

Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Urban Women in The Informal Sector: A Case of Gweru Urban

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching adverse impact across the socio-economic livelihoods and subsequently, the wellbeing of the majority of the population in Zimbabwe. The informal sector which is largely dominated by females was negatively impacted due to the tightening of lock downs and travel restrictions as the government responds to the pandemic. The impact led to fragility and conflict where social cohesion was undermined and institutional capacity limited. This paper focuses on the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable urban women. The study took a qualitative approach and was also based on a systematic review of secondary data sources like reports from national and international organizations, journal articles and policy reports. The study finds out that due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent regulations imposed by the government restricting interprovincial travelling, women entrepreneurs who relied on informal trading were adversely impacted by the measures. The study also observed that the lockdown measures which were imposed to minimize the contagion of the COVID-19 virus ironically granted greater freedoms to women abusers who were stuck with their victims at home. The respondents testified that with the inception of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures, there was an increase in domestic violence cases for most women in communities studied. The study also observed that the pandemic worsened the socio-economic vulnerability for women who lost their livelihoods due to the pandemic. Thus, the study submits that the pandemic did not only cause an increase in gender-based violence for women, but it also disconnected most women from their respective support networks. The study therefore recommends local authorities to have safety nets in place for the vulnerable women especially those who survive on informal trading so as to sustain their livelihoods whenever there are outbreaks of pandemics of such a magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is further recommended that, the government must establish a fund to assist especially the female entrepreneurs in the informal sector to recover from loses incurred due to COVID-19 induced lock downs.

Keywords: Socio-economic impact, vulnerable women, COVID-19 pandemic, informal sector

I. INTRODUCTION

The 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action on gender equality coincided with the emergency of an outbreak of COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease of 2019), a respiratory disease caused by the virus sars-cov-2. It is believed that COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan, a small town in the Hubei province in China before it quickly spread to far off cities and continents. In March 2020, the World Health

Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a global pandemic (Rahman et al. 2020). The pandemic saw the gains made in the past two decades in terms of gender equality and gender emancipation being reversed. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened pre-existing inequalities through uncovering vulnerabilities in political, social, and economic systems which consequently amplified the impact of the pandemic in most societies.

The impact of the pandemic was exacerbated for women and girls who by virtue of their sex experienced insecurity and lack social protection among others. The vulnerable women who generally earn less, save less, have insecure jobs, and living close to poverty greatly felt the compounded impact of the pandemic than any other persons (Mashapure & Hamunakwadi, 2020; Daka et al. 2022). Furthermore, the reallocation of priorities and resources by stakeholders during the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted on sexual and reproductive health care services for most women (Lenhardt, 2021). Akrofi & Nevo (2021) also observe that the pandemic led to the increase in cases of unpaid care work mostly for women due to the heightened care needs for the sick people given that the health sector was overwhelmed.

The deepening social and economic stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic combined with lockdown measures and restricted movement resulted in gender-based violence increasing exponentially in most communities. Thus, a number of vulnerable women were forced to stay together at home with their abusers at a time when support systems and services for victims of gender based violence were disrupted, and in certain instances, inaccessible because of the imposed travel restrictions (Mittal & Sing, 2020). This contributed to the fragility of the society as social cohesion was undermined and institutional capacity to respond to cases of GBV being limited. In light of the above observations, the study seeks to unpack the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mostly vulnerable urban women in Zimbabwe.

II. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far reaching adverse impacts across the socio-economic livelihoods and subsequently the wellbeing of the majority of the population in Zimbabwe (Dandara et al. 2021). The impact of the pandemic was felt across by both sexes. Gebhard et al. (2020) argue that both

males and females suffered from the impact of the pandemic. However, in Zimbabwe, the informal business sector is a strong economic contributor aiding to the livelihoods of more than 80% of the total population with females taking up more than 70% of the players in the informal sector (Mashapure, Hamunakwadi, Chavhunduka & Chikazhe, 2021). Thus, females were the most affected group by the pandemic especially in view of how it grossly affected the informal sector (Mashapure et al. 2021). The tightening of lock downs, travel restrictions, and also restrictions on business operations by the government in response to the pandemic negatively impacted the informal sector largely dominated by females. The pandemic further drove the predicament of jobless Zimbabweans to helplessness and extreme poverty. These adverse impacts were more pronounced in urban and peri-urban set-ups where there was little to no alternative means of survival and as such, vulnerable women and girls became the notable victims of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the pandemic has recessed, it continues to impact numerous facets of society in Zimbabwe in the middle of substantial challenges already posed by gender inequality. Whereas the bearings of the aforementioned challenges are being faced at community level, they have exposed and worsened prevailing disparities in the society and continue to affect specific groups of people more than others (Reichelt et al. 2020: Mooi-Reci & Risman, 2021). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic placed further obligations on women thereby worsening prevailing gender inequalities in the society. The lockdowns brought by the pandemic and the subsequent closure of services and business operations dominated by women in the informal sector severely affected women's productive time and this also contributed in fueling gender based violence. Due to the available evidence from existing literature and studies on how women are affected during times of crisis, this qualitative study seeks to look at the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable urban women in the informal sector. This is in light of limited literature available on the effects of COVID-19 pandemic to the informal sector which is dominated by women in Zimbabwe.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The novel coronavirus diseases of 2019 abbreviated COVID-19 is a respiratory disease associated with the virus severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). The SARS-CoV-2 virus first broke out in Wuhan a small town in the Hubei province of China in November of 2019 (Yang et al. 2020). The disease caught the world unaware and unprepared and as such, it caused substantial mayhem to business undertakings with some serious antagonistic effects on informal and small businesses (Humphries et al. 2020). Thus, the World Health Organization classified the health crisis a global pandemic. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic rigorously affected the performance of the informal sector worldwide, as such, women who form the majority of people in the sector were equally affected (Kaberia & Muathe, 2020). As day to day operations were being affected and disrupted at a significant scale due to the outbreak of the pandemic,

vulnerable women especially in the developing world were most hard hit by the effects the pandemic (Gao, 2021).

The impact of the pandemic has been worse for African economies considering their fragility and Zimbabwe being one of the African economies, it has been hard hit due to the fact that its economy is largely dominated by the informal sector. As such, livelihoods of the majority of citizens in Zimbabwe were severely affected with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The year 2020 witnessed a decline in economic activities particularly within the informal sector due to the imposition of lock downs, travel restrictions and other COVID-19 restrictive measures resulting in a severe downfall of trade which in turn affected all sectors of the economy (Zimstat, 2021). What is more compelling is the fact that, 90% of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Zimbabwe were forced to spend the rest of 2020 and partly 2021 with virtually no to limited activities being undertaken (Jansen, 2021). In the Zimbabwean context, SMEs which form the bulk of the informal sector contribute more than 65% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employ more than 80% of the working population with 60% of the employees being women (Fin Scope, 2021).

Just like in Zimbabwe, Sengupta et al, (2020) note that the informal sector in most developing economies significantly contribute to economic growth and support the increasing GDP of many of these developing countries. This is achieved through increased trade opportunities and creation of employment (Waiho, 2020). However, Amankwah et al, (2021) note that the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic reversed the economic gains brought about by the informal sector for many African nations. Thus, the African Development Bank (2020) notes that prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, countries in sub-Saharan Africa experienced an economic growth of up to 4% in 2019 and that the growth was projected to surpass 4.2% in 2020, and 4.6% growth in 2021. Nonetheless, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this anticipated economic growth trend and posed significant threats to the sustainability of sub-Saharan African countries (ILO, 2020a). At a global scale, Kumar, (2020) highlights that the drop in informal sector activities due to the pandemic dropped to below 6% year on year resulting in over 1.7 million women in the SADC region alone dropping out of work.

An informal economy is an economy that is made up of economic activities that are both in practice and in law not supported or insufficiently supported by formal legal frameworks and provisions (ILO, 2020a). This sector make up 90% of the economy in the region (Naidoo, 2020; UNCTAD, 2020), and also 80% of employment in the region (ILO, 2020b).

Thus, with the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, the informal sector was heavily threatened as countries put in place different measures to contain the contagion of the virus thereby affecting all the economic activities (UNWTO, 2020). In its joint continental plan to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the African Union (AU) (2020) highlights that the short term strategy was to minimize the contagion so as to limit

the harm of the pandemic. The approach resulted in the closure of borders across sub-Saharan Africa and the subsequent national lockdown in Zimbabwe. ILO (2020a) argues that the great dependence on the informal sector for livelihoods condemned the majority of the population in the sub-Saharan African region into an economic crisis due to their failure to cope up with the imposed restrictions and also due to the fact that many lacked savings.

It has also been argued that in the Zimbabwean context, the pandemic worsened the informal business economy as the economy was already in a decline mode shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic (Nyoka, 2020; UNDP, 2020). Karombo & Mataranyika (2020) further indicate that the Zimbabwean economy was facing an impromptu before the outbreak of the pandemic as the economy experienced escalating inflation partly due to a volatile currency policy, and rampaging unemployment rates especially amongst the women (Ntsaluba, 2020; Nyathi, 2020; IMF, 2020; ILO, 2020; UNDP, 2020). Additionally, as nations implemented quarantine measures to curb the highly infectiousness nature of the COVID-19 virus, some of the measures negatively impacted on women as cases of gender based violence increased especially for the vulnerable women (Mittal & Singh, 2020). Mittal & Singh (2020), further argue that the quarantines which were imposed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 virus in communities had serious social and psychological disruptive consequences referred to as the quarantine paradox which also contributed to the increase in gender based violence particularly in low income households where livelihoods for spouses were disrupted.

Cases of domestic violence targeted on women were not only unique in poorer communities of the developing world during the COVID era. Rose (2015), also notes that such cases were also rife in cities such as Bologna in Italy. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), states that social services often breakdown during pandemics thus, existing gender inequalities especially in poorer communities are often exacerbated in pandemic situations. Pandemic situations also increase the exposure of children and women to sexual violence and harassment in their attempt to procure basic necessities such as food, water, and firewood. The situation is further worsened by the breakdown in law and law enforcement during pandemic situations as the majority of vulnerable women are exposed to increased cases of gender based violence (Okur, 2021). Furthermore, under such circumstances, the majority of victims were not in a position to access sufficient support systems and assistance from service providers while the perpetrators of the gender based violence on the other hand were exempted from punishment.

Just like with the COVID 19 pandemic, studies have also shown the correlation of increased cases of gender based violence particularly intimate partner violence with disaster situations as was the case with the Earthquake disaster in Haiti (2007), the Hurricane Katrina (2005), and Mount Saint Helens Volcano (1980s). This has been largely attributed to high incidences in the disruption of peoples' livelihoods as well as

other stressors. The South Asian Tsunami of 2004 also resulted in a rise of gender based violence. Fisher, (2006) points out that several incidents of violence and sexual harassment against women were record in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of Tsunami. Thus, Sikira and Urassa, (2021), argue that the current COVID-19 pandemic cannot be an exception on how it correlates with increased gender based violence particularly for vulnerable women.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was founded on two theories which are the conflict theory and the structural functionalism theory. The conflict theory developed by Karl Max argues that a society is pronounced by competition for dominance of scarce resources. In the context of this research paper, the conflict theory argues that the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable women such as increased gender based violence can best be understood in view of how men attempt to maintain their privileges to the detriment of women (Harn & Boo, 2021). The structural functionalism theory corroborated with the conflict theory in this line of argument by arguing that the negative impact faced by vulnerable women occurred because of changes in roles both in families and in relationships during the COVID-19 era. The theories are perfect for the research as they are used as lenses to view the gender stratification which developed as a result of the pandemic.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach and it is also based on a systematic review of secondary data sources like reports from national and international organizations, journal articles, and policy reports. In person and telephone interviews were conducted to collect responses for the study from the respondents. The respondents for this study comprised of women who were drawn from two wards in the city of Gweru in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe namely ward 5 and ward 8. These women were the key sources of data for the study. The study used the snowball sampling to identify women involved in informal business activities and who were victims of COVID-19 pandemic induced gender based violence to be participants of the study. A saturation point of 18 respondents was reached when no new responses were forthcoming. The interviews were seeking to gain an insight on the socio economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the respondents. The women interviewed were of various age groups and the majority testified that they have been engaged in informal trading business for over a year on average prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the systematic review, four steps of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion which are part of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) were used (Khan & Kunz, 2003). PRISMA is made up of a 4 phase flow diagram to provide a framework on the evidence based systematic literature reviews and meta-analysis. Identification which is the first step involves looking for relative information and documents to include in the paper. In the identification step, emphasis was given to

relevant documents. Google Scholar, Research Gate, and Science Direct were used as sources and websites for relevant documents. After identification, the second step which is screening was performed where document titles and abstracts were screened and documents and publications which were regarded as relevant were chosen and the rest was disregarded. The chosen documents and publications were assessed to determine the eligibility for inclusion. The final process was to assess the documents for inclusion. The final step also included the reading of articles included to find their suitability for the present topic. Emphasis was placed on journal articles and documents that focused on gender and COVID-19 in terms of vulnerability and socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined the background of all the respondents through capturing their demographic information in an endeavor to better understand their views on the socio-economic impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on their livelihoods. The female participants of the study were of various age groups that ranged from 24 to 46 years.

The livelihoods of the women participants for the study were grouped into three categories namely; vegetable vending, clothing and flea market operators and cross border traders.

Vegetable vending: The study established that there were participants who sold a number of agricultural products such as leafy vegetables, various legumes, potatoes, brassica, and groundnuts. These participants indicated how they would freely travel to buy their products from different market zones before the advent of COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, most of those who were into vegetable vending indicated that their business activities were later on disrupted with the outbreak of COVID-19 due to imposed restrictions in movement by the government.

Clothing and flea market operators: Some of the participants revealed that they were operating clothing and flea markets where they trade items like shoes, used clothes and other related accessories. This sector was also not spared by the COVID-19 pandemic as customer's movements were equally restricted due to the imposed lockdown measures.

Cross border trade: The participants who involved themselves in cross border trading suffered the same fate with the rest of the other participants in that borders were closed, and as such, they could hardly travel to other neighboring countries such as South Africa, Zambia, Mozambique and Botswana to source the items to sell back home.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent regulations imposed by the government restricting interprovincial travelling including the closure of borders, the three categories of women entrepreneurs in the informal sector identified above were adversely impacted by the measures. The majority of the participants revealed that the strict regulations that were put in place by the government forced a shutdown of all informal trading activities such as flea markets, vegetable vending and cross border trading resulting in most of the women losing business opportunities and their source of

income. Some of the participants who resorted to the growing of vegetables in their backyard as a way of trying to earn a living during the imposed lock downs were also adversely impacted as they could not freely move their produce to the market. This was revealed by one participant who said the following:

After the closure of our vending site in town, I decided to grow vegetables on my yard for sell but few customers would come to buy the vegetables at my place during the lockdown... (Interviewee Six, 07-04-22/ ward 5).

A number of participants who were fortunate to have access to trade within their local communities revealed how most of their stock particularly the perishables got stale before being sold out as a result of restricted movement of customers. On one hand, this further worsened their situation as the majority of them experienced significant losses in income while on the other hand those who traded in unperishable products had their money or capital tied up in the stock they bought leaving them with no money to sustain their families. The study established that as a result of the above observation, a number of vulnerable women who relied on informal trading experienced severe mental strain and emotional toll due to their failure to sustain their families considering that the majority of the participants were actually bread winners to their respective families. Thus, due to experiences of mental strains and emotional toll by most participants, the study also established how some of the women ended up experiencing health related illnesses and challenges including high blood pressure.

The other notable effect of the COVID-19 pandemic that was revealed by most females interviewed in the study was the unavailability of critical service providers such as financial institutions from which to seek assistance such as credits during times of need. Furthermore, the study also noted a worrisome trend whereby a few entrepreneurs amongst these vulnerable women were able to keep on operating their businesses but through paying bribes to the law enforcement agents to avoid being arrested. This leaves them with little money to take home for the sustenance of their families. The participants further revealed that their business networks which comprised of suppliers and customers were severely interrupted as a result of the imposed restrictions on their trade and that this left them vulnerable to poverty. Thus, a number of women that participated in the study testified that it was difficult for them to recover and start all over again with their businesses in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic era. This was confirmed by one participant who remarked:

I have personally lost all my income for my business during the lockdown and it is now proving to be difficult for me to start all over again with my business especially considering that banks have no favorable packages for us the informal traders to borrow from (Interviewee Two, 07-04-22/ ward 5).

Such a remark serves as an indication of the severity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to the informal business activities of

vulnerable urban women who have no financial assistance from both the financial institutions and the government.

The study also established that the imposition of lockdown measures which were meant to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus actually granted greater freedoms to abusers of women in communities. That is, a number of participants revealed that since the inception of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures, domestic violence started to rise in their households. This was confirmed by the following similar remarks from the participants were one interviewee complained that:

Due to loss of income from my business during the lockdown I started to experience domestic violence from my partner who was used to get money for beer and other basic needs for the family from my business...(Interviewee Three, 10-04-22/ ward 8).

The other said:

During the lockdown, I spent time at home with my husband who would always abuse me out of his own frustrations as he had lost his employment...the husband would always keep me locked at home and would always spy on my phone to check if I was reporting his abuse to my relatives... (Interviewee Ten, 07-04-22/ ward 5).

Thus, the sentiments above reflect that domestic violence increased grossly for many families of the participants as they were now finding it difficult to meet the basic needs for their families due to their loss of income and employment. Additionally, the study found out that the perpetration of GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic created a raft of psychological effects to most women who were the victims. The views above corroborate with those of Gyamfi et al. (2021), who note that the imposition of lockdowns to deal with COVID-19 granted greater freedom to the perpetrators of gender based violence and the abusers. Peterman et al. (2020) also state that perpetrators of domestic violence used control tactics through limiting the access of the victims to their phones, other people and the internet.

Further to the above, it was also established from the interviews carried out with the participants that the COVID-19 pandemic increased the household burden for most women and girls, a situation that worsened their socio-economic vulnerability considering that their productive time and gainful employment opportunities were lost. Thus, the participants indicated that the bulky of care work for the sick and the elderly was now being considered the responsibility of women and as such, this compromised their efforts to earn decent incomes as most of their time was now being spent in-doors caring for the sick. The closure of schools and other day-care centers due to the pandemic also amplified the women caregiving burden. Confirming the above observation, one participant had this to say:

The COVID-19 lockdown actually worsened our position as women, after losing our businesses, we would stay at home caring for children and the sick and this limited our

opportunities to look for other income earning activities... (Interviewee Six, 10-04-22/ ward 8).

In summary, the study established that authorities in Zimbabwe imposed movement restrictions and lock down measures in a move to decongest populated areas that were key in stopping the contagion. Such measures resulted in market places being closed down for the informal traders who are mainly women. Thus, views of the participants show that the pandemic significantly disrupted the livelihoods of most women in the informal sector as they lost their productive time and gainful employment. This resulted in increased unemployment and increased unpaid care work for most vulnerable women during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the study also noted that there was an increase in domestic violence cases and that most vulnerable women became targets of GBV perpetrated by their partners and spouses after losing their source of livelihoods in the informal sector due to lockdown measures.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic created innumerable problems for the Zimbabwean people especially in light of lack of effective treatment for COVID-19. This forced the government to enforce lockdowns and quarantine measures to minimize the spread of the virus. Nonetheless, this caused economic vulnerability, isolation, and mental health problems across all genders with women being the most affected. Vulnerable women in the informal sector suffered greatly from the socio economic impact of the pandemic. The effects ranged from losing their means of livelihoods to gender based violence and lack of social security. Thus, despite the availability of research studies that assessed the adverse impacts of the pandemic, the uniqueness of this study is in assessing the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 from a gender perspective. This is in light of how the study established the rising in cases of gender violence and how most women were disconnected from their respective support networks during the pandemic. In view of the discussed findings, the study therefore recommends local authorities to have safety nets for the vulnerable women especially those who survive on informal trading to enable them to sustain their livelihoods whenever there are outbreaks of pandemics of such a magnitude as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is further recommended that the government must establish a fund to assist especially the female entrepreneurs in the informal sector to recover from loses incurred due to COVID-19 induced lock downs and also that support systems and networks for the victims of GBV should be strengthened during times of crises.

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