jan Pahal; Kayayei Youth Association; Kpone Landfill Waste Pickers Association; RENATTA - Red Nacional de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores Autoempleados; Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA); SEWA Delhi; Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar (SINACTRAHO); SINTRAHOGARP - Sindicato de Trabajadoras del Hogar del Perú; SINTTRAHOL - Sindicato de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras del Hogar de Lima; Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE); Street Vendor Project; Sure We Can; The Bulgarian Trade Union of Self-Employed and Informal Workers (UNITY); Trabajadores Voluntarios y Desempleados de la Ciudad de México (TVDCM); Unión de Aseadores de Calzado de la Ciudad de México (UACCM).



COVID-19 and the Informal Economy Study Outputs (Round 1): [www.wiego.org/COVID-19-Crisis-and-the-Informal-Economy-Study](http://www.wiego.org/COVID-19-Crisis-and-the-Informal-Economy-Study)

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

**Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)** is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit [www.wiego.org](https://www.wiego.org).

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Women in Informal Employment:  
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