



Note

Impacts of Covid-19 on Women in the Global Trade Market

Analysing Gender Implications in Developing and Least Developed Countries

By Jean Kanana Mbogori

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected women and men differently, additionally, it has made pre-existing gender inequalities worse. The economic and social impacts of the pandemic have rolled back the strides made in respect of women's participation in the labour force in the past decades, especially in developing countries. Continuous social and economic lockdowns, barriers to trade, increased tariffs and loss of jobs have had a profound impact on women's participation in trade. This note outlines the impact of Covid-19 on trade, the reaction of developing countries towards these impacts and the gender sensitive measures that have been put in place in various developing and least developed countries.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented disruption to the global economy and international trade, the impact of which has affected men and women differently, therefore the responses and analytics that are represented should not deny that women are at more of an economic disadvantage than men.¹

Women face bigger disadvantages due to their vulnerable status in communities, especially in developing and least developed countries (LDC's). This is attributed to a number of reasons that include: their job role - as the participation of women in the labour market is often in the form of temporary employment hence increasing the risk of losing jobs due to trade disruptions. For instance, women compose a large number of the workforce in manufacturing, hospitality and tourism sectors, all of which have suffered large economic drops due to measures taken as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic.² According to statistics from the International Labour Organisation, women across the world represent less than 40% of total employment but makeup 57% of those working on a part-time basis.³

Secondly, due to the unreliable nature of the kind of jobs women participate in, they're more often denied or don't have access to safety nets such as employee benefits or health insurance.⁴ Additionally, they face limited access to credit or finance options due to gender discrimination, which means female entrepreneurs are sometimes faced with no other option but to close their businesses due to lack of finance. Moreover, some women may be forced to take difficult decisions to leave the labour market or opt for part-time jobs in order to take care of their families. Thus, juggling between caring for family members and paid work becomes untenable. It has been observed that 1 out of 4 women are

leaving the workforce to take care of families".⁵

In addition to the factors mentioned, gender gaps in education, information technology (IT) skills, income, access to finance, and childcare responsibilities put women in developing countries and LDC's at an increased disadvantage during the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening the point that there needs to be a more gender-sensitive trade market climate.⁶

It is clear to see that the effects of the pandemic are not gender blind and that there's a disadvantage when it comes to the effects it has had on women in trade. This note will aim to highlight the trade-related issues that the pandemic has brought to light for women in developing and least developed countries. The fast-paced downfall of global trade due to the pandemic has forced countries to look for remedial efforts on how to respond to the issue. This note highlights some of the gender impacts the pandemic has had in developing countries and LDCs as well as the remedial measures needed to mitigate them.

Impact of Covid -19 on Women and Trade

The World Trade Organization (WTO) reports that women are more likely to be negatively affected by COVID-19 related trade disruptions than men, particularly in the LDCs and developing countries.⁷ This is due to the fact that women constitute a larger share of employees in the sectors that have been most affected by repercussions of the Covid 19 pandemic.⁸ Manufacturing sectors such as apparel, footwear textiles and communication products which experienced large falls in export growth during the initial months of the pandemic, mostly have a workforce that is predominantly

¹ UNCTAD, COVID-19 requires gender-equal responses to save economies, 2020

² WTO, 2020

³ ILO 2020

⁴ Ibid n1

⁵ Pamela Cook-Hamilton, Plenary - Trade and Conference

⁶ Ibid n2

⁷ WTO, 2020

⁸ Ibid

made up of women.

In Bangladesh women represent 80 per cent of the workforce in ready-made garment production, the garment production industry orders declined by 45.8 per cent over the first quarter of 2020, and by 81 per cent in April alone.⁹ It is estimated that about £2.4bn worth of suspended or cancelled orders of overseas garment brands has resulted in a wave of job losses within the country.¹⁰ Although the government of Bangladesh has set out a package to assist the industry, experts warn that “1.8 million workers are likely to permanently lose their jobs”.¹¹ Activists say that manufacturers are using the crisis as an excuse to pluck “undesirables” who are in most cases pregnant women who have to provide for their families.¹²

Another sector which has been negatively impacted by the pandemic is the tourism and hospitality industry. The decline of the tourism industry due to the pandemic has been evident on small island developing states (SIDS). Tourism internationally has come to a stop, The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reported that “during the first quarter of 2020, \$80 billion was lost in export revenues from tourism and there were about 67 million fewer arrivals as compared to the same period in 2019”.¹³

Women make up most of the workforce in the tourism industry globally, though they tend to be clustered in low-skilled jobs. More than half of those employed in the accommodation and food services sectors are all women, for SIDS who heavily rely on tourism as a lifeline, the pandemic has made its mark on the economy.¹⁴ Given the highly female-intensive nature of employment in

the industry, especially in low-skilled activities, women are likely to be hit the most by job losses in SIDS.¹⁵

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women working in the tourism industry in SIDS is disproportionate but so is the emerging policy response, which lacks an explicit gender component. In regards to what can be done to protect women in the tourism sector from the economic and social fallout of the pandemic, there are several strategies and immediate policy steps that the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) recommends for the SIDS, which could help mitigate the negative factors of the coronavirus pandemic on women in the tourism sector.¹⁶ These include:

- More gender-inclusive workers and employee’s policy, to prevent job losses for both men and women, such policies may include programmes that are set up for job retention through wage subsidies. Additionally, income support schemes that cover both formal and informal sectors where women are represented should be widened.¹⁷
- There is also an immediate need to prevent closures and bankruptcies of tourism enterprises through monetary and fiscal policy measures. This may include “measures to ease the liquidity constraints of enterprises through sectoral funds, social security and fiscal payment exemptions or deferrals, fast and subsidized loans, relaxation of regulations and taxes on travel and tourism activities”.¹⁸This can be in the form of the

⁹Politzer.M., The Guardian, 2020

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Politzer.M., The Guardian, 2020, Akter. founder and executive director of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers’ Solidarity.

¹³ UNWTO, IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK ON INTERNATIONAL Tourism 2020

¹⁴ UNCTAD, COVID-19 puts women working in SIDS tourism industry at risk 13 May 2020, available at :

<https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2370>

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ UNWTO (2020). Supporting Jobs and Economies through Travel and Tourism: A Call for Action to Mitigate the Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 and Accelerate Recovery, Madrid.

government creating special credit lines for women tourism entrepreneurs, in SIDS.

- Adopting strategies to enhance linkages between the tourism sector and local infrastructure can alleviate the impacts of the pandemic. This can be done by, introducing new products and skills to make the overall economy more resilient whilst simultaneously incorporating women and putting them on the forefront of this change.
- Enhancing the competence, education and training of workers and employers alike is also a recommended strategy. Through skill development programmes entrepreneurs and workers alike will be able to diversify and to upgrade their activities.¹⁹

Many SIDS have introduced, or at least expressed the intention of introducing, monetary/macro-financial measures to fight the negative economic impacts of the pandemic.²⁰ Measures that are more centralised around tourism have also been introduced by some SIDS, for instance, loan and tourism guarantees for the transport and tourism sectors in Cape Verde.²¹ Similarly, Trinidad & Tobago made available grants to hoteliers to upgrade their facilities, as of 7 May 2020.²² Nevertheless, none of the current strategies explicitly tackle the impacts of the pandemic on tourism whilst simultaneously being responsive to the specific difficulties that women experience.

The Covid -19 pandemic has created an unprecedented global demand for medical masks, gloves and gowns to protect both frontline workers and civilians, thus creating an opportunity for more jobs and a strategy for manufacturers to diversify yet run their businesses as per usual. Given the measures such as border closures that were adopted by

many countries to counter the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic, the crisis led to shortages especially in regions such as Africa, where there is currently limited production of surgical masks and medical-grade gowns. By adjusting/repurposing production lines in the textile and apparel sector and sourcing new materials, apparel makers have been availed an opportunity to fill the gap of the high demand for mask and gown products.

While switching production from apparel to masks and gowns is easier said than done, over the past two months, some manufacturers are showing they can diversify. For example, with International Finance Corporation (IFC) support, Hela Clothing shifted its Kenyan manufacturing facility from making men's underwear to making masks.²³

Developing countries responses to Covid- 19 So far

Although the Covid 19 pandemic has had a global impact, developing countries and LDCs have been more adversely affected. Amongst the responses considered critical for recovery measures, trade has been highlighted, as was recently stated by Afghanistan's WTO Ambassador, Mohammad Qurbana Harjo that: "Trade must form part of the solution in assisting and supporting recovery in developing countries".²⁴ The ambassador's comment reflect the capacity of trade to be used as a tool for social, and economic recovery from the pandemic impacts. It is acknowledged that the pandemic is a reminder of the world's interconnectedness, highlighting problems such as the digital divide between developed and developing countries, the lack of resources for developing countries and the evident negative gender disparity in the challenges arising.

At the WTO, Members highlight the importance of

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ MACAHUB, 2020

²² International Monetary Fund, Responses to Covid-19, 2020

²³ Moyo. M J, Lozansky.T, World Bank, 2020

²⁴ WTO, Members discuss impact of COVID-19 on developing economies' participation in world trade, 2020

using trade as a tool to achieve greater diversification, modernise manufacturing and gain resilience post-Covid.²⁵ Additionally, members of the WTO emphasise the importance to engage collectively to find the best multilateral responses, develop policies that promote economic recovery and strengthen programmes and agreements such as, the Work Programme on electronic commerce²⁶ and the WTO’s Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)²⁷ which provides incentives for technology transfer developing countries and LDCs.

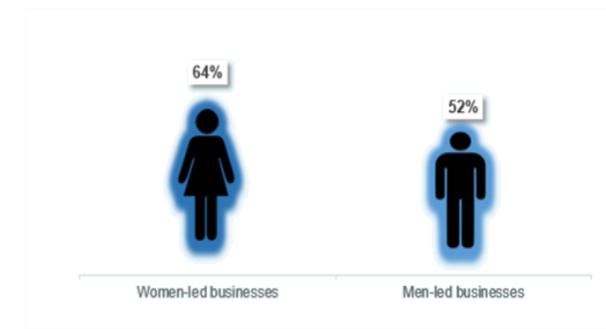
The Covid-19 crisis exacerbated Africa’s underlying economic issues, issues such as limited financial reserves, irregular cash flows, a lack of sustainable credit facilities and the gender barriers attached to them, have all worsened.²⁸ The African Development Bank Group published a policy brief highlighting the fact that “Women-led SMEs are disproportionately at risk as a result of the pandemic. To help cushion the impact of COVID- 19, governments across the continent have deployed stimulus packages and fiscal and monetary policies targeted at businesses, however, most of the packages and policies do not address existing gender barriers which prevent women entrepreneurs from growing and accessing business opportunities”.²⁹

The policy brief sets out some examples of areas in which the gender barrier is very prominent such as, stimulus packages still requiring collateral, whereas studies show that women in Africa may not have equal collateral to men. Creating barriers for women thus creates a wide financial gap which is detrimental for Africa’s post-Covid-19 economy, the quickest way to redefine African countries is through the economic empowerment of both genders equally.

As illustrated in the below figure, a survey by UN Women and the SME agency in Cote d’Ivoire

showed that a significantly higher number of women-led businesses has been forced to stop operations because of Covid-19.³⁰

Figure 1: Share of women- and men-led business foreclosures due to Covid-19



Source: A survey by UN WOMEN and SME agencies of Côte D'Ivoire 2020

Figure 1 above illustrates that women-led businesses are being impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic at a faster rate than men-led SMEs, the diagram above shows that 64% of women-led SMEs have been forced to stop their operations compared to the 52% of men, because of the crisis.

Suggestions for Gender-smart Government responses

The crisis has exacerbated the pre-existing economic gender gap in developing countries and LDCs, especially in Africa, governments need to ensure that post-covid responses such as implementing programmes and initiatives are more gender-sensitive. Governments would need to consider previous factors that existed, in the economic divide between women and men-led SMEs, simultaneously, they would need to take to account the barriers women-led SMEs face currently and address them. In Addition to the

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Adopted by the General Council on 25 September 1998

²⁷ TRIPS Agreement (as amended on 23 January 2017)

²⁸ African Development Bank Group, Policy Brief - Transformative policy solutions to support women-led businesses in Africa in a

post covid-19 world
15-Jul-2020

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ African Development Bank Group Policy, 2020

gender financial gap, other barriers that need attention include:

- **Access to Technology:** In Sub-Saharan Africa, women are about 45% less likely to be online than men. Translating to fewer women participating in e-commerce.
- **Unfavourable Loan Terms:** Banks usually have high interest and high loan rates. However, most women in Africa do not have access to collateral like their male peers.
- **Lack of Information or lengthy loan processes**
- **Measures to mitigate the impact on Covid 19 for women-led businesses-** In a post Covid 19 era, women and SME owners need to adapt to solutions ranging from financial loan repayment grace periods to flexible collateral options, and technical assistance, such as technology and general business advisory.

Governments are also urged to layout short term and long-term responses that include:³¹

- **Gender Smart Stimulus:** stimulus packages designed and disbursed from a gender lens perspective to ensure that women-led SMEs can benefit.
- **Gender Responsive Procurement:** government procurement of goods and services related to Covid 19 response (food, protective gear) could prioritise sourcing from Women-led entrepreneurs
- **Relaxation of Collateral requirements, interest rates and loan tenors by Banks**
- **Technologically targeted investments:** capital could be allocated to also allow non-technology-enabled SMEs to be transformed into technology-enabled businesses, with particular emphasis on

women-led SMEs given the gender technology gap.

- **Partnerships between financial institutions and women organisations.**
- **Tax Incentives for African Investors -** Governments should offer tax breaks for individuals that invest in women-led ventures.
- **Fund more women fund managers.**

An illustration of a gender positive response, is the UN's Women's efforts of supporting women-led business, which was created in collaboration with New Faces New Voices³² to support and complement national efforts on health, socio-economic impact and social protection due to the crisis. Women tailors across Rwanda who are navigating this time of economic uncertainty, are producing reusable protective cloth masks for the public, while also strengthening their income-generating skills hence reducing their vulnerability to the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

Through Gahaya Links, a women-owned business, the project aims to not only enhance prevention measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 infection in communities, but also support women-owned businesses and income generation and employment of vulnerable women.³³

Addressing Covid 19 Impacts on women in developing countries and LDCs

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women compiled a database fact sheet that provides gender equality focused overview of the Covid-19 response of governments around the globe.

The three main areas which were focused on

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³UNWOMEN, Increasing resilience of vulnerable women to the

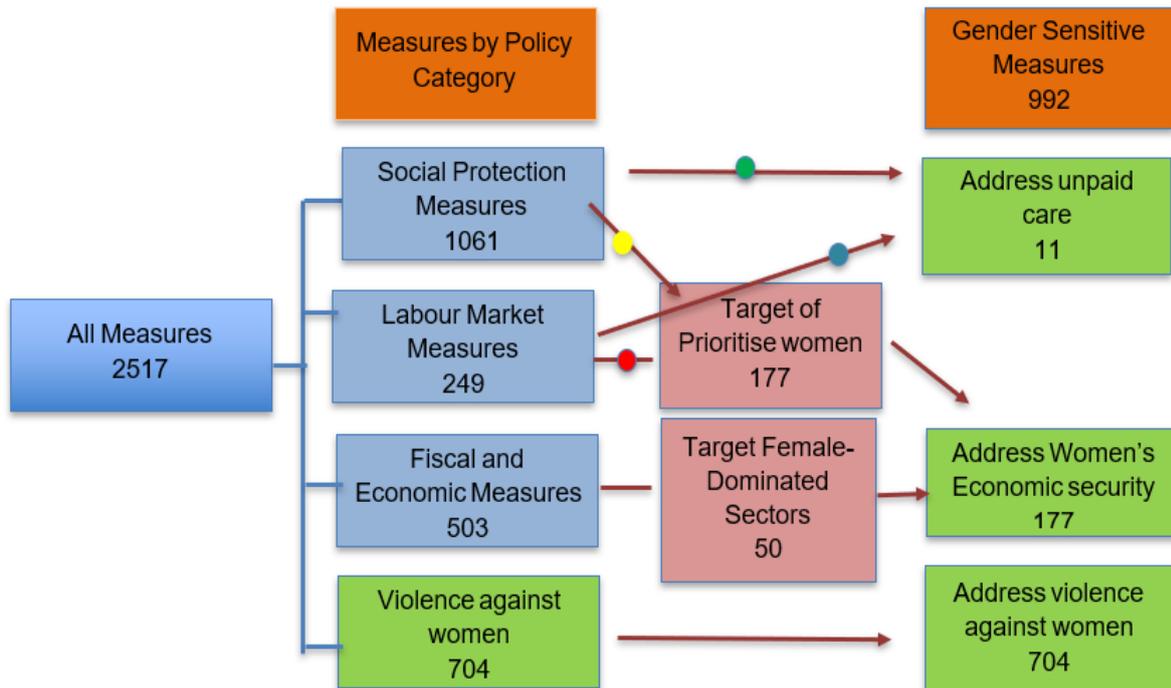
socio-economic impact of COVID19 crisis in Rwanda,2020

were, the unprecedented increase in unpaid care-work for women, large scale loss of jobs, incomes and livelihoods and the surge in violence against women and girls.³⁴ The database states that although efforts have been taken by governments to support women and girls post Covid-19, the response remains insufficient and uneven across all areas.

As governments move towards the direction of rewiring the negative factors from the impacts of the crisis, close detail to the definition of the terms “Gender-Sensitive” is imperative. Only when there is a clear and concise understanding of the definition, can governments implement gender-sensitive policies and initiatives to build back a bigger, better and, more resilient trade future.

Most of the negative impacts of the crisis are due to pre-existing factors that were not properly addressed or did not have a gender-sensitive lens. Thus, the crisis only amplified these issues, governments would need to tackle these factors by strengthening and extending gender-sensitive social protection systems, creating new sources of decent work for women, investing in the care economy as a key foundation for economies and societies and scaling up the global response to eradicate the scourge of violence against women and girls, once and for all. Nevertheless, measures to support women and girls through the effects of the pandemic have been evident. The database tracker compiled by UNDP and UN Women informs that 2,517 Covid-19 responses concerning gender, have been taken globally.

Figure 2: Structure of Global Covid-19 gender response database adopted from original on UNDP website



Source: UNDP website Global regional factsheet 2020

³⁴ Ibid

Figure 2 above illustrates the policy areas and responses such as social protection, labour markets, fiscal and economic policies as well as policies regarding the violence against women by category.³⁵ The colourful circles on the arrows that connect some policies indicate, the number of policies that join together to support women globally. The green circle represents 91 policies that are social protection measures and that address unpaid care. The yellow circle represents 94 social protection measures that target and prioritise women, the red circle represents 33 labour market measures that target or prioritise women and finally the blue circle represents labour and market measures that address unpaid care.³⁶

Developing countries have also implemented numerous measures to counter the impacts of Covid-19, for instance Across sub-Saharan Africa, “29 of the 46 countries and territories analysed have taken a total of 113 gender-sensitive measures in response to COVID-19”.³⁷ Echoing global trends, the measure that’s adopted the most across the region is stopping violence against women (64 measures across 17 countries), followed by measures to ensure women’s economic security (45 measures across 24 countries), with the lowest number of measures being those that address unpaid care work (four measures across three countries)³⁸

Similarly, across Latin America and the Caribbean, the UN Women’ and UNDP database tracker registers 33 countries and territories out of the 43 analysed, that have taken a total of 261 gender-sensitive measures in response to COVID-19. Like in sub-Saharan Africa, most measures that are taken in the region address violence against women (177 measures across 29 countries), followed by measures to address women’s economic security (61 measures across 22

countries), with relatively fewer measures to address unpaid care work (23 measures across 12 countries). Most countries taking at least one gender-sensitive measure are in Latin America (20 countries), compared to 13 in the Caribbean.³⁹

The pandemic has led many governments to adopt a broad range of support measures to help individuals and businesses. Although not every measure taken has been gender-sensitive, some will benefit women and girls. The economic impact of Covid-19 has hit women in developing countries since they are predominantly employed in sectors most affected by measures to restrict spread of the pandemic such as tourism.⁴⁰

Secondly, the share of women who telework in developing countries is lower than men, as a result, many women haven’t been able to earn a living during lockdown due to their lack in IT skills.⁴¹ Thirdly, many women continue to work in informal sectors which have been heavily affected during this period, lastly, even if women do have the necessary IT skills to work from home, the limited digital connectivity in most developing countries limits the kind of work and hours they can put in.⁴²

The lack of any gender dimension in the design of support measures in some policies can prevent women from fully benefiting from the support they need. In that context, firstly a clear definition and threshold of what can be deemed as the gender-sensitive policy must be sought and be uniform across regions. The area of social protection initiatives should be widely appropriated across all regions. This can be in the form of cash transfers, food or vouchers, to paid sick leave and childcare subsidies.

Increasing women's participation in economic

³⁵ UNWOMEN, Global Regional Factsheet, 2020

³⁶ UNWOMEN, UNDP, COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker Methodological note 1, 2020

³⁷ UNWOMEN, UNDP, Covid-19 Global Gender Response in Sub-Saharan Africa 2020

³⁸ UNWOMEN, UNDP, Covid-19 Global Gender Response in

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³⁹ UNWOMEN, UNDP, Covid-19 Global Gender Response Tracker Factsheet: Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020

⁴⁰ MACAHUB, 2020

⁴¹ WTO, 2020

⁴² Ibid

activity can be part of the solution to the post-pandemic recovery. The rise in women's employment in many countries was achieved through trade-related activities. "Maintaining open markets during the recovery period is key to building faster and more inclusive growth"⁴³. Increasing internet connectivity, digital technology education and improving IT infrastructure can offer great opportunities for women. With COVID-19 hitting countries at different times and rates, access to e-commerce knowledge and outlets and a continued trade market will be important for supporting and sustaining economic recovery. There is a need to consider how to keep trade flowing in the current Covid-19 pandemic, to ensure it can help underpin global recovery.⁴⁴

Cooperation between states is also advised to further contribute to raising awareness and making changes on the trade-related gender impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is plenty of data and information that can provide policymakers and organisations alike to collectivise efforts and ensure a long-lasting, gender-sensitive and resilient future trade environment.

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⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), 2020

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37-39, Rue de Vermont, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland
geneva@cuts.org • www.cuts-geneva.org

Ph: +41 (0) 22 734 60 80 | Fax:+41 (0) 22 734 39 14 | Skype: cuts.grc

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