



## SDDirect COVID-19 Pandemic Blog Series

**How has COVID-19 affected women informal workers and what policies and measures are in place to mitigate any negative consequences? What policy recommendations are there for UK government?**

*Chris Hearle and Suvira Chaturvedi consider these questions for low and middle-income countries in a recently published report on the [Implications of COVID-19 on women informal workers](#) for the [UK government Work and Opportunities for Women \(WOW\) Helpdesk](#).*

Informal workers are workers without access to labour protections or social protection through work. [They make up the majority of the world's workers and 90% of employment in low-income countries.](#) Women are over-represented in the informal economy and are more likely to be in the most vulnerable and precarious forms of informal work, such as home-based piece work and domestic work. The implications of Covid-19 report builds on the [WOW guidance note: Promoting economic empowerment for women in the informal economy \(2019\)](#).

**COVID-19 is intensifying the precarious situation of women informal workers, exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities:**

- Women informal workers have suffered a disproportionate loss of livelihoods and income compared to men, with less access to social protection to absorb the economic shock. Responses from authorities' risks heightening the economic fallout.
- Women-owned informal Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises are experiencing bankruptcy because of a lack of access to finance.
- Many women informal workers feel compelled to work to survive, but risk being infected with COVID-19 as a result. This is because their working conditions are such that it makes it difficult to socially distance, meanwhile their [access to hand-washing facilities and Personal Protective Equipment \(PPE\) is extremely limited](#).
- COVID-19 is resulting in exponential increases in unpaid care work, much of which is carried out by women. This [is a contributing factor that can lead to women's permanent exit from the labour market](#).
- Lockdown measures are increasing the threat of intimate partner violence inflicted on women informal workers inside the home. [Violence outside the home, often perpetrated by the police and the authorities, is also a problem](#).

**Governments and donors have few policies and measures in place to protect women informal workers from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is**

a danger that untargeted labour market policies in place to respond to COVID-19 will not benefit women informal workers. The targeted policies that are in place consist mostly of cash and in-kind social protection, providing work to women informal workers in the response to COVID-19, and improving access to finance. [Women informal workers' organisations are playing a critical role supporting vulnerable groups of women, and advocating for governments to respond.](#)

**The UK government can play a critical role by ensuring that women informal workers are central to COVID-19 responses and sufficiently resourced.** Both short- and long-term measures are essential to ensure that economic recovery is inclusive, green, safe, and resilient to future shocks.

***Short-term measures:***

- Work with governments to ensure that policies and intervention for response and recovery are informed by rapid gender and intersectional assessments of the impact of COVID-19 and that interventions are context specific and targeted. Actively engage women informal workers, women entrepreneurs and their organizations in any decision making.
- Support social protection measures that use universal/near universal or categorical targeting, considering how different types of benefit best support informal livelihoods. Complementary programmes, such as personal protective equipment, minimum emergency sexual and reproductive health services, and free or subsidised public care arrangements, are essential in ensuring incomes are protected. [Social protection measures should be part of broader economic interventions and livelihood recovery.](#)
- Support governments to provide accessible and integrated public services for prevention and essential service interventions for gender-based violence, and infrastructure support for clean water, sanitation, hygiene services and accessibility to transport services. Particularly vulnerable women informal workers, such as those living with disabilities and women sex workers, should also be included in these measures.
- Ensure women informal workers and representative organizations have a voice in decision making, leadership and participation in COVID-19 responses and plans. Organisations such as WIEGO, HomeNet South Asia, SEWA and others, should be engaged with and sufficiently resourced to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19.

***Medium-to long-term measures:***

- Support gender-sensitive legislation that offers legal recognition and rights to informal workers through ratification of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) and implementation of other relevant ILO Conventions.
- Expansion and adaptation of existing social and labour protection systems so that they are gender responsive and inclusive to ensure that workers, regardless of their contractual status, are afforded adequate protection.

- Galvanize economic recovery efforts to engage and economically empower women informal workers that strengthens their agency and access to productive resources. Develop the unpaid and paid caregiving economy and infrastructure for affordable water, sanitation, hygiene service, accessibility to transport and electricity supply. In addition, actively support quality and affordable care services, and work with governments to ensure women informal workers have better access to affordable and quality health services, including sexual and reproductive health services.
- Partner with and influence private sector companies, especially UK-based companies, to ensure supply chains promote women's access to decent work and extend minimum wages and social protection.
- Incentivise digital financial inclusion, and support schemes that provide mobile phones and/or access to the internet together with digital literacy training.
- Targeted measures to support women entrepreneurs and their capacity strengthened in participating and linking with trade platforms.
- Establish an efficient monitoring and evaluation system to ensure objectives and outcomes of the UK government's short- and long-term measures are achieved on the ground.

For a more detailed exploration of the situation of women informal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as existing policies and measures and policy recommendations, please read the [full WOW Helpdesk report](#). Feel free to access this report and other WOW resources on the [WOW programme website](#).

We welcome constructive feedback on this blog and are keen to collaborate with organisations that share our values and our commitment to ensuring no one is left behind as part of the COVID-19 response. If you would like to share feedback or explore opportunities for collaboration, please email [laura.martineau-searle@sddirect.org.uk](mailto:laura.martineau-searle@sddirect.org.uk).