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Featured Panelist:

- Professor Ashwini Deshpande (Ashoka University)
- Dr. Mary Njeri Kinyanjui (University of Nairobi)
- Dr. Laura Alfars (WIEGO)
- Dr. Lorena Alcazar (GRADE)



Gender Matters: COVID-19 and the labour market in the Global South

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown measures, and the associated economic crisis have had a disproportionate effect on women's labour market engagement globally. This is especially true in regions of the world with higher poverty rates, weaker public health systems, and more densely populated urban spaces. Women disproportionately work in public-facing occupations, including frontline care work, and so are at risk of either job loss or exposure to the virus. They disproportionately work in the informal sector, in precarious occupations, and many are suddenly considered essential workers but without the support and protection afforded to formal sector workers. Meanwhile, women disproportionately bear the burden of care of children and the sick. With school closures and increased rates of morbidity, this burden has risen substantially and has made balancing work and home even more tenuous than before. This first webinar brought together four experts to discuss the labour market consequences for women during these pandemic times, in their home countries and from their work in various countries, to reflect on early trends, identify research priorities and possible policy solutions or implications. Professor Ashwini Deshpande from Ashoka University, Dr. Mary Njeri Kinyanjui formerly from the University of Nairobi, Dr. Laura Alfars of WIEGO and Dr. Lorena Alcazar from GRADE shared reflections, preliminary findings, and policy implications from India, Kenya, Peru and globally. A number of salient research questions and policy priorities emerged from the Webinar.

Research Priorities

Priority 1:

We need better, sex-disaggregated, epidemiological and labour market data. Understanding how the pandemic is affecting women's labour supply will be limited if we do not have an adequate picture of the sex-disaggregated of infections. The case of India shows some of these limitations, even in the states in which this sex-disaggregated breakdown exists. Similarly, the panel largely concentrated on the informal sector, a known blind spot in data collection. Whatever data does exist for the informal sector indicates that it accounts for a large share of the labour market in many developing countries, that it absorbs a large share of female labour supply, and that it is incredibly heterogeneous. One key take-away from this discussion is thus the need to double down on data collection efforts in difficult contexts.

Priority 2:

A natural extension to the lack of data is a lack of understanding of labour market transitions, especially where the informal sector is concerned. Do unemployment rates adequately capture the labour market consequences of the pandemic when a large proportion of the affected (and female) population works in precarious informal occupations? Are people exiting the labour market altogether as a result of the pandemic? Will this lead to a rise in poverty rates? Are we seeing a rise in child labour, especially of young girls? The impacts of the pandemic on the labour market will likely be long term, especially in the likely case of multiple lockdown periods. Understanding the (informal) labour market dynamics will be of first order importance as governments close and reopen sectors of the economy.

Priority 3:

Diving deeper into understanding the informal sector follows from the first two points. Implementing many of the non-pharmaceutical interventions to minimize transmission in environments in which regulation is by definition difficult to implement may require considerable adjustment to day-to-day business practice. Informal sector work is public-facing and more often than not considered essential (especially in relation to the food chain) and will require additional input costs (e.g. personal protective equipment, hand sanitizing products). Meanwhile, to address possible supply chain disruptions, redundancies will be necessary in an economy with little room in already low profit margins.

Policy Implications

Implication 1:

Social security and social nets are proving inadequate to meet the acute needs of the chronically poor and vulnerable populations. Access to social services such as public health, already limited pre-pandemic, is severely constrained as COVID cases surge and access to non-COVID care is being postponed. Even among non-essential informal sector workers, the inability to reach those in need with social support systems (like cash transfers) make lockdown efforts impractical. Furthermore, the fiscal strain of providing short term support during lockdowns may not be sustainable, especially when government are experiencing sharp drops in revenue. How to support those who lost their livelihoods is a policy priority.

Implication 2:

Reports from various settings are showing an increased rate of stigmatization among informal sector and community health workers who are increasingly seen as vectors of disease. Both types of workers are critical in managing the reopening of economic activity and controlling the epidemic. This is especially true for the community health workers whose responsibility it is to conduct the contact tracing necessary to identify and isolate cases. A key take-away for policy and practice is to find ways to dispel the stigma associated with these workers, stigma that pre-existed the pandemic but risks jeopardizing efforts to control it.

Implication 3:

Local governments should work more closely with informal markets who are providing essential services and/or life-sustaining livelihoods. Some ideas proposed during the webinar included livelihood restarter grants, assistance in rebuilding supply chains, providing of social services, access to water and sanitation, and designating essential work as such within the informal sector. While the panel did not address it explicitly, one avenue raised by the audience is to explore the role that ICTs can play in delivering solutions to the many problems identified.

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