

Covid-19: National Lockdowns and Social Distancing Exposes Gender Inequalities in the Market Places of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The day the earth stood still! This is a title of a western movie production that is pregnant with meaning in as much COVID-19 is concerned. However, this was not a matter of a day as days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months. Lives have been turned upside down for the entire human race. Different economic statuses have also had both negative and positive impact on families the world over. Female breadwinners are facing difficulties in trying to look after families during this COVID-19 environment. The African continent found itself on the receiving end and had to systematically respond to this global pandemic through the announcements of closing borders and lockdowns in a bid to combat the spread of the deadly virus. Several gender policies and instruments have been put in place to create gender responsive environments. It is while implementing these measures that the Zimbabwean societies have realised that the female bread winners are on the losing side as most of their activities are directly affected by the se covid-19 safety measures. It is on this background that this paper is underpinned to demonstrate the vulnerability of the females on the market places. The study which is informed by qualitative research, made use of document analysis. In addition deep structured interviews with female breadwinners. Due to social distancing measures all interviews were conducted online. The paper also put in place recommendations that can be implemented during and after covid-19 period, so that there is gender equity in the market places.

Key Words: Covid-19, Market place, social distancing, Lockdown, Gender responsive, Gender equity and breadwinner.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the newly discovered corona virus. It originated in a food market in Wuhan, China towards the end of the year 2019. The disease is said to be attacking the human respiratory system leading to severe breathing difficulties and even death, (Gupta, 2020). Many theories have been told as to how and why it emerged but the sure thing is, the whole world is at its panic mode since early 2020 to date. No one ever thought or even imagined that by this time the world would be at its standstill. In Africa, the worst hit countries include South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria and Algeria (Gupta, 2020).

According to health experts, one cannot contract COVID-19 unless they have been in contact with an infected person. They say the virus cannot move by itself but uses people as its hosts to move, hence the prevention measures such as social distancing and self quarantining. Other measures include the frequent washing of hands up to twenty seconds with soap or sanitizer to help kill the virus. The use of face masks and gloves has also been observed as a measure against the spread of corona virus. It is believed that if these recommendations are adhered to, the virus can be conquered. This is referred to as shared responsibilities and a global solidarity according to United Nations.

Additionally, in a bid to curb the spread of corona virus most countries, including Zimbabwe, introduced

programmed periods of national lockdowns. With most Zimbabweans citizens being self-employed and even the employed ones have also sought means to supplement their meagre salaries, such measures may be seen like destroying livelihoods of most families. Women make up more than three quarters of the informal and part-time workers around the world. During periods of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, women risk unemployment and being unable to return to work after the pandemic is over (Gupta, 2020).

Women breadwinners provide the larger number of essential services that include food services, frontline services and home based caregivers. Due to the lockdown, women breadwinners have been deprived of identifying alternative livelihood options in order to take care of their families. According to Bali (2020), women' loss of income has an impact on their families' wellbeing especially when they are the sole breadwinners. When monitoring the larger socio-cultural impacts of the pandemic including school closures, lockdowns and reduced access to healthcare, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen to differentially affect the genders and possibly exaggerate existing gender disparities (Wenham *et al.*, 2020). The lockdown experience is quite different for men and women, taking into consideration the difference in physical, cultural, security and sanitary needs for both genders.

Pandemics are a gendered vulnerability, with their socioeconomic impact disproportionately higher among women (Bali, 2020). Statistics reveal that the Zimbabwean economy is predominantly informal with economic renewal policies still to bear fruit. The informal sector has been the most active providing income for the majority families. Access to disposable income is a daily quest to ensure that food is available among the mostly daily-wage-earners dependent on vending and other forms. The lockdown has largely shut down the informal economy affecting millions of Zimbabweans especially women and girls, who are the major players in the informal sector. Additionally, destruction of the market stalls and relocation by local authorities has led to unequal access and utilization by poor and vulnerable groups, of the market spaces.

Theoretical framework

The study is framed by Critical Emancipatory Research theory which is based on interpretative paradigm. Critical Emancipatory Research is grounded in critical hermeneutics (Brenda, 2015). It is the research that challenges conventional ways of conducting research and ensures that the participants are not marginalised and have a voice in issues that affect them (Behar-Horenstein and Feng, 2015) and encourage emancipation and participation (Gilan-Wiliams, 2014). Critical Emancipatory Research abolishes social injustice, looks for social change and transforms the society in the research process (Ramírez *et al.*, 2013). Emancipation and social justice is created because the researchers are now at the centre of the research process (Behar-Horenstein and Feng, 2015). Social change is brought by giving female breadwinners a voice on matters where they normally do not have a voice. The conventional way of conducting a research is turned upside-down because there is no researcher and researched hierarchy. Female breadwinners are not marginalised but are given a voice on an issue that affect them, which is reducing gender induced discrimination. The research process is transformative and brings social justice, female breadwinners' views are considered on how gendered discrimination in the market places can be reduced.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

According to Chimirri (2015) research design practices shifted towards collaborating with beneficiaries of the research process and when constructivism is used knowledge is socially constructed and the participants are actively involved in the research process. The study uses Action research design which is a qualitative research methodology in which the participants actively participate in the research process (Breda, 2015), and it is collaborative, democratic and changes the situation of the participants (Aasgaard *et al.*, 2012). The research process is collaborative, cyclical and reflective and focuses on improving practices (Tshelane, 2013) and the participants improves by their participation. It further studies social issues that affect the participants and focuses changing the situation by affording an opportunity to those who are normally

marginalised to contribute towards mitigation construction (Lykes, 2011).

In order to ensure that the study is carried in an ethically responsible way, participants signed consent forms to confirm their voluntary participation. Participants were assured privacy, anonymity, confidentiality and the ability to withdraw freely from participation at any stage and given the option of choosing not to comment on particular issues. Pseudo names were used for all the participants as a way of hiding their identities but keep the research very realistic.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Living in a socio-economic crippled country as Zimbabwe and having to try and avoid contracting the deadly virus keeps Zimbabwean female breadwinners under too much pressure. Issues like malnutrition and absolute poverty are imminent beyond COVID-19. Closure of schools and day care centers has an impact on women, who will often be expected to take on additional care-giving responsibilities due to discriminatory gender norms, further restricting their work and economic opportunities. Cross border traders consist mainly of women breadwinners. These have told their sad side of the story on the impact of COVID-19. With borders closed stocks are running out and the money meant for restocking is now used to buy food stuffs that keep on running out.

This therefore becomes hard for women breadwinners like cross-border traders who have their businesses put on hold as their market places and borders are closed to pave way for the curb of COVID-19. Women cross border traders share the same sentiments with domestic workers who are less concerned about their children lack of schooling but their worst fear being failing to put food on the table (Gupta, 2020). In addition, women as breadwinners face the risks of contracting the deadly corona virus in the process of saving lives. Bali, (2020) states that women comprise 70% of health workers and these are midwives, nurses, pharmacists and community health workers on the frontlines. As mothers and wives, women breadwinners have challenges balancing professional and care-giving roles and tenderly taking care of the family needs. Wenham, et.al (2020) indicate that women and girls in many contexts may have to travel longer distances to collect food and water for household use, exposing them to increased risk of contracting COVID-19, as well as of gender-based violence. Thus, women as breadwinners have a mammoth task in trying to balance their households' needs and also keep their families safe from the spread of corona virus. Wenham, et.al, (2020) continues to note that not everyone can equally access preventive measures and as such, women breadwinners remain at risk of infections as they are left with no choice.

The study revealed that female breadwinners have been in their different business for a long period of time some having as many years as fifteen years. This shows the resilience of the women in business even if the operation field has not been in their favour they have managed to sail through in the gendered environment. Table 1 below shows the participants, their different businesses and the number of years they have been operating the business

Table 1: Nature and number of years in the business

Participant	Nature of Business	Period in Business (Years)
Molly	Flea Market	10yrs
Jackie	Hairdresser	7 yrs
Sekai	Tupperware marketer	5yrs
Bongie	Keeping Children	4yrs
Nyasha	Book keeper	8yrs
Pamela	Cross Boarder trader	11 yrs

Zandile	Vendor (Fruits and Vegetables)	15 years
Linet	Vendor (Fresh and Dried fish and kapenta)	9 years
Ruth	Owens and runs a (restaurant) kitchen	11 years

Sustenance from the Business operations

The participants revealed that their different business operations have benefitted them in various ways like enabling to educate their children up to college levels. Most of the participants as seen on table 2 are single mothers or have non-economic active husbands but have taken up the challenge to be breadwinners for their families. The business operations could be yielding higher outputs if the women are given equal opportunities as their male counter parts and if the business environment is gender responsive.

Table 2: The business sustenance of female breadwinners

Participant	Responses
Molly	I have lived on my flea market, I'm a single mother but have managed to take my 3 children to school up to university level.
Jackie	The business has met my needs and those of my family. My husband earns little money, with the proceeds from my business, life has been easy.
Sekai	The business has kept me well for the past 5years. I'm single and I'm looking after my parents well.
Bongie	The chicken business has been reliable to me for some time now. I have my regular clients.
Nyasha	I am surviving well with my children, they are all going to school without any problems.
Pamela	The business has kept my family running. My husband lost his work and I joined the business, it has met all our needs.
Zandile	My husband is a builder by contract. Jobs are few and scarce. I have managed to take care of my family since the birth of my first child till now. I have managed to put my 5 children through school, buy clothes and food without the help of my husband for the whole 15 years of our marriage.
Linet	I have been sourcing fish and kapenta from Binga since I finished school about 9 years ago. The proceeds from the sale are used to support my parents and siblings. I buy food, pay school fees and buy uniforms with this money.
Ruth	I am a single mother. I have 4 children. I have been fending and supporting my family via the sale of meals since I had my first child. I have managed to put one of my through university at the local state university.

Experienced gender-based barriers

The participants expressed a range of gender-based challenges that they have to battle with in their operations. They lamented that the market places are dominated by patriarchic practices that make it extremely difficult for them to operate gainful in their businesses. Molly was bitter about the treatment they get at the border posts stating that they at times are denied entry just because of their gender. The environment in the border posts are neither gender sensitive nor gender responsive. Pamela, Linet and Ruth also weighed heavily citing sexual harassment as a common thread that runs across in all the their businesses as unscrupulous males will want to use their positions to gain sexual favors over women. Getting operating spaces in the strategic locations in urban areas is made difficult as males who in most cases are in charge or the owners of business premises for unknown reasons prefer to have male clients. When it comes to paying for these services provided male clients delay or do not pay at all, taking advantage of us being

women. Table 3 below summarizes the gendered barriers raised by the participants that impede their success in the market places of Zimbabwe.

Table 3: Gendered barriers met by women on the market places

Participant	Responses
Molly	At times we are denied entrance at the border posts because we are women. The travelling and negotiations to pass with our luggages is a challenge to the females.
Jackie	It is difficult to get operating places in the good locations in the city. Land owners prefer to have male tenant's females.
Sekai	I deal mostly with women, so I have not experienced gender-based barriers.
Bongie	At times to get chicks you to be forceful and spend hours waiting, this tends to be tiring for women and the environment is not gender responsive.
Nyasha	Male clients at times take advantage of me being a woman and refuse to pay for the services provided.
Pamela	It's difficult, men in the border posts want to take advantage and ask for sexual favors to allow us to go through with our wares.
Zandile	Mostly gender based violence via harassment from husband who feels inferior because he cannot make enough money for the family's upkeep
Linet	Sexual harassment from transport operators and the fish mongers.
Ruth	Sexual harassment, verbal abuse, physical abuse, robbery.

Impacts of Covid -19 on the Business operations

When the national lockdown with its social distancing was announced and enforced in Zimbabwe it meant a lot of economic challenges to the women breadwinners. With the majority of women businesses based on cross border and long distance movements this meant that most of their business came to a halt. Flea markets rely heavily on goods ordered from south and of late Tanzania, so the closure of borders have seen a slow down on flea markets and those who were basing their economic survival on them had to close down or started looking for new business ventures. Such unplanned changes meant that for some time women breadwinners had to go for some time without income and this meant huge economic problems for the women breadwinners. Those that had few stocks remaining were not able to sell as they were under lockdown and consumers due to media preferred to buy from formal outlets that were said had precautionary measures against COVID-19. The hair saloons were completely closed down as the business operations does not have any social distancing measures. The few operations that remained operating although at a low scale were those that had something to do with food. Food being a basic daily need that cannot be postponed saw people taking risks to buy from the informal traders. The only challenge was keeping up with the demand as the main suppliers were far away or had also scaled down their operations due to the pandemic. The issue of borders also came in with closed borders the informal traders were forced to acquire their goods from the local market which in most cases expensive leaving the women bread winners with small profit margins. Ruth who supplies some restaurants with fish and chickens lamented over her loss of business as the restaurants were closed due to lockdown. All her ordered stock was a waste she could not find ready market for it. While these economic hardships due to covid-19 affected everyone. the impact was much felt by the women breadwinners who due to their roles had to make sure the family had food over the long periods of lockdown. Men could find ways of making business trips in and outside the borders but for women it was very difficult. Table 4 below gives a picture on how the pandemic impacted the women breadwinners.

Table 4: Covid-19 impacts on women breadwinners.

Participant	Responses
Molly	With lockdown, flea markets couldn't operate I had no other alternative, people were discouraging from buying from us preferring established outlets.
Jackie	With lockdown and social distancing we could not operate our business as clients were scared to be touched as a result we lost a lot during this period.
Sekai	Business was at a standstill, our products come from south Africa and with the closure of the borders. The little that we had stored could not be sold because of lockdown.
Bongie	Business greatly went down as all other operations were down, we had no books to balance.
Nyasha	Business slowed down a bit, but because food is always a top priority because were buying chickens. I managed to make ends meet though.
Pamela	With borders closed we couldn't operate at all .We now trying to source items locally.
Zandile	We were banned from selling at the shops; we were banned from selling on shop verandas and we were moved to a new designated market which is a bit far from the customers.
Linnet	Travel restriction meant I couldn't travel to Binga to resource the fish and kapenta; requested the haulage truck drivers en route to bring me the fish and kapenta but there would be issues which meant I could never get my order on time and in the correct quantities; police at roadblocks were confiscating the fish and demanding very high fines.
Ruth	The restaurant (kitchen) was closed down and I went through a very difficult time trying to fend for my children who were all at home since schools had closed down; I resorted to illegal gold panning in Gwayi area.

Measures to reduce gender-based barriers in the market places

While the Zimbabwean government has taken a lead in the crafting of Gender policies in Africa, it however been reluctant in ensuring the implementation of the same. Women are still not operating on a level field with their male counterparts. The gender affirmative policy has done little to change the business ownership in Zimbabweans women are still on the periphery of all key businesses leaving them vulnerable to abuse by male business people. The appointments of women in influential positions is still a farfetched dream this hinders the protection of women as all influential offices are occupied by men, women have no safe offices to air their grievances. Participants called upon the government relevant offices to make changes in the operations of businesses so the women breadwinners can also survive the competition. Participants also called upon the government to seriously considered helping the women breadwinners with pandemic allowances so that they can at least have a decent living during pandemic times. Operations like hair salons and flea markets should be incapacitated to protect themselves and their clients from the pandemic rather than simply closing them down. Men who are found taking advantage of the women breadwinners should be given prohibitive punishments so that this does not keep on recurring. Table 5 below shows some of the measures that the women breadwinners suggested as ways of curbing the gender based barriers in the market place.

Table 5: Suggested measures to assist women breadwinners during pandemics.

Participant	Responses
Molly	Flea markets to be treated like formal outlets, also to be treated like essential services because people need the flea market products as well. Covid 19 allowances to be extended to the flea marketers.

Jackie	Protective innovations should be designed to protective us in our field rather than closing our operations, our business matters also.
Sekai	Government to be sensitive to small business. If they can't protect us and our clients they should at least give us living allowances.
Bongie	Food will always be a very essential product, we should be allowed to operate and regulations that are gender responsive should be put in place to protect women.
Nyasha	Everyone should be protected by gender policies, women need to be protected from irresponsible men. Men to be socialized to be respect women.
Pamela	More women to be employed at border posts. Border crossing to be made easier. Gender offices to be opened in border posts to handle gender based complaints.
Zandile	Reporting the husband to the police leading to arrest; Counseling of the husband by relevant authorities; the husband should brand and market his skill so that he gets more construction contracts.
Linet	Men to be socialized to respect women.
Ruth	Restaurant (kitchen) business should be treated like an essential service instead of just closing them down.

CONCLUSION

Although termed the weaker sex, women have emerged as the backbone of every society. The COVID-19 environment has posed as a great challenge to female breadwinners to a greater extent. They have been subjected to harsh conditions as compared to men in this COVID-19 environment. Women as breadwinners are trying very hard to fight the novel virus at the same time see it to that their families are well taken care of. The voices, expertise and experience of women have to be fully incorporated into global health security surveillance, detection, and prevention mechanisms.

Covid-19 has demonstrated that while the country has good gender policies in place much more has still to be done in the implantation of these policies so that the women in general and women breadwinners in particular are protected so that they have a chance to develop themselves in the economic spaces available in the country. It's also time that the whole society is socialized to accept and respect women. The old patriarchal practices should be shunned by all in all sectors especially in the market places. In preparation for future pandemics the government should have disaster funds set aside so that it can always assist its citizens when such phenomenon occurs.

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