



COVID-19 AND URBAN LIVELIHOOD VULNERABILITY: THE CASE OF STREET VENDING WOMEN IN EAST LONDON, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Street vending is a livelihood strategy for many poor women in Africa. The rapid spread of COVID-19 in South Africa resulted in a hard lockdown restricting the operation of non-essential services including street trade. This study ascertains the impacts of the hard lockdown on the livelihoods of female street traders in East London, South Africa. Convenience and snowball sampling were utilised to select twenty respondents for in-depth interviews. The key findings of the study are that the loss of financial capital, increased unpaid workload and lack of economic relief for the informal sector have threatened the livelihoods of poor women. There is a need for a multi-sectoral approach to strengthen livelihoods and the implementation of more pro-poor policies.

1. Introduction

The increase of urban populations accompanied by high unemployment rates in African cities presents livelihood challenges for the poor. The informal sector has emerged as a place of refuge for many unemployed Africans as it accounts for about 85.8 per cent of employment in the continent (International Labour Organization, 2018). This has resulted in the sector being viewed as a shock absorber since it is responsible for the provision of livelihoods for the bulk of the poor and unskilled population (OECD, 2009; ILO, 2020). There are complexities in defining the informal sector. Prominent characterisation of the informal sector involves businesses/firms that are unregistered, lack of social safety nets, no employment contracts, small scale operations, no labour benefits (pensions, maternity and sick leave), self-employment among others (ILO, 2002; OECD, 2009; ILO, 2020). The informal sector often absorbs people who fail to be employed in the formal sector for several reasons be it lack of job opportunities or skills or a combination of both. Studies have shown that the informal economy contributes immensely to the larger economy especially in developing countries (Ligthelm, 2004; OECD, 2009; Benjamin and Mbaye, 2014). This has prompted debates on whether the sector is “informal” or it simply operates “informally”.

Women are over represented in the informal sector worldwide, in developing countries they account for about 92 per cent of informal workers (Bonnet et al, 2019; Chen, 2001; Kinyanjui, 2014). In South Africa, there has been an increase of street trading activities in the post-apartheid era; attributed to migration from rural areas and other Africa countries, socio-economic challenges and the tolerant approach of the South African government to the informal economy (Skinner, 2008; Masongonyane, 2010; Mokgatetswa, 2014). Street vending is an important livelihood strategy for the urban poor, especially women who are disproportionately affected by poverty and often lack skills to work in the formal economy.

COVID-19 is a threat to the livelihoods of street vending women. The rapid spread of the pandemic led to the lockdown of social and economic activities as an attempt to contain it (Khambule, 2020). This meant that street vending activities were suspended in level five of South Africa’s lockdown. In every sphere, from health to the economy, the impacts of COVID-19 are aggravated for women and girls by virtue of their sex (UN, 2020). There is a correlation between being a woman, working in the informal sector and poverty (Chen, 2001), implying that street vending women are likely to fare even worse from the effects of the pandemic. Street vendors like other informal workers, lack social protection available to formal workers such as worker benefits or health insurance; shocks to their livelihood strategies have serious implications for their households. This paper examines how COVID 19 has increased the vulnerability of the livelihoods of street vending women during the hard lockdown in South Africa. The central question which the paper sought to answer is ‘What are the effects of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of street vending women in South Africa?’ The question is tackled through a synopsis of literature on street vending and its contribution to women’s livelihoods. A qualitative research approach is used to enable an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of street vendors. The results of the study are discussed before the conclusions and recommendations section.

2. A synopsis of street vending and its contribution to women’s livelihoods

Street vending is a livelihood strategy for many poor urban women; like other livelihood strategies in the informal sector, it is a readily available avenue of employment (Kinyanjui, 2014; Abebrese and Schachtebeck, 2017). Street vending accommodates women who lack the education and skills required to gain entry in the formal sector to be able to earn a living. The increase of rural to urban migration together with the contraction of the formal sector makes street vending to be the most attractive means of survival for the urban poor (Chirisa and Muchini, 2011; Adhikari, 2012; Njaya; 2015). Findings from previous studies reveal that almost three-quarters of street traders are their household’s main breadwinners with approximately one-third of street trader households having no other earners (Motala, 2002). In Lesotho, women in the informal sector including street trading; are using their income to buy food and clothes, pay rent and school fees (Chingono, 2016). This makes street vending a survivalist low income livelihood strategy which contributes positively to people without any existing source of financial capital.

Street vending enables women to contribute to food access and availability for their households and these are important pillars of food security. The accessibility and affordability of goods sold by street vendors allows women to put food on tables for their families (Amankwaa, 2015; Chingono, 2016; Roever, 2016). While there is dearth of empirical studies on the contribution of street vending to the food security of street vendors and their households; studies in South Africa indicate that an increase in household income correlates with food security (Shisanya & Hendriks, 2011; Hendriks, 2014). Improved food and nutrition security have a positive impact on the health and well-being of individuals; contributing significantly to human capital. Healthy street vendors are able to continue with their trading activities or diversify their livelihood strategies.

Social capital can be improved through the practice of street vending. Social capital is '...central to a functioning, sustainable local economy' (Curtis, 2003:87). Social capital is defined as '...features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination for mutual benefit. It also enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital' (Putnam, 1993: 35). In Harare, Zimbabwe; street vendors utilised their links with formal shop owners for more effective trading (Njaya, 2015). Formal shop owners worked as suppliers who offered discounts or favourable deals and some availed their shops for the storage of their wares. Social capital amongst street vendors themselves improved their financial capital through participating in Rotating Savings Clubs while political capital improved through membership in street vending organisations (Njaya, 2015; Motala, 20002). Street vending organisations offer training on business management and advocate or negotiate the trading space for street vendors to protect them from unnecessary evictions.

Street trading offers women the ability to influence decision making in their households as a result of financial autonomy. Economic dependence on men which usually subjects women to endure abuse is significantly reduced when women achieve economic independence as economic instability is a link which binds a woman to her abuser (Abramsky et al, 2019; Conner, 2014; Akilova & Marti, 2014). In Lesotho, empirical evidence indicates that 88 per cent of female informal traders made sole decisions on their incomes (Chingono, 2016). This demonstrates a shift from traditional dependence on male income typical in some patriarchal societies. Increased financial capital in this regard is instrumental in establishing a leverage on social and political capital which is made possible through participating in street vending as a livelihood strategy.

3. Covid-19 and threats to women's livelihoods

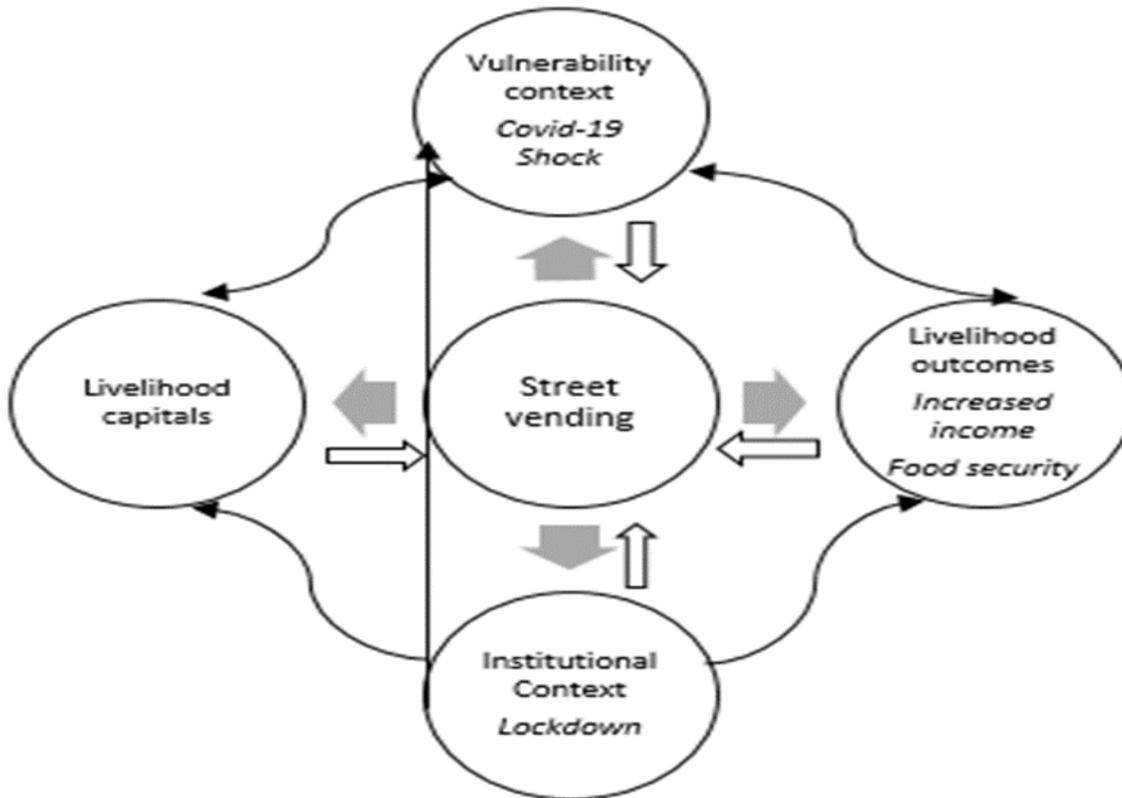
COVID- 19 is a shock which has increased the vulnerability context of urban livelihoods. The spread of the disease in South Africa led to the President announcing a national lockdown effective from midnight on the 26th of March 2020. The lockdown was meant to limit the spread of Covid-19 and also give the country time to develop sound response strategies. During this period, schools were suspended, travelling was restricted, government events were cancelled, public gatherings were limited to 50 people and all ports of entry were closed, only essential workers and services were exempted (Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) (2020). As the COVID-19 cases continued to spread, the lockdown was extended with further two weeks. This meant that all people were to stay at home except essential services workers, which include those in food supply. However, besides food being considered as an essential service, street vendors selling food were prohibited from operating (Wegerif, 2020; Khambule, 2020). Street vending like other informal sector-based livelihood strategies lacks social protection and lockdown related restrictions resulted in a loss of income for traders. Evidence from the Ebola outbreak in West Africa showed that the "...lack of social protection measures in the context of health epidemics aggravates poverty, unemployment and informality, leading to a vicious circle of even greater fragility" (ILO, 2020: 15). As evident from previous health shocks women risk bearing the socio-economic brunt of COVID 19 (Zarrilli, 2020; Burki, 2020). Curbing the virus through quarantine affects women's livelihood strategies. The Ebola virus related quarantines significantly reduced women's economic livelihood activities resulting in increased poverty rates and food insecurity (UN, 2020). Men's economic activities managed to return to pre-crisis levels but the impacts on women's livelihoods lasted longer and this can be expected in the case of COVID-19. Emerging evidence on the impact of COVID-19 already suggests that women's economic and productive lives will be disproportionately affected (UN, 2020).

Figure 1 attempts to unpack how COVID- 19 has affected the livelihoods of street vending women. Street vending as a livelihood strategy is dependent on the institutional context (institutions, organisations, policies and legislation); in this case level five of lockdown restrictions increased the vulnerability context of street traders. Civil society organisations pushed for changes of the level five or hard lockdown restrictions which prohibited the operation of street vendors with an amendment to the regulations on the 2nd of April 2020 Government Notices No. R.419 of 2 April 2020 (COGTA, 2020). Informal food traders were allowed to operate with written permission from municipalities. This presented challenges with some street traders being refused permits or having their wares confiscated by law enforcers even if they had permits (Wegerif, 2020). The government of South Africa has been criticised for side lining the informal sector in the COVID-19 relief packages (Khambule, 2020). The institutional context in this regard, contributed to a decline in the livelihood capitals and livelihood outcomes like food security by restricting the operation of street trade.

COVID 19 is a shock which has increased the vulnerability contexts of street trading women. A shock in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework refers to sudden pressures on livelihoods which affect the accumulation of livelihood capitals (DFID, 2000). The vulnerability context is difficult to alter as it is usually beyond the control of the poor. Government policies can however reduce or increase the vulnerability of the poor through the implementation of anti or pro-poor policies. Street trading impacts on the accumulation of social, human, financial and political capitals. These in turn can influence the continuity of street vending as a livelihood strategy. The

most affected livelihood capital in this instance was financial capital which is the most versatile capital that can be used to accumulate other capitals or achieve livelihood outcomes such as food security. The livelihood capitals available at one's disposal can reduce their vulnerability to the COVID-19 shock for example some women could depend on incomes from friends and relatives or Rotating Savings clubs during the hard lock down period. Civic organisations pushed for changes which resulted in an amendment to the lockdown restrictions, this explains the two-way relationship between street vending and the institutional context. The focus of this paper is therefore on how COVID 19 as a livelihood shock increased the vulnerability context of street trading women being further exacerbated by the prohibition of street vending in the initial stages of lockdown.

Figure 1: The relationship between street vending and livelihoods



Source: Authors (adapted from the DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, 2000).

4. Study area

East London city is in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, it was formally known as Port Rex then re-named East London in honor of the Great Britain capital city. In isiXhosa the city is called eMonti and Oos-Londen in Afrikaans. The city is located in the Southeast coast (see Figure 2) and falls under the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCM) and has a population size of about 267,000 (Statistics South Africa, 2011). It is dominated by Xhosa speaking citizens followed by English, Afrikaans, 61.8%, 21.2 % and 13.3% respectively, other languages constitute 3.8 % (ibid). East London is the second industrial city in the province after Port Elizabeth. The province recorded the highest unemployment rate in the country of 40.5 % and it is amongst the five provinces in the country that recorded unemployment rates above the national level of 30.1% in 2019 (Eastern Cape Socio Economic Consultative Council, 2020). The continuous rise of unemployment levels in the province has resulted in most residents resorting to the informal sector mainly street vending as a source of livelihood.

Figure 2: Map of East London



Source: eastlondon.org.za

5. Research methods

This study employed a qualitative approach. The East London Central Business District (CBD) was used as a case study. The study focused on women trading in the streets of the CBD. Convenience and snowballing sampling were used to select the target population. The street vendors who were more accessible or close at hand were conveniently selected to be participants in the study. Street vendors who observed COVID-19 regulations such as social distancing of 1,5metres apart, proper wearing of masks and in possession of sanitizers participated in this study. The researchers explained the purpose of the study and the nature of data collection (telephonic interviews) to the selected participants and a total of 10 street vendors shared their telephone numbers and were interviewed at their convenience. Snowball sampling was necessitated by the challenges of lack of social distancing and noise pollution in some parts of the city. Snowballing was useful in gathering telephone numbers of other street traders who were in extremely crowded places where social distancing was difficult to be observed. From the 10 street vendors who were selected, each vendor provided a telephone number of another CBD trader and permission to share the numbers was granted by their colleagues as they also wanted to participate in the study without breaking the COVID-19 regulations. Consequently, a total of 20 interviews were conducted. Through telephonic interviews respondents stipulated the time for interview calls and their trading operations were not interrupted.

Participants were given a brief explanation of the study prior to interviews being conducted; this was useful as it made them understand what the study was about. The researchers also explained that their involvement in the study was voluntary and they were allowed to withdraw from the interview whenever they deemed necessary. Participants were also allowed not to answer questions they regarded as sensitive. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to the participants and their phone numbers were deleted after data analysis was completed. In this study data was analysed using thematic analysis. All interviews conducted were transcribed and coded, this allowed the researchers to capture emerging issues from the participants. In instances of use of direct quotations, pseudo names were used so as to protect the identity of the respondents.

6. Findings and discussions

The results of the study are presented based on prominent themes that emerged after data collection and transcription. The women interviewed specialised in goods such as fruits, vegetables, cooked meals, soft drinks,

water, beef, tripe, cigarettes, traditional wear, sweets, cigarettes and snacks. These women sold more than three types of the mentioned goods and the main reason being the need to lure customers at all cost, since customers prefer buying all they need from one person compared to moving from one vendor to another.

6.1 Demographic information

Women between the age group of 26 and 35 constituted 35%, followed by 36 to 45 (30%), above 45 (25%) and lastly those below 25 (10%). Marital status wise, the bulk of the respondents were single (55%), followed by 20% who were married, 15% were widowed and 10% were divorced. To fully comprehend the challenges that COVID-19 posed to the livelihoods of women street traders, obtaining the number of dependants in their households and income range was significant. About 40% of the respondents had between 7 to 9 dependants, followed by 30% who had more than 9 dependants. Twenty percent of the participants had between 4 to 7 dependants and only 10% had 1 to 3 dependants. An individual's income has a bearing on one's ability to cope and respond to shocks. A large proportion of respondents (35%), had a monthly income range of between R1100 and R2000 from May to August 2020, followed by those generating below R1000 (30%). Those earning between R2100 and R3000 were 20% and only 15% earned more than R3000. These statistics pose a lot of questions on the sustainability of the livelihoods of women street traders especially during a COVID-19 crisis period where their daily trading was affected by lockdown regulations.

6.2 Loss of financial capital: Implications of public health measures on income

The emergency lockdown resulted in most traders losing their stock and participants in this study stated that most of their goods went bad before they could sell or eat leading to a massive loss of financial capital especially for those who had just restocked perishable goods. Some stated that they were forced to break lockdown regulations and sell their goods door to door. One such respondent stated that;

You know tomatoes and fruits do not last long, I had to move from house to house in my neighbourhood selling them. In as much as I knew it was not allowed, I had no choice because I was going to lose a lot of money if I decided to follow the regulations and watch my products go bad. (MakaLumka, 2020). Another one also said,

When the lockdown started, I had just restocked tomatoes, cabbages, potatoes, bananas and apples. After the announcement that we cannot sell our products, I knew I had to come up with a plan, because I had used most of my money for restocking. The following morning, I went to the street side and set up my stand while my children also went door to door selling. I knew, I was putting my life at risk and that of my children but it had to be done, I gave all my trust to God. All I wanted was to at least have most of the products sold so that I will be able to sustain my family until I was back in business. (Noluthando, 2020).

COVID-19 has resulted in immense economic shocks which have exacerbated loss of income amongst informal traders whose business was not considered as essential during the full/hard lockdown period (FAO, 2020). Projections have shown that regions such as Sub Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and South America whose population highly depend on informal trading are expected to sink into extreme poverty as COVID-19 continues to spread; women are at a high risk of income and job loss due to their high representation in the affected sectors (ILO, 2020, UN Women, 2020). The street traders interviewed highlighted that the full lockdown affected their incomes tremendously. The lack of business insurance by street traders meant no recovery of stock lost and this had negative consequences on their livelihoods and those who depend on them. Business resumption became a huge challenge for most women due to lack of capital and remittances. Some of the respondents highlighted the following;

My husband got laid off in April, the little money we had was used at his brother's funeral and the remainder was used for basic needs. I had to venture into domestic work in order for me to raise money to resume my business. (MaMzo, 2020).

This lockdown has affected me a lot, now my children who were working in Gauteng lost their jobs and came back home, this means that I have more people to feed, the situation is even worse now because the business is very slow. (Makhulu, 2020).

The study found that the situation was better for respondents who had other sources of income such as social grants and those who had family members who received Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) payments. These were ready to resume business as soon as the regulations were relaxed. After the 3rd of April 2020 the street vendors who had capital were able to go and apply for permits to resume trading.

6.3 Lack of savings and health challenges for women

The study established that most respondents had no savings and the 21 days' lockdown left them in survival

uncertainty. Most respondents survive on a hand to mouth basis. When the business is slow household food availability is also affected and in this case, it became worse because there was no business at all. One of the respondents stated that:

My life during lockdown was very terrible, I didn't have enough food to feed my children, the little money I had was used up within two weeks. You know my business is small, I survive on my daily profit, and I am not yet at that stage of having savings. During hard lockdown, we only had two meals a day, cereal and an evening meal and I could see that my children were struggling to adjust. (Noluthando, 2020).

Studies have shown that lack of savings and secure employment contracts amongst informal traders has led to unemployment and loss of business for vulnerable groups such as women and youth who constitute the bulk of the population in this sector (FAO, 2020; WIEGO, 2020). The respondents were not able to keep savings as; i) profits made are used to pay funeral policies and other accounts, ii) build homes in rural areas, iii) expand their business for more profit and iv) for groceries, rent, food and other social clubs. It was noted that for business to grow and make a lot of profit, informal traders should have more stock and this makes it difficult for them to save money because the focus is mainly on growing the business for the prospect of more profit. Others noted that once they receive a lot of profit, the money is used to build or renovate their homes. One of the women stated that:

I do not save any money for longer periods; I prefer buying more stock and get more profit than to save the money. You see we sell most of our goods for R1, R2, R5 and it's only a few that cost more than R5. This makes it difficult for me to save a lot of money that I can say this will be used in times of crisis. Most of the money I make here I use it to buy essentials and that's it... but when my business expands, I will surely be able to save and COVID-19 has just taught me a good lesson when it comes to the usefulness of savings. (Siphokazi, 2020).

Consequently, most of the women were unable to resume their business when the lockdown regulations were eased due to lack of capital. For those who managed to resume, business was no longer the same and they were still adapting to trading in the new normal and the need to have sanitisers every time is straining their already affected incomes. Thus, without government support the gains that most street traders had made will be reversed dramatically. Other than lack of savings there is also a trade-off that exists between the health of street traders and their income which is the backbone of their survival. Financial survival takes precedence over health especially for households who mainly depend on income derived from street trading. Respondents stated that as women they have always performed their duties regardless of their sicknesses, thus being told they are at a high risk of infection if they have comorbidities never deterred them from doing their daily business as they had already lost their incomes. This demonstrates how women are determined to feed their families even when it means putting their lives at risk. Street vending is usually a survivalist livelihood strategy for many poor women (Motala, 2002; Lindell, 2010; Sassen et al, 2018; Arias, 2019); it is difficult for them to save because there will be no extra income left.

The nature of informal trading makes the sector vulnerable to a myriad of health challenges as the world grapples with COVID-19. COVID-19 has also increased the health challenges that most women face as health treatment and services prioritised COVID-19 patients. This shows how women face intersected inequalities in society and in times of pandemics these are multiplied and failure to obtain critical health services by women may result in long term implications. The participants cited that the full lockdown affected them not only economically but also health wise as it became a challenge for them to go for medical check-ups. As stated by one of the respondents:

I have a female related health issue and I need to go for check-ups now and again and this lockdown affected all that. In as much as I couldn't sell my goods, I still couldn't go visit the clinic. During lockdown I had no income and my health challenge became intense as well. (Mamzo, 2020).

Some respondents also highlighted that after the regulations were eased their main focus was on getting back to business more than catering for their health needs. These sentiments clearly show how they were enormously affected by the spread of COVID-19 in all the spheres of their lives. Street traders depend on public spaces and social interactions and these places make social distancing quasi impossible hence, the sector was considered to be a high risk for COVID-19 transmissions (Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2020). The heavy reliance of the sector on face to face interaction with customers and lack of proper sanitation facilities in their trading spaces makes them vulnerable and this puts them at high risk of contracting the virus (WHO, 2020; WIEGO, 2020). The restrictive norms and gender stereotypes also limit women's ability to access their health

needs, thus COVID-19 and its complexities amplified this crisis. The need to contain the spread of COVID-19 resulted in governments diverting both the attention and resources away from other sectors; this increased the burden for women who had to deal with COVID-19 and other female related health needs (WHO, 2020).

6.4 Engendered Hardships: Increased unpaid work for women

The demand for unpaid work increased exponentially due to COVID-19. The closure of schools and non-essential businesses meant more people in the household on a daily basis and the demand for household duties fell disproportionately on women. One woman highlighted that,

Before lockdown I performed less work because my children went to school and other family members also went to work... Having everyone at home during lockdown meant more work in terms of cleaning, cooking and daily care for younger children. It was a very difficult period for me. (MakaLumka, 2020).

Another respondent also stated that,

I used to afford a helper before lockdown and this allowed me to focus more on my business, however, when my income was affected, I had to let go of the helper, hence all the duties she used to perform were now my responsibility. (Makhulu, 2020).

There are great care demands for women at home and the closure of their businesses (street trading) reversed the few gains that women had made for their livelihood outcomes. Increased unpaid work resulted in reduced trading hours as it became difficult for traders to be at their trading stands early in the morning and late in the evening since household duties needed to be taken care of. The situation was better for those who had older children who could perform some duties and those with family members who were part of essential business as they could afford to pay a helper. Most (70%) of the respondents resumed their trading after June, this was due to massive loss of income, lack of financial support for restocking and the demand for care for COVID-19 patients and other family members with chronic illnesses. Some of the respondents highlighted the following;

I resumed my business in June, life was difficult at home, my mother in law was discharged from hospital after her COVID-19 symptoms were mild so as to open space for other critical patients. I had to ensure that all her needs are met and also protect other family members from contracting the virus, this meant that I could not resume business until she fully recovers. (MakaNono, 2020)

I took care of two of my family members who were diagnosed with the virus when they got discharged, I couldn't come to work until their recovery because I was going to be labelled a heartless individual. To make matters worse after their recovery, none of them even gave me money to boost my business... being a woman is a total curse and family members do not care about your wellbeing. (Thandokazi, 2020).

WIEGO (2020) postulates that women in all sectors are finding it more difficult to work due to childcare responsibilities as schools and day-care centres are closed. The retrenchment of most workers resulted in urban migrants returning to their areas of origin and this resulted in increased number of people to feed.

2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action which was meant to be the apex of gender equality. The spread of COVID-19 and its effects has reversed the strides that had already been made. It is evident that the pandemic is continuously exacerbating inequalities and vulnerabilities in economic, social and political systems; women are at the epicentre of vulnerability (UN, 2020). Globally, before COVID-19 became a universal pandemic; women were already doing at least two and a half times more unpaid work as men (UN Women, 2020). Women's lives have transformed and the lockdown and its regulations amplified pre-existing inequalities between women and men and the situation becomes triple for women street traders who survive on daily incomes. Francis et al (2020) argue that in South Africa there are discrepancies in the wages of women and men indicating challenges that women face in the labour market.

6.5 Lack of economic relief and limited capacity to adapt to shocks

COVID-19 and its intricacies has exposed the vulnerability of street traders. Unlike their formally employed counterparts there was no relief specifically for their business. In South Africa the government implemented emergency measures which included tax relief, provision of disaster relief funds, small and medium enterprises support (SMEs) and the unemployment insurance fund (UIF). There were plans for the development of a safety net to support informal traders and up to date nothing has come into fruition (Khambule, 2020). Participants in this study raised numerous concerns about how the government neglected them in the economic relief process. Some respondents raised the following concerns;

This government does not care about us; we are just useless people to them. I really don't understand what they think we ate, actually how we survived during the lockdown level 5. The child grant I receive is close to nothing when it comes to buying the basic needs. (Sibabalo, 2020).

You know it's like we not citizens of this country, I didn't even hear any mention of us by the President, it's like we do not exist to them. It's not like we need billions of Rands, they can even give us loans we don't mind. We are hard workers this is why we even choose to operate in these streets, all we want is to have better lives and not stress anyone. (Aphiwe, 2020).

The lack of support directed to informal traders meant that millions of citizens who derive their livelihoods from the sector were adversely affected. In all government relief interventions, the informal sector has been excluded and this deepened the crisis for individuals who derive their livelihoods from the sector.

7. Conclusion

COVID- 19 has increased the vulnerability of female street traders in East-London South Africa. Street vendors lost their incomes during the hard lock down and that has implications on their food security and household well-being. This has been aggravated by the lack of economic relief packages for the informal sector. The workload of unpaid work increased and that constrained the economic productivity of street trading women. Evidence has shown that women and girls are always at a disadvantage in times of crisis and COVID-19 has exposed these inequalities and at the same time exacerbated them. This calls for countries, governments and organisations to place women and girls at the epicentre of recovery plans in order to limit the challenges women face. The inclusion and presentation of women and girls in both international and national recovery plans is crucial in the creation of a resilient world and impactful recovery policies (UN, 2020).

The COVID-19 engendered hardships call for long term recovery strategies that are gender responsive, that will address men and women disparities, correct existing biases and inequalities and promote women in the informal economy. Benefits such as paid sick and maternity leave and pensions among others must stretch from formally employed women to those in the informal economy (UN, 2020). Immediate steps are needed to ensure that COVID-19 does not reverse the gender equality progress achieved in recent decades, in particular with regard to women's participation in the labour force.

As the World Health Organisation Chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has stated (DNA, 2020), COVID- 19 is not the last pandemic; Governments should begin work to prepare for the next health crisis of such magnitude. Social protection should be strengthened for the poor so that they can easily recover from economic shocks. There is a need for collective responses from stakeholders such as NGOs and local governments to strengthen the livelihood capitals of women so as to reduce their vulnerability. Micro-financing their projects can greatly improve their livelihood outcomes.

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