



Lessons for a feminist Covid-19 economic recovery: multi-country perspectives

Acknowledgements

The briefing was researched and written for the Gender and Development Network (GADN) by Nikita Chettri, Salonie Muralidhara Hiriyur and Palak Gadiya of SEWA Cooperative Federation (India case study); Eleonor Faur (Argentina case study); Rowena A. Laguilles-Timog (the Philippines case study); Eunice Musiime of Akina Mama wa Afrika (Uganda case study); Gloria Carrion; Fatimah Kelleher; and Katherine Dean, Sophie Efange, Yamina Ouldali and Jessica Woodroffe of GADN.

We are grateful to all the women interviewed for this report who gave up their time despite the substantial additional pressures they face under Covid-19.

We would like to thank our peer reviewers: Marianne Asfaw (AWID), Alma Espino (CIEDUR, Uruguay), Jyotsna Jha (Centre for Budget and Policy Studies, India), Lyn Ossome (Institute for Economic Justice, South Africa), Constanza Pauchulo (IRRAW-AP, Malaysia) and Marion Sharples (Women's Budget Group, UK). We would also like to thank Somali Cerise and Laura Turquet for their assistance in the conception of the project. This briefing was edited by Megan Daigle and was designed by Diana Rubio.

The research was funded by the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

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Recommended citation: Gender and Development Network (March 2022).

Lessons for a feminist Covid-19 economic recovery: multi-country perspectives.

Available at: <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/covid-economic-recovery>.

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Summary

Times of crisis and renewal present opportunities for brave and innovative policy choices. Yet, despite calls to “build back better”, powerful actors around the world are showing little real vision. For a Covid-19 recovery that is equitable and just, what is needed is transformative change that rejects the old “normal” in favour of an economy centred on wellbeing and care.

The fact that the pandemic has exposed, and drastically exacerbated, inequalities is now widely acknowledged. Feminists from all parts of the world have documented how women experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination have borne its worst impacts, but now decisions are being made with little regard for the realities that face those most affected, and with no attempt to include them in the policymaking process. It is time for feminist alternatives to take centre stage.

What's different about this report?

With this context in mind, this report seeks to do two things. First, it centres women's lived realities and experiences. Women's rights organisations and feminist consultants located in four countries analyse the impacts of both the pandemic and government responses, with summaries of these case studies provided at the end of the report.

They were asked to base this work on the perspectives of those most heavily affected in their communities. Even in this process, it became apparent how overstretched and underfunded women's rights organisations and feminist activists already are just in helping their communities to survive, and we were mindful of their time in asking them to support the research.

Second, the report moves from critique to proposition, developing concrete lessons to inform decision-making beyond the countries studied. As recovery measures are designed and rolled out, feminists are demonstrating that alternatives are not just necessary – they are viable. Alongside our own findings, the report collates and amplifies some of the many alternative approaches to recovery planning put forward by feminists and women's rights organisations around the world.

The findings

This report provides a snapshot of government responses and their impact on women in four countries: Argentina, India, the Philippines and Uganda. The choice of countries was made partly to represent different regions, national income levels and population sizes, but it also reflects the availability of consultants with capacity to undertake the work at a time when the pressure on women's rights organisations is immense. The research includes interviews providing perspectives from women working in the

informal sector, domestic workers, community care coordinators, trade union leaders and women's rights organisers and activists from across the four countries.

The case studies reveal how women in the Indian informal sector were frequently excluded from social protection measures, and that the Ugandan government's rescue packages supported large companies rather than women-led small businesses. Recovery measures in the Philippines failed to understand or confront the barriers most women face, including the many overseas Filipina workers who send money back to their families. Even in Argentina, where the government was ostensibly pursuing progressive policies, care and domestic workers saw unemployment rise and their workloads soar.

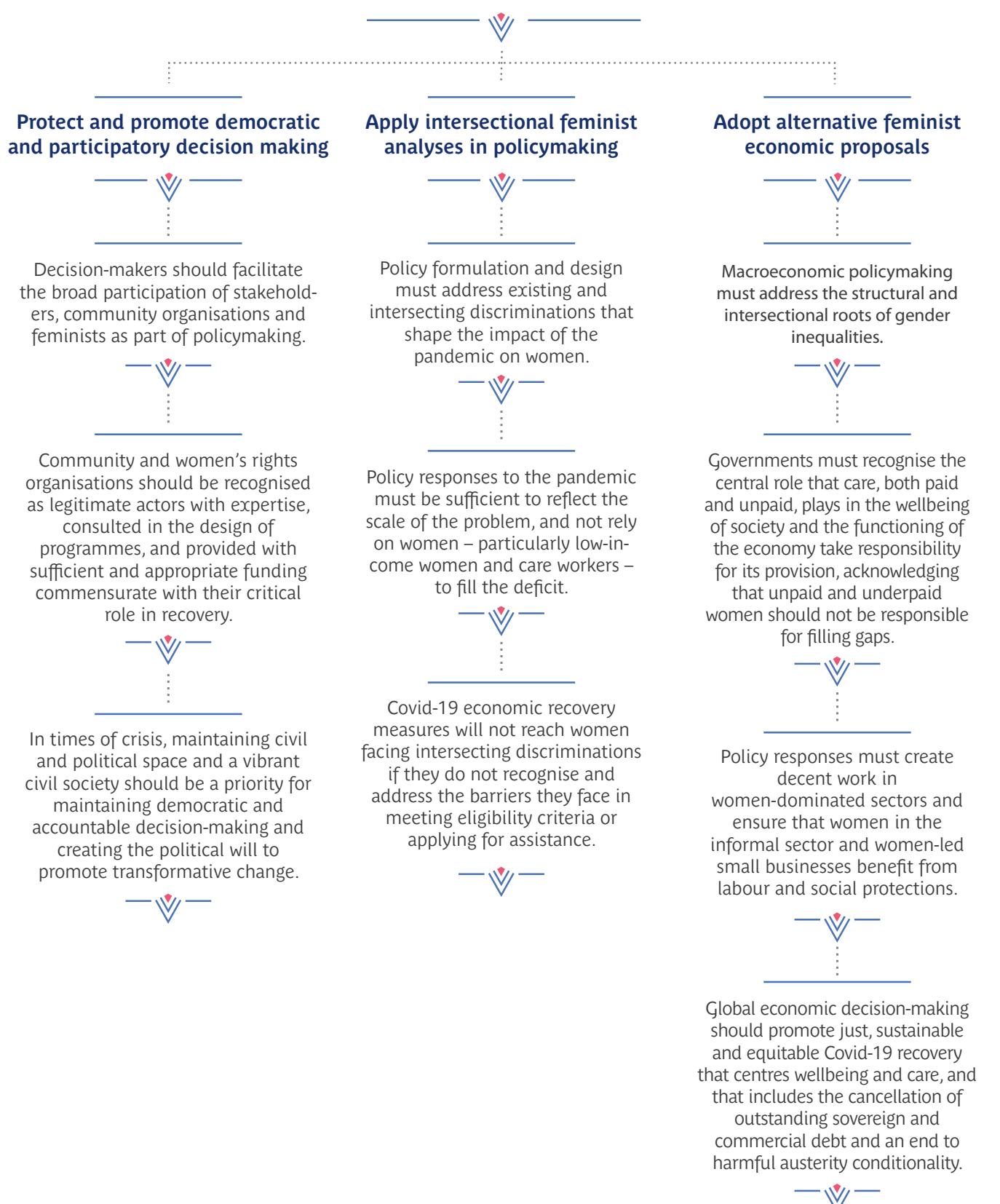
Common experiences and lessons also emerged: all the case studies revealed problems including inadequate policy responses with uneven implementation, failure to address the care economy or the needs of informal workers, a reliance on women's rights organisations to supplement gaps in public services, and reluctance to include these organisations and other feminists in policymaking. Global macroeconomic policies also play a part in constraining governments' policy choices and fiscal space. Thus, structural inequalities and unequal power relations continue to shape and limit the potential impact that any government policy response can have, regardless of intent – thereby upholding inequalities in the absence of more transformative action.

Lessons for the future

The lessons from our research (see the diagram below) together with the growing body of feminist alternative proposals for Covid-19 recovery suggest a way forward. Our overarching message is that **a just and equitable Covid-19 economic recovery must centre care, wellbeing and sustainability with transformative policies that promote equity**. This requires local, national and international decision-makers to take the following actions:

- **Protect and promote democratic, participatory decision-making** ensuring the participation of feminists and women's rights organisations so the expertise of those most impacted is at the forefront of responses. This in turn provides the information and framework to:
- **Apply intersectional feminist analyses in policymaking** that centre women's lived realities and address the long-standing intersecting discriminations they face. This will highlight the need to:
- **Adopt alternative feminist economic proposals** that include progressive taxation to fund public services and social protection, recognition and reduction of unpaid care burdens and decent work with living wages and enforced labour protections.

A just and equitable Covid-19 economic recovery must centre care, wellbeing and sustainability with transformative policies that promote equity.



1. Introduction

That Covid-19 has both exposed and drastically exacerbated inequalities globally is now widely acknowledged, and the need to understand and document the devastating and unequal impacts of the pandemic on women of different social and economic classes is clear. The tragedy of Covid-19 has exposed and intensified the reality of structural and systemic injustices that exist in our societies, brought about by inherently flawed economic systems. As decision-makers around the world rapidly shape the nature and scope of recovery measures, feminists are developing and proposing alternative policies to secure an economic recovery that transforms the old “normal” of inequality and oppression. It is time now for brave decisions that promote just and equitable societies with wellbeing and care at their centres.

Against this backdrop of widening inequalities, this paper examines how national and local Covid-19 policy responses have attempted to address the needs and rights of women of different socio-economic classes. Our hope is to identify lessons applicable to other contexts, so that we can propose evidence-based and transformative recommendations that bring about shifts towards feminist solutions and change the lives of women for the better. Instead, however, we found more lessons on how not to do things than we did examples of positive change.

Crucially, we want our approach to reflect feminist principles by amplifying women’s voices and emphasising human impacts, recognising that gendered inequalities intersect with other axes of oppression that differ across countries. We commissioned women’s rights organisations and feminist consultants in four countries to analyse the impacts of both Covid-19 and their government responses from feminist perspectives, based on the lived realities of those most heavily affected. The case studies include interviews with domestic workers, women working in community centres and canteens, union representatives and women’s rights organisations, and with the members of two of the organisations commissioned, along with desk reviews of government policy and academic analysis. The topics covered were chosen by our consultants, led by the priorities they observed locally. The choice of Argentina, India, the Philippines and Uganda as our country case studies was in part to achieve a cross section of regions, and variety of income-levels and population sizes, but it was also based on the availability of consultants with current capacity. As we will show in the report, women’s rights organisations, already underfunded, are now stretched to their limits due to the pandemic.¹

¹ For the purposes of this report, we understand women’s rights organisations to be feminist, women-led civil society organisations whose primary objective is to promote the realisation of women’s rights and gender equality as part of broader strategies for achieving transformative change. This may be addressed through a variety of methods including community-building, advocacy, service delivery, education and communications. Such organisations often work in alliance to form broader women’s movements campaigning for change.

In section two, we summarise government responses to the pandemic across Argentina, India, the Philippines, and Uganda; each case study is outlined in more detail at the end of the report. Section three looks at impacts of the pandemic, and government responses, in relation to women's work, the care economy, economic vulnerability and social protection and repression and violence. The lessons from our research, together with examples from the four case studies, form the basis of our conclusions in section four. The final section then presents alternative propositions drawn from the growing body of feminist economic recommendations for Covid-19 recovery at global, regional and national levels. More detail from each of our case studies is provided in the Annex. Throughout, we seek to amplify alternative and transformative approaches to recovery planning, put forward by Southern feminists and women's rights organisations located in those countries that are shouldering the greatest cost of the pandemic.

2. Four case studies of the pandemic and government responses

The purpose of our research was to identify policy changes made by national or local governments in response to Covid-19, and to centre the perspectives of local feminists and women's rights organisations in assessing their impact and success. More detail from the four case studies is included in the [Annex](#). Below we provide a snapshot of the experiences each of our consultants observed in their own country.

2.1 The views of feminists and women's rights organisations

Our hope was to find lessons that were applicable to other contexts so that we could propose evidence-based policy change for the future. This did not prove easy - the scale of the impact of Covid-19 was immense, and the gendered response of governments very limited with little disaggregated research on efficacy. This lack of evidence also limited our ability to take a truly intersectional approach, especially around intersections of race and caste with gender and class. Meanwhile, the capacity of feminists and women's rights organisations was already stretched to the limit by the pandemic, leading us to select case studies based on the availability of evidence and capacity of relevant consultants to collaborate.

All the case studies examine governments' main economic assistance programmes and the extent to which they have reached women, particularly those facing intersecting discriminations. The Argentina case study looks specifically at aspects of the care economy, analysing the experiences of women domestic workers and those employed in community kindergartens and canteens. In India, the research considers women workers and business owners in the informal sector, while the Philippines study examines the main social relief programme's impact on women and concerns over anti-terrorism legislation. In Uganda, government support to business forms the main site of investigation, but we also found that respondents wanted to raise issues around the capacity of women's rights organisations who were so crucial during the pandemic.

We also made use of UNDP and UN Women's (2021) *Covid-19 Global Gender Response Tracker* (UN "tracker") and their analysis of government policy responses to Covid-19 from a gender perspective, which details the policy measures taken to address women's economic and social security, including unpaid care work, the labour market and violence against women. It is based on publicly available information, including official government documents, media coverage and existing policy repositories that track government responses to Covid-19.

2.2 Argentina

Eleonor Faur is a Professor at the National University of San Martín in Argentina and a Researcher at the Institute for Economic and Social Development (IDES Argentina). In examining the impact of the Argentine government's policy responses to the pandemic, she spoke to care workers, domestic workers and community childcare workers and community care workers at food banks in Buenos Aires province between August and October 2020.



Argentina is a large, middle-income country with a government newly elected in late 2019. Care is increasingly recognised as a major social and political issue in Argentina and the care economy initially featured as part of the Argentinian government's Covid-19 response measures. This included the formation of an inter-ministerial committee on care policies, led by the recently established Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity, with a focus on ensuring care was central to the government's Covid-19 response. The government's response package also included an emergency family income, which provided monthly support to informal workers and domestic workers (among others) who might have otherwise fallen through the cracks. However, since the mid-term elections in November 2021, when the government lost many seats, care appears to have fallen off the government's agenda.

Many domestic workers, who account for almost a fifth of Argentina's female workforce, still experienced high levels of job insecurity at the hands of their employers and suffered higher job losses and wage cuts than any other sector, as some government measures to protect labour rights failed to cover the reality of their working conditions. A representative of the Unión Personal Auxiliar de Casa Particulares, a union for domestic workers, explained that its informal nature means this service is still not recognised as 'work' by most employers. Despite the government introducing a number of gender-sensitive measures, women's employment was hit harder than men's – particularly for domestic workers outside formal labour protections – while those still in employment found their conditions worsened.

Community canteens and community kindergartens – largely grassroots safety nets developed by communities themselves in response to historically insufficient state resources – did receive additional government support during this time. However, many of the workers interviewed within these community structures (overwhelmingly women) worked long hours without extra pay and with limited resources, often having to supplement the centres out-of-pocket in order to address unprecedented levels of demand.

What is clear from the experience in Argentina is that even with the political action taken by its new government, the effectiveness of Covid-19 response measures was limited by pre-existing and widespread gendered and economic inequalities, combined with increasingly high levels of foreign debt repayments.

2.3 India

Nikita Chettri, Saloni Muralidhara Hiriyur and Palak Gadhya are members of the Research Team at Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Cooperative Federation. Based in Gujarat, SEWA Cooperative

Federation's main role is to support SEWA's cooperatives in capacity building for management and marketing as well as policy and advocacy work with key stakeholders. It is part of SEWA, a trade union of 1.9 million low-income, self-employed women workers in the informal sector. To capture the experiences of their members in Gujarat, the Research Team used interviews conducted in April 2020 with nearly 300 of their members working in agriculture, services, social security and manufacturing (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020), alongside other research conducted with SEWA members (WIEGO & SEWA, 2020).



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The informal sector makes up about 90 per cent of the Indian economy and employs almost half of its population, disproportionately women. Most women in India earn low wages in precarious work and so they were hit hard by the pandemic. Even for women in global supply chains, who can often undertake home-based informal work, the contraction in global demand meant they lost their livelihoods. Many SEWA members experienced severe hardship with loss of income and few savings to fall back on. Meanwhile, their unpaid care burden increased as services declined. Some women were even prevented from returning to work by family members expecting them to take on more cleaning and care work in response to the pandemic. For women of the Dalit caste in particular, the intersection of class, gender and caste brought additional hardship as their assigned roles in "unclean" sanitation work further exposed them to health risks and stigma.

Although the government introduced a raft of policy measures, they have been criticised for the failure to recognise the informality of women's work. Notably absent from the government's Covid-19 response measures were targeted interventions for garment workers (who constitute a significant proportion of India's female workforce), domestic workers and women-owned collective enterprises. SEWA members reported that their informal work status made them more vulnerable but less able to access government support (WIEGO & SEWA, 2020). Moreover, many of the government's social security schemes have experienced problems in implementation, as a glaring gendered digital divide created

barriers to awareness and access to registration of the emergency welfare schemes. In a country where so many people are undocumented, eligibility requirements were also unrealistic for many low-income women who were thus excluded from potential benefits.

Overall, the response of the Indian government failed to understand or reflect the pre-existing complex realities of most women's lives, as well as the intersecting barriers of gender, class, caste and ethnicity that they were experiencing in the face of the pandemic.

2.4 The Philippines

Rowena Laguilis-Timog is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Women and Development Studies at the University of the Philippines. In assessing the impact of the Philippine government's Covid-19 response, she conducted interviews with representatives from women's rights organisations across the country: Primar Jardeleza is Vice President of the National Network of Informal Workers in the Philippines (PATAMBA) and President of Home-Based Workers International Network (HomeNet) Philippines; Amparo Miciano, Secretary General of the National Coalition of Rural Women; Luz Bador, a farmer, indigenous peoples' community leader and member of the National Coalition of Rural Women; Anna Navarro and She Gonzales, caseworkers at the Center for Migrant Advocacy; Cham Perez, Executive Director, and Emily Barrey, Vice President of the Nexpria Philippines Workers' Union, within the Center for Women's Resources.



The lockdown in the Philippines was strict and amongst the longest in the world, with many women losing their jobs, including the many Filipina who work in global supply chains. The vulnerability of overseas Filipina workers (known as OFW), particularly those employed as domestic and care workers who are often exposed to violence and wage theft by their employers as well as increasing levels of debt, was also exacerbated.

While the government introduced two main policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, our research and that of the UN "tracker" (UNDP & UN Women, 2021) suggests that these were notably bereft of any specific gender measures and failed to address women's specific realities in any way. Women had not been included in the design of relief measures and faced considerable barriers in accessing any benefits. Information about benefits, which was already a challenge given the lockdowns and poor internet infrastructure, was additionally restricted by government-imposed media shutdowns, while eligibility criteria were often complicated. In one example, only those officially registered as farmers or fisherfolk were entitled to agricultural support, and only one person per household was usually allowed to register – and this was invariably always a man.

The lengthy lockdown also increased unpaid care work, as well as rates of violence against women and girls, which added significant stress, with the socio-emotional impacts of the Covid-19 crisis largely unrecognised. Across our case studies we see that women's organisations became increasingly important means of support for many women as they struggled for their own, their families' and the communities' survival.

On top of Covid-19 and strict lockdown measures, activists in the Philippines have also had to contend with an administration that has used the pandemic to further close down civil political space – namely, through the introduction of a draconian anti-terrorism law that silences criticism and dissent against the government. However, the country's strong and long-standing tradition of activism has continued, despite attacks on trade unionists, indigenous groups and community organisers (Leth, 2021).

Experiences in the Philippines highlight some of the pitfalls of failing to include women and women's lived realities in policymaking. This, alongside prolonged lockdown measures and increasing levels of state repression, contributed to the hardships faced by women in the Philippines during the pandemic.

2.5 Uganda

Eunice Musiime is the Executive Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika, a feminist pan-African leadership organisation based in Kampala, Uganda. She works with feminists across Uganda and other countries on the continent to promote feminist leadership, generate and disseminate knowledge, and build movements for gender equality. Based on the substantial experience of her organisation, Eunice looked at the pervasive scale of gender inequalities in Uganda and how these have severely limited the scope and impact of the government's Covid-19 response measures.



The Ugandan government's response to the pandemic was criticised for the way it clearly favoured urban citizens over rural ones and businesses over women on low incomes, exposing specific biases in the government's decision-making. Our research found that the government had allocated a far higher proportion of its pandemic budget to support for formal business owners, instead of rolling out a more comprehensive expansion of its social protection programmes targeted at a fifth of its population who live below the poverty line. Also, although the government prioritised support to businesses, its interventions noticeably left out women workers in the informal sector and small-scale women-led businesses, with most low-income women not meeting the required eligibility criteria.



As is so often the case, women's essential work was taken for granted. The government allowed women market traders to continue working during lockdown to maintain the supply of essential foodstuffs on condition that they slept in the markets so as not to spread the virus when travelling to work, despite the increased risk of violence and exposure to infection this created. Many of these same women market traders were excluded from most of the available financial support measures. Even before the pandemic, Ugandan women in some parts of the country were doing about eight hours of unpaid care work a day (Oxfam & Uganda Women's Network, 2018). The added responsibilities that come with the world's longest school closures have no doubt further intensified women's unpaid care burdens during the pandemic (Agence France-Presse in Kampala, 2022), and yet the government has failed to introduce any measures to address these growing unpaid care responsibilities.

The Ugandan case exposes the consequences of government policy choices that prioritise the interests of big business over the needs of low-income women. With limited social protection measures and no support for women's ballooning unpaid care responsibilities, women in Uganda have borne the largest consequences of the pandemic.

3. The economic impacts on women

This section provides a snapshot of the impact of the pandemic, Covid-19 and of government responses, on women in the four countries studied. It looks specifically at women's economic priorities: work; the care economy; economic vulnerability and social protection; and repression and violence. Despite varying national contexts, the pre-Covid-19 realities identified in our case studies demonstrate clear commonalities in gendered economic injustices, especially for women from lower-income backgrounds. Age-old structures based on a gendered division of labour continue to devalue women's work, while socially constructed gender norms around care left women on the frontlines of the pandemic's health impacts. Interestingly, our case study respondents also emphasised that women's economic justice could not be understood in isolation from the structural violence that they face, which is explored at the end of this section.

3.1 The reality of women's work

Women's predominance in the informal sector has made them particularly vulnerable to the economic impacts of the pandemic, as has their vulnerability in small businesses and even across global supply chains.

3.1.1 Women in the informal sector

The majority of the world's poorest women work in the informal sector, with little access to labour regulation or social protection, resulting in gendered income disparity (ILO, 2018a). Job losses for women in this sector were particularly high during the pandemic: in the Philippines, one survey of women domestic and informal workers found that almost half had lost their jobs by the end of 2020 (SWS, 2021a).

In India, women were severely affected because of their higher participation in the informal economy and in the most hard-hit trades (ILO, 2020). One Indian study found that, by the end of 2020, 47 per cent of women had lost their jobs compared to 7 per cent of men, and that women had fewer options to transition to self-employment (Basole et al., 2021). The SEWA Cooperative Federation found that a lack of formal contracts hindered women from benefiting from a raft of government measures to protect labour and extend social protection. Existing discriminatory practices that mean women seldom hold the titles to land further excluded them from cash transfers in the agricultural sector. Many informal women workers also rely on cooperatives, which needed working capital support to stay afloat when their revenues came to a halt, but local municipalities failed to provide these supports.



Overseas Filipina workers were particularly exposed to economic shocks. She Gonzales, a case worker at the Center for Migrant Advocacy explained that these migrant workers, usually already in debt, had to borrow more money in lockdown to send back to their families and then to buy plane tickets to return home when they lost their jobs:

When lockdowns were announced, people faced issues with incomes; jobs were lost and migrant workers were more vulnerable, [facing] “no work, no pay”, even when their contracts specified otherwise. (Online interview, part of Philippines case study, June 2021)

3.1.2 Global supply chains

Even in formal employment, women's economic security is often less than men's, as global supply chains depend on women's low wages and lack of labour protection (Beneria, 2011). These jobs are characterised by gendered segregation, insecure contracts and minimal work benefits and entitlements (Oxfam Canada, 2021). The vulnerability of these jobs became all too apparent as pandemic restrictions in the Global North brought about a contraction of demand. Women in the large, industrialised sectors of manufacturing and horticulture suffered disproportionate job losses compared to men, with a far slower recovery predicted for women's employment than men's (ILO, 2021).

In India, resulting job losses in the garment industry, which predominantly employs women, led to a humanitarian crisis as workers suffered from income loss and wage theft that pushed them further below the poverty line (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2021). Similar situations were faced by women in the ecozones in the Philippines, where workers went on forced and unpaid leave (Refraccion & Cinco, 2020). Primar Jardeleza of HomeNet noted the impacts:

A lot of people lost jobs from the formal sector. There are those who worked from home, some were laid off, and there are others that were totally neglected especially if they were among the rank-and-file. Many turned to the informal sector. (Online interview, part of Philippines case study, June 2021)

Lockdowns in the Global North substantially impacted the flower sector in Uganda, where 70 per cent of workers are women, resulting in half losing their jobs in the first year of the pandemic (Hivos Uganda & Akina Mama wa Afrika, 2020). Janepher Nassali, the General Secretary of Uganda's Horticultural, Industrial, Service Providers and Allied Workers, explained that,

The pre-pandemic inequalities in the sector were multiplied when the pandemic hit. For example, due to government control measures, flower farms put in place temporary sleeping conditions for workers, and for many single mothers, this meant that they

could not opt-in to be among the workers retained at the farm and leave their children at home without care. This automatically excluded them from employment. (Telephone interview, part of Uganda case study, December 2021)

3.1.3 Small businesses

Throughout our case studies we found that women-led small enterprises suffered disproportionately during the pandemic - a view supported by others (Elam, 2021). Many government interventions aimed to protect domestic big business rather than the economic rights and needs of women-led small businesses and informal sector workers. In Uganda, women-run businesses were already smaller and less profitable than men's and so they were the first to close when Covid-19 related measures were introduced (Mwesigye et al., 2021). Pre-existing lack of access to credit posed a further challenge for these Ugandan women on low incomes when the pandemic hit (Owori, 2020). Most of the economic stimulus measures introduced in 2020, including access to credit through the Ugandan Development Bank, required levels of collateral and other restrictions that precluded small business. These challenges of access to credit, financing and tax benefits meant poorer women did not benefit from government measures (Owori, 2020).

Similarly, in the Philippines, women-led small enterprises have been hard-hit, particularly in rural areas, while in India, SEWA members found that women-owned collective enterprises in the informal economy faced significant barriers in accessing both online and offline markets and capital support. In India, 90 per cent of women-owned enterprises operate in the informal sector, with small scales of production, low rates of savings and investment, and small capital accumulation, they are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks and dependent on informal financing (IFC, 2014; Chen & Beard, 2018).

3.1.4 The digital divide

Moreover, measures were absent to tackle the digital divide across lines not only of gender but class and other pre-existing axes of exclusion. Social distancing, remote work and other measures to contain the spread of Covid-19 require continuous and long-term technical training and capacity building in management and leadership that are suited to women's needs in the labour market. Our India case study found that women entrepreneurs and their businesses in the informal economy lack adequate infrastructure, access to technology and tools to digitise their business and, most importantly, the capacity to sustainably connect to both online and offline marketplaces.

3.2 The care economy

Covid-19 is taking place amidst the global failure of policymakers to acknowledge the role of the care economy in supporting the so-called “productive” economy. The provision

of care is undervalued globally by a gendered division of labour that designates care as women's work. Justified as "natural", women's care work – both unpaid and underpaid – has continued to subsidise economic activity, while being treated by policymakers as an "externality", with limitless supplies available to prop up the economy.

3.2.1 Unpaid care

Even before the pandemic, research shows that women's time spent on unpaid care far outweighs that of men, whether in Africa where women do three times as much unpaid care work as men (ILO, 2018b), in Latin America and the Caribbean where they do twice as much (Díaz-García et al., 2021), or in Europe where women are 1.5 times as likely to be carers as men (Eurofound, 2016). In times of crisis, this unpaid and underpaid care work then further expands to fill gaps left by underinvestment, cuts and privatisation in public services – reductions in services that also disproportionately impact low-income women (GADN et al., 2020).

The pandemic has dramatically exposed and escalated this crisis in care, with deepening cuts in public services just as demand rises, not just due to the illness alone but also the knock-on impacts of lockdowns. However, our findings alongside a review of the UN "tracker" (UNDP & UN Women, 2021), show the most consistent policy gaps by governments across most countries were in addressing women's unpaid care and domestic work. Argentina is the only country of the four case studies that put into place a set of policy measures to recognise and address the extent of unpaid care, with the others having either none (Uganda and the Philippines) or only one (India).

Our Ugandan case study found an increase in unpaid care work for women with children out of school, after nearly two years of school closures (Agence France-Presse in Kampala, 2022). In Argentina, isolation measures were found by UNICEF Argentina (2020) to intensify women's unpaid care work in households. Similarly, our case study found mothers in the Philippines reporting an increase in care work and related stress as schools closed. Although working from home – both for unpaid care work and for income – is not new for many women workers in the informal economy, in the majority of the countries studied, the increases in these burdens were significant given that mothers are considered the "learning partners" for schools' new remote set-ups. For those living with extended family, care work further increased, explained Luz Bador, of the National Coalition of Rural Women in the Philippines:

Men and women's experiences are different. Men do not think about doing laundry and other housework; they would wait for the women to do it because they think it is not their work. After farm work, a man would rest; but a woman would still work at home afterwards. (Telephone interview, part of Philippines case study, August 2021)

In India, women reported increased workloads in both households and compounds looking after those who were sick but also as a result of enhanced cleaning regimens. When the government-run Anganwadi childcare centres stopped operation in the first 2020 lockdown, it was primarily mothers who took over the work, as documented by childcare cooperative SEWA Sangini Centre. Interviewee Faridabibi, a home-based worker noted,

I can concentrate on my work when I drop off my children to the centre. In the past year, the centre has been closed and my children have been home. Although they receive their meals from the centres, with them in the house my work efficiency has decreased. (Interview part of India case study, April 2020)

Bhartiben, a manager of SEWA Homecare, a cooperative of domestic workers in Ahmedabad city, described pressure put on women by family members not to take paid work so they would be available to undertake unpaid domestic and care work. In a study of SEWA members, half reported spending more time on cleaning both as a preventive health measure and because most of the family were at home during the day (WIEGO & SEWA, 2020).

3.2.2 Paid care work

The undervaluing of care work also impacts women's paid work and work in the community. Globally women make up 70 per cent of health workers and 90 per cent of social care workers, during the pandemic their already difficult conditions have been made even harder while their work continues to be undervalued (Lotta et al., 2021). Where public services fail, it is not only women's unpaid work in the home but also their community-level organising that holds communities together. In India, SEWA's childcare centres distributed educational material for children, along with hot, nutritious meals door to door. In Argentina, despite policies that ensured increased provisions to community canteens, our case study found that workloads increased for women working in these canteens, as well as kindergartens and child development centres, as they needed to reorient towards feeding not only the children and teenagers enrolled in the centres but also their families and neighbours. This was not factored into the policy prescriptions, nor were proportionate pay increases or support for added care work.

Our India case study reported that no measures were in place to ensure that employers provided paid leave for domestic workers and cleaners, who were hit hard with job loss and income declines (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). For low-income women in Argentina, domestic labour is one of the easier occupations to enter, accounting for about 20 per cent of the countries' women wage earners, three-quarters of whom have no legal protections (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2020; López Mourelo, 2020). The unprotected nature of domestic work meant that, despite government measures, hundreds of thousands of women in this sector still lost their jobs in the pandemic, more than for any other occupation; in the first three months of lockdown, two out of three domestic workers

were laid off and one in five were no longer paid (Donza, 2020). For those who retained their employment, their weak contracts meant high levels of discretion for employers towards continued receipt of pay, working hours and the nature of their tasks.

3.3 Economic vulnerability and social protection

In all the case study countries, the intersection between gender, class, ethnicity and other factors meant that women who were already more economically vulnerable faced the most barriers to accessing social protection measures designed to mitigate the impact of the crisis.

3.3.1 Economic vulnerability

Across all of our case studies, for those with few savings or access to credit, income reduction led to rising debt levels as women turned either to family and acquaintances or money-lending outlets for loans. Women's income loss translated into multiple forms of economic hardship that negatively impacted on household welfare and their own wellbeing. About 82 per cent of Indians could not cover their basic necessities including food during the crisis (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). At the peak of the pandemic, 78 per cent of SEWA Bharat members surveyed indicated that they were entirely out of savings and had turned to informal (family and friends) and formal networks (bank loans and high-interest lenders) for financial assistance (WIEGO & SEWA, 2020). In times of crisis like the pandemic, Indian families tend to sell small assets like jewellery or small animals, which tend to be owned by women rather than the larger assets owned by men, further increasing women's economic vulnerability within the household (Agarwal, 2021).

3.3.2 Social protection

Women's lower incomes leave them more in need of social protection schemes, while their concentration in the informal sector and their socially ascribed roles then reduces their eligibility for benefits and protection. Lack of formal contracts and documentation further excludes them from eligibility for those very schemes. In the Philippines, interviewees reported that only one person per household could be registered as a farmer or fisherfolk, which favoured men in the family who are seen as the "breadwinners" and left women ineligible to receive sector-specific support. Primar Jardeleza explained that one of the members of her organisation even had to return the cash she had received after being told she was not eligible (Online interview part of Philippines case study, June 2021). Amparo Miciano of the National Coalition of Rural Women added that women could either claim assistance as a low-income household or because they had lost their jobs, but not both, reflecting a failure to understand the intersecting discriminations women faced (Online interview part of Philippines case study, June 2021). In Uganda, women's access to emergency funds and support networks was more fragile in the face of the pandemic

than that of men (Financial Sector Deepening, 2020). They also have less access to social protection and the impact of Covid-19 will thus be longer than for men (Muhwezi-mpaga, 2020).

Meanwhile in India, even before the pandemic, only 12.5 per cent of informal workers were covered by health social protection and only 24 per cent received a pension (Sinha, n.d.). While the Indian government provided food relief through the PMGKY (one of their assistance schemes), women often lacked the documentation required. Moreover, many informal workers lived in what are known as 'containment zones' so were not able to travel to Fair Price Shops to avail government rations while others faced issues due to lack of transportation, outdated ration cards and ration cards from different municipalities (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). Barriers to accessing pandemic relief measures were further intensified by the growing digital divide. India's fifth National Family Health Survey, for example, recorded a large gender gap in access and use of the internet, whereby 42 per cent of women surveyed had used the internet compared with 62 per cent of men (Krishnan, 2020). Furthermore, a study by communications provider GSMA reported that in 2020 only 25 per cent of women respondents owned smartphones as opposed to 41 per cent of male respondents in India (Carboni, 2021). In other cases, lack of education or access to media acted as barriers.

This lack of access was further compounded by the inadequacy of social protection measures, in part the result of constrained fiscal policy space available to Southern governments due to international financing commitments. A common reality during Covid-19, this underfunding of social protection is also linked to the devaluation of care.

3.4 Repression and violence

The pandemic and related containment measures have brought about a closing of political space and a ratcheting-up of gender-based violence, which are part of a pattern of structural violence that perpetuates inequalities and injustices.² Our case study respondents emphasised that women's economic justice must be understood as interconnected with these other harms.

3.4.1 Closing political space

During the pandemic, women's rights organisations had to fill gaps in public service provision, much the way women have had to do in their households. Yet, in return, in some countries these organisations have seen their ability to function further constrained. The pandemic and lockdowns caused shrinking civic space and even "democratic backsliding", with particularly detrimental effects on women facing intersecting discriminations (Anderson et al., 2021). In Uganda, our case study found that women's movements and organisations

² The term 'structural violence' seeks to explain the ways in which socially constructed institutions and forces can perpetuate inequalities and prevent people from being able to meet their basic needs (Galtung, 1969).

have experienced shrinking civic space, which has constrained activism. Additionally, the absence of long term funding for small and medium women's rights organisations - such that they are unable to scale up and sustain organisational activities - coupled with political polarisation that limits constituency-building, as well as persistent backlash and heightened security threats for human rights defenders, have all further exacerbated existing difficulties that women's movements and organisations face (Human Rights Watch, 2020a).

Civil society groups have also protested the way that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures have been used by governments as an excuse to further close political space. In the Philippines, the Anti-Terrorism Law (2019) – making it possible for the government to “red tag” anyone speaking out or advocating on social issues – was enacted mid-pandemic and is regarded as an attempt to quell freedom of expression among Filipinos (Human Rights Watch, 2020b). Among those affected are Filipina women who worked as community leaders and organisers and experienced enhanced state violence as the government passed the law (Bolledo, 2021; Rita, 2020). The law is also seen as part of a broader repression of human rights within the country, particularly in relation to labour movements and the death of nine union activists during the pandemic, condemned by the UN Human Rights office (UN News, 2021).

In the context of Covid-19, workers' rights have also been eroded with three quarters of all governments restricting the rights to strike, to collective bargaining or to establish and join a trade union, with repression of the labour movement in the Philippines being an obvious example (ITUC, 2021; UNI Global Union, 2021).

3.4.2 Violence against women and girls and gender-based violence

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) increased as the Covid-19 pandemic swept through these four countries and lockdowns were implemented. The Philippines' official figures recorded 17,968 cases of VAWG as of March 2021, figures that will only grow as the pandemic continues to unfold (PSA, 2021). International organisations like UNFPA (2020) estimates a 20 per cent increase in intimate partner violence from 2019 to 2020 in the Philippines, as women and young girls were locked down at home with their abusers. This rise, combined with a lack of access to reproductive health services and other factors, contributed to teenage pregnancy levels increasing from around 70,000 cases in 2019 to more than 133,000 in 2021 (Pelayo, 2021). Uganda saw an increase in girls drawn into commercial sexual exploitation, trading sex for money, food and even sanitary towels, while other girls were married in exchange for dowry or bride price. Underage pregnancies have also risen in Uganda, blamed in part on rising rape cases (Rebecca, 2020). In Argentina, one community kindergarten coordinator also reported increasing concerns:

We have worked a lot on the issue of the increase in gender violence and domestic violence. The issue is being reactivated (...). And we also have a lot of institutional violence against children. Dealing with the police is never easy and helping there is difficult. (Online interview, part of Argentina case study, September 2020)

4. Lessons for transformative change

Our case studies are just a snapshot of government responses in four countries, but they exemplify wider lessons emerging from work by feminists from across the Global South (GADN, n.d.)³. Based on this literature and our research, five sets of lessons are outlined below. Proposals to improve the formulation of policy responses to the pandemic are followed by the need for participatory decision-making and recognition of the barriers to policy implementation. Lessons on the context of structural inequality in which Covid-19 responses take place, including constraints imposed by current macroeconomic policies, are then outlined. The need for political will to make those transformative measures an explicit objective of Covid-19 recovery measures, recognising the importance of civil and political space if any meaningful progress is to be achieved is then outlined. Running across this analysis is our observation that women's rights organisations and movements play a critical role every step of the way, albeit one that is largely unrecognised and unsupported by governments. Finally, we bring together these lessons and propose ways forward.

4.1 Policy formulation – value of feminist analysis

Apparent across the case studies was the absence of a complete view of the realities of women's lives, the intersecting discriminations they face, and the ways in which the pandemic and lockdowns were affecting them as they struggled for their own, their families' and the communities' survival. Gaps and challenges were particularly observed in governments' approach to care and to the vulnerability of women's paid work. Overall, policies were underscored by an aim to ameliorate an immediate problem rather than acknowledge and address the systemic causes of inequalities that predate the pandemic but were exacerbated by it. These existing structural inequalities meant that even those policies that did aim to address gendered issues like care were ultimately undermined.

4.1.1 Ensuring sufficient policy responses

Our case studies showed that women's socially ascribed roles as carers and household managers leave them responsible for managing shortfalls, particularly in relation to food security.

In the Philippines, women had to feed their families in the face of inadequate relief programmes. Emily Barrey of the Center for Women's Resources reported that:

³ For a collection of feminist alternative proposals see: <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/feminist-responses-to-covid-19>.

Relief means receiving three kilos of rice. That's all it takes to say you received assistance, but we're not talking about relief that even reaches a week. Perhaps that's good for only a couple of days. If you received three cans of sardines, that's already considered relief. (Online interview, part of Philippines case study, August 2021)

Just getting to the municipal centres where food aid was usually distributed could be expensive, especially for those living in rural areas. Cash aid packages – although welcome – were also insufficient, as reported by Amparo Miciano of the National Coalition of Rural Women (Online interview, part of Philippines case study, June 2021). Her colleague Luz Bador further related,

[The cash aid] is easily used up. You can't even buy food. You have to pay for bills first. For electricity, for example, they provided for a grace period, but the bills remained the same. And you have to pay or else you will get disconnected. (Telephone interview, August 2021)

In India, two-thirds of SEWA members interviewed found that the worry of not having enough to eat increased during lockdown, and 11 per cent that they had to skip eating food for a whole day because of food shortages at home. Over three quarters of these women had run out of savings by April 2020 (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). Reshmaben, a patchwork artisan in the Abodana Cooperative advised:

I faced financial hardship and we had very little savings in the bank which we could not access due to lockdown restrictions. In these difficult times borrowing money from family members would be difficult because they would be in a similar financial situation. (Interview, part of India case study, April 2020)

Lesson 1: Policy responses to the pandemic must be sufficient to reflect the scale of the problem, and not rely on women, particularly low-income women and care workers, to fill the deficit.

4.1.2 Understanding intersectional inequalities

When structural inequalities are ignored, policies are often reactive and inadequate in meeting the needs of women, particularly those who are marginalised and facing intersecting discriminations. An intersectional gender analysis provides a more complete view of how the pandemic and lockdowns have affected women as they struggled to protect themselves, their families and their communities.

Addressing intersecting discriminations is critical for appropriate policy responses, ensuring that *all* women benefit. This was one of the challenges of our own research,

which highlighted the difficulties of obtaining disaggregated data that would provide a more complete picture of women's lived realities. In Uganda, the government response largely ignored the poorest and most vulnerable citizens, instead focusing the most investment on a package of tax reliefs and bailouts primarily benefiting big businesses and corporations (Owori, 2020). While the government did provide food aid, this was targeted to the urban areas of Kampala and Wakiso Districts, with poorer rural areas receiving little support. Interviewees in the Philippines also reported that indigenous peoples and rural women living far from city centres struggled with access to information and services.

In India, Dalit women faced additional barriers as a result of caste discrimination, including exposure to greater risk from the virus due to their "unclean" work in sanitation and subsequently greater risk from discrimination and prejudice (Asia Dalit Rights Forum, 2021). Another report found that a community of Dalit families working as waste pickers and drain cleaners in Andhra Pradesh was barred from travelling to purchase essentials such as food and medicine (International Dalit Solidarity Network, n.d.).

Women from indigenous communities in India faced additional barriers to effective communication, which women's organisations worked to overcome. Lataben, President of Megha Indigenous Women's Agriculture Cooperative explained:

The government messages are in Gujarati and they use some English words like "quarantine" and "Covid-19" that the women don't understand. We speak to them in Gamit (the local language) and this way they feel more comfortable about the information that they receive. (Online interview, part of India case study, April 2020)

Lesson 2: Policy formulation and design must address existing and intersecting discriminations that shape the impact of the pandemic on women.

4.1.3 Recognising the value of the care economy

Care work both paid and unpaid plays a vital role in sustaining economic activity and wellbeing, but the gendered division of labour designates it as women's work and takes for granted its provision. Across all four case studies we consistently saw how women's unpaid work increased as they supplemented dwindling public services in the face of rising need, in Section 3.2. The undervaluing of care work also has implications for paid carers. Whether in India, Argentina or the Philippines, domestic workers were already working under precarious conditions with little labour or social protections so were extremely vulnerable during lockdowns.

De-romanticising care and domestic work – and the willingness of women to perform it – is essential to transform deeply rooted cultural patterns that make these workers more

vulnerable to exploitation, labour rights violations and abuse. It is crucial that care work be linked to rights and not to a kind of voluntarism or helpfulness. Governments must accept state responsibility for care provision and commit to long-term social and cultural transformation of social roles to question prejudices and beliefs associating care work with women. In addition, states should ratify ILO Convention 189 (2011) on domestic workers. Ultimately, policymakers must recognise the care economy's central role in promoting wellbeing and the functioning of our economies and societies, at all times but particularly during pandemic recovery, and acknowledge their responsibility to provide this care, both through the provision of robust gender-responsive public services and through universal social protection.

Lesson 3: Governments must recognise the central role that care, both paid and unpaid, plays in the wellbeing of society and the functioning of the economy, take responsibility for its provision, acknowledging that unpaid and underpaid women should not be responsible for filling gaps.

4.1.4 Understanding the reality of women's work

The circumstances and structure of women's paid work was not understood or reflected in policy responses. As we saw in Section 3.1, the persistent structural inequalities that characterise work for women in all their diversity, including gendered labour segregation and women's informalised work, meant that even where employment protections were introduced, women were often excluded.

Extending labour and social protections to women in informal sectors, alongside deliberately creating decent jobs in those sectors where women predominate – particularly health and care – are critical steps yet to be taken. As a first step, governments should ratify, fund and enforce (including through supply chains) ILO conventions on collective bargaining and freedom of association, as well as Convention 190 on the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work.

Lesson 4: Policy responses must create decent work in women-dominated sectors and ensure that women in the informal sector and women-led small businesses benefit from labour and social protections.

4.2 Decision-making – feminist participation

The specific barriers women face could be elucidated and overcome with broader participation by women and feminist experts in policymaking.⁴ Similarly recognition of the value and expertise that women's rights organisations provide will make a substantial contribution to improving decision-making processes.

4.2.1 Promoting feminist voices in decision-making

While not a panacea, the inclusion of feminists in decision-making positions will help promote a feminist analysis. In Argentina, the appointment of government ministers who define themselves as feminist appears to have had some impact, particularly in relation to the recognition of the care economy (News Chant, 2021). Furthermore, 53 per cent of the Argentinian government team in charge of designing measures to deal with the pandemic were women. This compares with just 13 per cent in India and none in the Philippines (University of Pittsburgh, UNDP & UN Women, n.d.). Beyond Argentina, we found little evidence of participation by marginalised women and the women's rights and feminist groups that work with them.

Instead, in the Philippines, the drafting of response plans was mainly delivered by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Infectious Diseases, which is composed of heads of several government agencies and led by the Secretary of the Department of Health (IATF, n.d.). Notably, the Philippine Commission on Women was not part of the task force or had a clear role in it, nor were women's organisations and civil society organisations consulted. In an interview, Luz Bador of the National Coalition of Rural Women noted,

[Policymakers] should come to our villages and ask what could sustainably work for us. Small farmers should be consulted about their own situation. (Telephone interview, part of Philippines case study, August 2021)

In contrast, research collated by Piscopo and Och (2021) demonstrates the value of women leaders' knowledge of the local communities and their priorities. Despite President Rodrigo Duterte's reputation for harassing women politicians, local leaders in the Philippines were prepared to stray from national policy to respond to local needs. After consulting with village leaders, Mayor Trina Firmalo-Fabic of Odiongan set up mobile libraries for children and mobile health check-ups for the elderly. Seed was distributed so that women could grow food in their backyards rather than visit crowded markets. Tabaco became the first city in southern Luzon to offer cash assistance under Mayor Krisel Lagman-Luistro's leadership. She also ensured that relief packages met needs, with eggs for children and calcium for

⁴ For an explanation of the importance of 'participation' rather than 'consultation' see Utting, Peter; Nadine van Dijk and Marie-Adelaide Matheï. 2014. Social and Solidarity Economy: Is There a New Economy in the Making? Occasional Paper 10, Geneva: UNRISD and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

breastfeeding mothers. Lagam-Luistro also recognised the need to create employment for women, switching seamstresses from prom dresses to personal protective equipment (PPE) as graduations and proms were cancelled.

Meanwhile in India, women leaders organised door-to-door education campaigns on Covid-19 prevention measures, while local government leader Siva Lakshmi of Neelithotpalle village in Andhra Pradesh worked with frontline workers on protocols to protect them from Covid-19. Here too, social protection was a priority: in Bokaro in Jharkhand state, another local government leader Shobha Dev re-established essential services to distribute food and hygiene kits by combining local government funds, her own money and private donations. Similarly, elected representative Renuka Kotambkar in Wardha in Maharashtra state used local government funds to enable the distribution of medical kits. In order to reduce gender-based violence, Sunita Devi, a village head in Haryana state, suspended alcohol sales during lockdown (Piscopo & Och, 2021).

Lesson 5: Decision-makers should facilitate the broad participation of stakeholders, community organisations and feminists as part of policymaking.

4.2.2 Community and women's rights organisations

Feminist literature has long established that women's unpaid care work expands to fill in gaps in times of crisis (UN Women, 2015), but what we have seen during the pandemic is the way that women's rights organisations similarly step up to provide support and thereby blunt the full impact of the crisis. Policymaking continues to take for granted the way this work subsidises social protection programmes and the wider economy, ignoring the value it holds. In Argentina, grassroots organising and community response was crucial to meeting surging needs in food security, care, education and health at the local level. The community canteen and kindergarten models formed an in-built safety net when government provisions were insufficient. More organically, staff in these centres were instrumental in community outreach throughout the pandemic and shouldered additional costs in order to survive as a collective.

In India, our case study observed that informal and community safety networks were also fundamental for women's access to support in the face of job and salary loss. In response to the pandemic, SEWA organisations and enterprises increased efforts to provide support to members through livelihood, social protection, and ration support. For example, the SEWA insurance cooperative, VimoSEWA created an insurance product with easy policy guidelines and low premium that eventually covered 3,089 people with Covid-19 insurance. SEWA Cooperative Federation also facilitated working capital provisions for health, agriculture, service, finance and handicraft cooperatives to produce low-cost sanitisers and masks. A

decentralised model of relief work was adopted where the *aagewans* (community leaders) carried out distribution. By extending even modest amounts of capital support, cooperatives were able to support business activities like procuring raw materials, covering fixed costs and procuring assets required for product development and continued payment of income support to members.

Similar experiences were found in the Philippines, where difficulties in accessing government response packages were addressed by community organisations such as the National Coalition of Rural Women⁵, which provided community education on the pandemic and led donation drives to secure seed banking for agricultural production. Meanwhile, the National Network of Informal Workers in the Philippines⁶ and HomeNet Philippines⁷ kept their village savings and loan programme growing throughout the pandemic. They also conducted community education, including on Covid-19 and safety protocols, and livelihood training for their member communities; led donation drives and distribution of food and grocery items with hygiene kits; and produced and sold community face masks and full PPE.

Grassroots safety nets and collective organising at community level play a fundamental role in buffering national crises, including economic shocks. Their inclusion is therefore critical to more equitable gender outcomes, as our case studies show that decentralised models of emergency response support help to enable women's leadership and rapidly address the needs of local people. Further Covid-19 response planning and implementation must, therefore, happen in consultation with women's cooperatives and collectives to focus resources where they are most needed and generate quicker and longer-lasting solutions to day-to-day problems. These organisations must also receive sufficient, appropriate funding for their contributions, ensuring women's unpaid workload is not further expanded. This is not currently the case, as 99 per cent of development aid and foundation grants still do not directly reach women's rights and feminist organisations (Dolker, 2021). The Philippines case study noted that women leaders and organisers themselves were affected by the pandemic and lockdown measures, meaning they had to explore alternative modes of work, scale up digital skills and resources, and be creative and relentless in finding resources for their initiatives.

While women's rights organisations must be recognised, consulted and appropriately funded, they should never be used by governments to side-step their responsibility as part of the "social compact" with citizens to provide public services and universal social protection even in times of crisis.

5 For more information, visit: <https://nrwc.wordpress.com/>.

6 For more information, visit: <https://www.patamaba.org/>.

7 For more information, visit: <https://homenetsea.wordpress.com/country-news/phippines/>.

Lesson 6: Community and women's rights organisations should be recognised as legitimate actors with expertise, consulted in the design of programmes, and provided with sufficient and appropriate funding commensurate with their critical role in recovery.

4.3 Implementation - barriers to women's access

Even where policy provisions existed, implementation challenges have played a significant role in depriving many women, particularly those facing intersecting discriminations, of policy measures and benefits to which they were otherwise entitled, usually because the reality of their lives were ignored by policymakers. Another aspect that became apparent across the case studies was the importance of ground-level organisations in supporting implementation of government programmes during the pandemic, alongside their own service delivery.

4.3.1 Eligibility

The informality of many women's paid work has excluded them from the benefits of policy interventions, as shown in Section 3.1. In Uganda, provisions for small business relief required a level of turnover and collateral that effectively precluded most women-led enterprises. In the Philippines, emergency cash subsidy programmes were limited by embedded gender norms and assumptions that households were headed by men, rather than universal coverage and gender-disaggregated information.

The Indian government's cash transfer scheme was plagued with accessibility problems that included ambiguities in relation to women informal workers' access and the requirement to have bank accounts or digital financial access. Interviewees in our India case study told how women-owned collectives in the Indian informal sector also faced multiple barriers to accessing Covid-19 assistance programmes such as the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan package, which was supposed to help small enterprises. The SEWA Cooperative Federation played a significant role in plugging the gaps, providing information, knowledge and technology for many women so they could access the available support. It supported women's enterprises to register on portals for small business support schemes, facilitated their use of online e-commerce and e-procurement platforms, and provided working capital to agricultural cooperatives. They also initiated a digital literacy programme to facilitate health information sessions.

4.3.2 Communications

The issue of digital inequality has been highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis far more than any other economic shock to date, as curtailments on mobility have shifted nearly all communication, services and operations online. Where a digital gender divide persists, this

leaves many women unable to engage with Covid-19 response measures. Communication was also a problem. In the Philippines, information about pandemic measures was not clear or consistent, leading to confusion when filing claims and difficulty fulfilling requirements for many women. Primar Jardeleza of HomeNet:

What happens is you just have to wait whenever help will come, and it takes a long time. There's lots of documents for submission and other requirements, et cetera. What our members tell us is that they get confused because the guidelines they receive are not consistent. (Online interview, part of Philippines case study, June 2021)

Lesson 7: Covid-19 economic recovery measures will not reach women facing intersecting discriminations if they do not recognise and address the barriers they face in meeting eligibility criteria or applying for assistance.

4.4 Context - constraints imposed by macroeconomic policies

Underpinning all our findings has been the failure of governments to acknowledge and challenge the kind of orthodox macroeconomic policymaking – the dominant framework for economic decision-making globally – that creates, solidifies and perpetuates gendered and other inequalities.

Prior to Covid-19, this pattern of economic policies that are disadvantageous to those most marginalised was apparent across the four case study countries. The devaluing of care – as part of the undervaluing of work done primarily by women – also serves to externalise the care economy in economic policymaking, taking for granted the supply of women's unpaid and underpaid labour. For racialised women across the Global South, particularly those embedded in exploitative global value chains, these realities are compounded by a development model based on free trade and deregulated foreign investment that favours large businesses and the Global North. Justified by cyclical financial and debt crises and the need for fiscal consolidation over the last 40 years, the international financial institutions (IFIs) have extended their reach into national policymaking promoting austerity, with many governments complying (GADN & FEMNET, 2020).

More recently, widespread austerity measures – often imposed by the IFIs as conditions for finance – have included curbs on public spending and public sector wages cuts combined with regressive taxation, leading to a failure to invest sufficiently in public services and social

protection, a focus on inflation and wage restriction, and the “flexibilization” of labour that restricts workers’ rights and conditions. At the same time, governments introduce reductions in tariffs for foreign imports (GADN & BWP, 2020). The ability of governments to fund public services and social protection is then further constrained by the growing debt crisis, with both Argentina and Uganda considered to be at risk (Jubilee Debt Campaign, n.d.). As a result, the “social contract” between governments and their citizens was already severely eroded, even before the pandemic struck.

In Argentina, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recommended cuts in the government wage bill in 2017, while in 2019 gender-focused programmes had already been cut by 19 per cent (IMF, 2017). In India, austerity had arguably been codified since the 2003 Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act to ensure that the country’s fiscal deficit (the difference between a country’s revenue and its expenditure) was kept at no more than 3 per cent (Kapur, 2021). In the decade leading up to the Covid-19 pandemic, India instituted austerity measures, including a reduction in food and energy subsidies, containment of the public sector wage bill and increases in consumption tax (Ortiz et al., 2015). Since coming to power in 2014, the current government has focused on privatising and liberalising the economy with reduced corporate tax rates and cuts in public spending (Ruparelia, 2015). Similarly, in Uganda, food and energy subsidies were also reduced, along with pension reforms and a rise in consumption tax (Ortiz et al., 2015). Women managing household budgets have had to continually adjust to high food costs, consuming smaller quantities of less nutritious food. Equally, with rising fuel and energy costs, the most vulnerable populations carry a disproportionate impact as transportation, lighting and cooking all become less accessible, affecting both welfare and livelihoods. Moreover, measures to further open the economy to trade through the Rice Tarification Law (2019) in the Philippines affected the livelihoods of agricultural workers and smallholder farmers even pre-pandemic, since it promoted imported rice and subsequently lessened the market value of locally produced rice (Simeon, 2020).

As a result, the policy landscape that existed pre-pandemic – often seen as the “normal” to which countries aim to return through recovery policies – has always been unequal and discriminatory. Mounting evidence points to the need for debt cancellation and an end to IFI austerity conditionality as part of any attempts towards just and equitable recovery (GADN & BWP, 2020; Jubilee Debt Campaign, 2020). Section 5 includes proposals for moving instead toward transformative macroeconomic policies, alongside democratised global decision-making.

Lesson 8: Macroeconomic policymaking must address the structural and intersectional roots of gender inequalities.

Lesson 9: Global economic decision-making should promote just, sustainable and equitable Covid-19 recovery that centres wellbeing and care, and that includes the cancellation of outstanding sovereign and commercial debt and an end to harmful austerity conditionality.

4.5 Intent – political will for transformative change

Ultimately, the problem is not just a lack of understanding of existing structural inequalities but also the political will and vision to challenge and change them. Our case studies highlight an absence of ambition, with initial policy responses that were largely ameliorative emergency relief. Moving forward, Covid-19 economic recovery measures must be transformative in intent, deliberately applying feminist policy measures with the power to dismantle structural inequalities and discriminations for the future, rather than condemning women to return to the old “normal” through inaction.

Creating and protecting space for democratic decision-making is crucial to achieving this political will and reinforcing the social compact between state and citizens, yet we have seen how the context of emergency has been used to justify the closing of civil society space, most notably in the Philippines but also in Uganda (Section 3.4). Women’s rights organisations play an important democratic role, providing political education and voice for women otherwise excluded from decision-making. In Argentina, the large-scale *Ni Una Menos* (“not one [woman] less”) mobilization in 2015 and other feminist movements across the country can be seen to contribute to feminist policies by the new government elected in 2019. In the Philippines, the Center for Women’s Resources organises consciousness-raising activities for grassroots communities and the general public, and the Center for Migrant Advocacy initiates dialogues with government agencies and officials and conducts education on migrant workers’ issues. Meanwhile, community and feminist organisations have also put forward proposals for economic recovery like the *Feminist Recovery and Response Plan* by Everywoman, a Filipina feminist network (Claudio ed., 2020).

Support for worker organising is also an important component of democracy. At the start of the pandemic, Ugandan union leader, Janapher Nassali visited all fourteen flower farms in the country to ensure that thousands of workers retained their jobs, negotiating collective agreements benefiting thousands of workers (Musiime, 2020). In India, SEWA Cooperative Federation is confronting challenges faced by women-owned enterprises to access online markets and conversations with the representatives from Government e-Marketplace are ongoing. In the Philippines, the Center for Women’s Resources continues to support various unions fighting for workers’ rights during the pandemic, including just pay and job security.

It is thus crucial that states stop violations of workers' rights in all forms while ensuring and enabling a democratic environment for organising by workers and women human rights defenders without undue restrictions, persecution, or repression.

Lesson 10: In times of crisis, maintaining civil and political space and a vibrant civil society should be a priority for maintaining democratic and accountable decision-making and creating the political will to promote transformative change.

Lesson 11: If Covid-19 economic recovery is to be just and equitable, decision-makers must clearly and intentionally include transformative policy measures that address the structural barriers perpetuating inequality.

4.6 Concluding lessons - feminist proposals for transformative change

This research set out to find positive examples of policy responses to Covid-19 economic recovery that could be used to inform other decision-making and achieve transformative change. Instead, what we found was, by and large, that governments ignored existing and intersecting gender inequalities in the formulation and implementation of their interventions. They failed to address priority issues for women such as the care economy, the reality of informal work and the role of women's rights organisations. Very few responses recognised the care economy in India, the Philippines or Uganda, and even in Argentina where the government acknowledged the importance of care, interventions were inadequate to the scale of need. Women's concentration in informal employment, as well as the fact that women-led businesses are usually smaller enterprises, further excluded them from most measures designed to protect income during the pandemic. Failure to understand the reality of women's lives thus served to exclude them even from the most basic social protection measures. Even where Covid-19 policy measures were deemed gender-sensitive by the UN "tracker", their ameliorative nature meant that they carry little further promise in addressing the structural roots of gender inequalities (UNDP & UN Women, 2021). Recovery measures failed because they were layered on top of foundational inequalities that permeated and shaped the outcomes.

In part, this omission was the result of governments' refusal to enable the participation of feminists and grassroots organisations in policymaking, and to thereby foment an understanding of the barriers to effective implementation and of women's lived realities.

However, more significant has been the lack of political will or vision to see economic recovery as an opportunity for anything more than a return to an already-problematic "normal". Nevertheless, there is still time to reorient towards transformative change as the pandemic continues to unfold and Covid-19 economic recovery measures advance, bringing lasting economic justice to marginalised women and their communities.

Below, we have brought together the lessons identified throughout this report that propose ways to ensure that Covid-19 economic recovery is transformative. Our overarching message is that a just and equitable Covid-19 economic recovery must centre care, wellbeing and sustainability, with transformative policies that promote equity. This requires bold action by local, national and international decision-makers that protects and promotes democratic, participatory decision-making ensuring the participation of feminists and women's rights organisations so the expertise of those most impacted is at the forefront of responses. In turn, this provides policymakers with the information and framework to apply intersectional feminist analyses that centre women's lived experiences and address the long-standing intersecting discriminations they face. Such an approach highlights the need to adopt alternative feminist economic proposals as a means of remedying the discriminations and structural barriers women continue to face. This includes the use of progressive taxation to fund public services and social protection, recognising and reducing unpaid care burdens and promoting decent work with living wages and enforced labour protections.

Together, these lessons form a modest proposal for better understanding women's lived realities and challenging the intersectional discriminations that they face. Based on their deep understanding, knowledge and experiences, feminists from around the world have developed transformative recommendations. In the final section of the report, we provide a snapshot of the wealth of these feminist propositions.

A just and equitable Covid-19 economic recovery must centre care, wellbeing and sustainability with transformative policies that promote equity.

Protect and promote democratic and participatory decision making

Apply intersectional feminist analyses in policymaking

Adopt alternative feminist economic proposals

Lesson 5

Decision-makers should facilitate the broad participation of stakeholders, community organisations and feminists as part of policymaking.



Lesson 6

Community and women's rights organisations should be recognised as legitimate actors with expertise consulted in the design of programmes, and provided with sufficient and appropriate funding commensurate with their critical role in recovery.



Lesson 10

In times of crisis, maintaining civil and political space and a vibrant civil society should be a priority for maintaining democratic and accountable decision-making and creating the political will to promote transformative change.



Lesson 2

Policy formulation and design must address existing and intersecting discriminations that shape the impact of the pandemic on women.



Lesson 1

Policy responses to the pandemic must be sufficient to reflect the scale of the problem, and not rely on women – particularly low-income women and care workers – to fill the deficit.



Lesson 7

Covid-19 economic recovery measures will not reach women facing intersecting discriminations if they do not recognise and address the barriers they face in meeting eligibility criteria or applying for assistance.



Lesson 8

Macroeconomic policymaking must address the structural and intersectional roots of gender inequalities.



Lesson 3

Governments must recognise the central role that care, both paid and unpaid, plays in the wellbeing of society and the functioning of the economy take responsibility for its provision, acknowledging that unpaid and underpaid women should not be responsible for filling gaps.



Lesson 4

Policy responses must create decent work in women-dominated sectors and ensure that women in the informal sector and women-led small businesses benefit from labour and social protections.



Lesson 9

Global economic decision-making should promote just, sustainable and equitable Covid-19 recovery that centres wellbeing and care, and that includes the cancellation of outstanding sovereign and commercial debt and an end to harmful austerity conditionality.



5. Feminist proposals from around the world

This report represents just a small contribution to a wealth of feminist economic alternatives that women's rights movements and labour movements have generated in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. To put these in context, and in an attempt to create spaces for these alternative voices, we have collated some of these proposals and demands below.⁸ UN Women's *A Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice* (2021) also provides valuable propositions, many of which speak to the lessons from our own research. Together they illustrate that transformative change is not just necessary but viable and they set out how to move towards a more just and equitable world.

These proposals in this section are grouped, reflecting the lessons in Section 4. The first set of proposals calls for more democratic decision-making where women and their organisations meaningfully participate. The second addresses the importance of policymaking that reflects the reality of women's lives through an intersectional feminist lens. The next three sets of alternative proposals outline what transformative policymaking could look like, with proposals on recognising and investing in the care economy, promoting decent work for all women, feminist alternatives to current macroeconomic models. The final set of proposals relates to a theme running throughout our case studies and a central tenet of just and sustainable Covid-19 economic recovery: the need to reframe the ultimate goal of economic activity as wellbeing rather than economic growth.

5.1 Protect and promote democratic, participatory decision-making

Feminist alternative economic models will not be adopted without participatory democratic decision-making, where the priorities of women facing intersecting discriminations are heard and their expertise valued.

⁸ Most of the proposals outlined below come from a GADN briefing, *Feminist proposals for a just, equitable and sustainable post-Covid-19 economic recovery*, that can be accessed here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/536c4ee8e4b0b60bc6ca7c74/t/603655a9172ae6638e3f8864/1614173611820/COVID+19+Economic+Recovery+Collation+of+Demands+2021.pdf>. Further proposals are available on GADN's website: <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/feminist-responses-to-COVID-19>.

Promoting participatory democratic decision-making

- [The African Feminist Post-Covid-19 Economic Recovery Statement](#), signed by 340 different African organisations and individuals, posits that the recovery process should recognise communities – particularly marginalised and underrepresented ones - as experts that should be involved in decision-making platforms and demands that they ensure the creation of “an open, inclusive and transparent process” (African Feminism, 2020).
- WoMin, an African ecofeminist alliance for climate justice and to advance women-centred, community-driven development alternatives, [advocates](#) for women’s movements and organisations to be fully engaged in discussions on post-Covid-19 recovery measures (WoMin, 2020). The Gender and Covid-19 Working Group - a global group of researchers, health practitioners, policy actors, and advocates on women’s rights and Covid-19 - [argues](#) for women-led organisations, feminist academics and women’s experiences and ideas to be at the centre of recovery efforts (and beyond) in government bodies, official consultations and online spaces (Solomon et al., 2020).
- The Count Me In Consortium, an initiative led by women’s fund Mama Cash, [demands](#) increased representation of women in Covid-19 decision-making spaces, including financial and fiscal processes. They also call on funders and governments to make sure that gender equality and women’s rights are at the heart of Covid-19 recovery, which includes making core and flexible funding available to women’s rights organisations (Count Me In Consortium, 2020).
- Global feminist movement AWID’s [Feminist Bailout Manifesto](#) advocates for the inclusion of experiences and voices of feminist experts in decision-making processes, particularly emphasising underrepresented and marginalised communities. It also urges policymakers and funders to eliminate any obstacles for organisations, especially feminist movements and community-led organisations, to access resources (AWID, 2020).

Protecting civic political space

- [The Feminist Manifesto](#), a statement coordinated by the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), an African women’s rights organisation, is the result of almost two years of consultations with more than 250 women from various grassroots movements and has been endorsed by more than 50 organisations. It sets out demands to reform discriminatory laws to enable women’s effective political participation, as well as calling for women’s meaningful participation in peace and transitional justice processes (Bajec, 2021).

- The Feminist Alliance for Rights (FAR), a global alliance working to advance gender equality, [stresses](#) that to prevent abuse of power, “any restriction [of political freedoms] should be strictly necessary, proportionate and in the interest of legitimate objectives of general interest”, and demands support for civil society organisations and human rights defenders to monitor developments in detention and confinement facilities (FAR, 2020).

5.2 Apply an intersectional feminist framework to gender-responsive policymaking

In calling for a gender-transformative Covid-19 recovery, feminists are clear that an intersectional lens is critical for ensuring that women facing multiple and intersecting discriminations are included, with a focus on racial justice and decolonisation.

- The Women’s Major Group [calls](#) for human rights-based, gender-responsive Covid-19 recovery plans that target the most marginalised groups in society and are designed to eradicate inequalities. This will require the meaningful engagement of feminist-, women- and youth-led organisations in the design, implementation, monitoring and review of recovery plans (Women’s Major Group, 2020a).
- A [statement](#) by FAR (2020), endorsed by more than 1,600 individuals and women’s networks and organisations from more than 100 countries in the Global South, demands that states adopt a feminist policy to address the extraordinary challenges posed by the pandemic in a manner that is consistent with human rights standards and principles (FAR, 2020). Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development members [call](#) for feminist responses that are women- and people-centred, using intersectional analysis to understand the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on different groups (APWLD, n.d.).
- The UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent [underlines](#) the importance of applying a racial lens to gender-responsive approaches for Covid-19 economic recovery. It demands that states recognise how the historical exploitation of people of African descent causes current risks and calls on them to be led by racial equity and racial equality (UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, n.d.).

5.3 Acknowledge and invest in the care economy

Core to the re-shaping of economic policy is recognition of the care economy across policymaking with increased investment in social infrastructure, gender-transformative public services and universally accessible social protection.

Recognise the care economy

- [The African Feminist Post-Covid-19 Economic Recovery Statement](#) highlights the importance of recognising the care economy: “no turnaround in Africa’s socio-economic fortunes will happen without recognizing the economic, social, political and cultural value of the care economy –where the provisioning of care goods and services to households and the economy is predominantly through women’s invisibilized unpaid and domestic labour, but also in many forms of popular/horizon sector, migrant and public sector jobs that are precarious, badly paid and without labour protections”. It goes on to call for the implementation of measures to support the resilience of the care economy (African Feminism, 2020).
- PSI outlines a new approach to care that regards it as a human need and right, which translates to a re-valuation of care and its role in society. For that to become a reality, PSI advocates for public services to be placed in public hands, funded through a progressive taxation model (Pavanelli, 2020).

Invest in the public provision of care

- [The #AllWomenWork Global Campaign Statement](#), endorsed by more than 160 organisations and networks from across the globe, advocates for governments to invest in care institutions and infrastructure and ensure decent work conditions to establish a nation-wide approach to the care economy (APMDD, 2020a).
- Similarly, the UK-based Women’s Budget Group [calls](#) for investment in social and physical infrastructure as vital prerequisites for a caring economy (Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, 2020).
- The We Rise Coalition, a Pacific feminist network, [calls](#) on governments to guarantee universal, high-quality services in care, children’s education and food security. Universal coverage should be accessible to all, including informal workers and immigrants, through non-contributory schemes that are well designed, funded and publicised (We Rise Coalition, 2020).
- International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific [considers](#) that investment in quality, accessible and gender-sensitive fundamental public services, including water and sanitation infrastructure, sexual and reproductive health services, domestic violence services, safely reopened schools and universal, free childcare, is crucial to an equitable Covid-19 response (IWRAW-AP, 2020).
- The Gender and Covid-19 Working Group [recommends](#) universally accessible, free childcare as well as long-term eldercare (Solomon et al., 2020).

Provide universal social protection

- Covid-19 has also shone a spotlight on the need for social protection. The International Trade Union Confederation is [calling](#) for universal, gender-responsive social protection available to all workers regardless of employment status, migrant status, race, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation (ITUC, 2020a). The ITUC also [calls](#) for a global social protection fund to “kickstart national social protection systems” funded by an increase in overseas development assistance commitments, corporation taxes including a tax on financial transactions and contributions from IFIs (ITUC, 2020b).
- The Women’s Major Group [demands](#) that reductions in spending must be avoided on non-contributory social protection mechanisms. Discrimination against gender non-binary people in accessing social protection programmes must also be removed (Women’s Major Group, 2020b).
- Women Enabled International, a US-based global network working on the intersection of gender and disability, [calls](#) on states to ensure access for women and girls with disabilities to social protection measures that should go directly to these individuals instead of partners or family members (Women Enabled International et al., 2020).

Remunerate care workers

- Recognising the care economy also means improving the conditions of paid care workers. The International Domestic Workers Federation, a membership-based global organisation of domestic and household workers, [highlights](#) non-compliance with legislation protecting domestic workers’ rights in Latin America and demands government measures, as well as basic income, to support domestic workers (Valenzuela & Ramírez, 2021).
- Articulación Regional Feminista, an alliance of feminist institutions working for human rights and gender justice in Latin America, [emphasises](#) that the rights of domestic workers must be guaranteed at all times by providing continuity of pay (ARF, 2020).
- WoMin [suggests](#) the payment of cash transfers to caregivers for recognition and compensation of their labour (WoMin, 2020).

5.4 Promote decent work for all women

The provision of decent work with secure labour conditions, freedom of association and a fair wage will be indispensable for an economic recovery that ensures all women can

benefit from paid work, with national development strategies that target employment creation in sectors where women predominate. In the first instance, this must entail government ratification and enforcement of ILO conventions on freedom of association (Convention 87), collective bargaining (Convention 154), violence in the workplace (Convention 190) and domestic workers (Convention 189).

Improve labour regulations

- The ITUC [calls](#) for decent work to be at the centre of the Covid-19 economic recovery ‘that puts people first’, with income protection, minimum living wages and basic income for those in the informal economy (ITUC, 2020c). The ITUC also [calls](#) for decent pay and working conditions, including equal pay for work of equal value (ITUC, 2020b).
- The Domestic, Home and Contract Workers’ Association (Asociación de Trabajadoras del Hogar, a Domicilio y de Maquila), an organisation of Guatemalan working women, is [calling](#) for programmes to access decent work and salaries and support for women-owned businesses, as well as incentivising national and international safe tourism to support women who sell artisanal products and work in related industries (ATRAHDOM, 2021).
- States that have not ratified the ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment should be [urged](#) to do so according to AWID (AWID, 2020).
- Asociación Lola Mora, an Argentinian women’s rights organisation, [calls](#) for the improvement of women workers’ organisations’ legal status, which would help them to access resources and funding to fulfil their mandates (Asociación Lola Mora, 2020).

Create decent work

- AWID [calls](#) for policy measures to tackle the barriers that prevent women from accessing employment, compensation, recovery and other financial packages; that recognise the household as a workplace and secure labour rights for domestic workers; and that protect the rights and freedom of movement of migrant and undocumented workers (AWID, 2020).
- The Gender and Covid-19 Working Group [calls](#) for support to workers in women-dominated economic sectors that were particularly hard hit by the pandemic, along with historically marginalised women workers, such as indigenous women and sex workers (Solomon et al., 2020).
- Meanwhile, SEWA Cooperative Federation [emphasises](#) the particular position of informal workers, advocating for access to financial and capital resources, markets, and technology and digital tools (SEWA Cooperative Federation, 2020).

5.5 Pursue feminist macroeconomic models including progressive taxation to fund public services and social protection

The need for feminist macroeconomic alternatives is evident across many of the statements, particularly in relation to taxation but also debt and trade and investment rules.

Implement progressive taxation

- The Global Alliance for Tax Justice’s [Make Taxes Work for Women](#) campaign advocates for governments to meet the macroeconomic commitments laid out in the Beijing Declaration, which called on nations to “review and modify macroeconomic policies especially tax policies to address the structural causes of poverty and reduce gender inequality” (United Nations & World Conference on Women, 1995, p. 36), including through gender budgeting, to ensure that tax revenues are raised and spent in ways that promote gender equality (Global Alliance for Tax Justice, 2020; Tax and Gender Working Group & the WWG on FfD, 2020).
- The Asian Peoples’ Movement on Debt and Development [calls](#) for a global minimum corporate tax rate to fund quality public services and universal social protection, including universal health coverage. APMDD also recommends taxing multinational companies as a single entity to prevent profits being shifted to low- and zero-tax countries, as well as levying excess profits taxes on multinational firms, especially those profiting from the crisis (APMDD, 2020b).
- The Feminist Response to Covid-19 [calls](#) for special taxes on financial flows, short-term speculative currency, financial transactions and concentration of wealth to serve as the basis to raise the necessary public resources to face current and future crises (Feminist Response to Covid-19, 2020). Tax justice and use of progressive taxation should ensure corporations pay fair taxes in order to increase public resources, as well as addressing tax avoidance and tax evasion including illicit financial flows (African Feminism, 2020). WoMin and the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM) [call](#) for the closing of all loopholes for tax evasion, trade mis-invoicing, unlawful transfer pricing and the corruption of government officials by corporations headquartered in their territories (WoMin & CADTM, 2020).

Cancel sovereign debt

- WoMin and CADTM [advocate](#) for the cancellation of both official and private external debt, urging the Global North and China to recognise their global responsibility in light of the pandemic (WoMin & CADTM, 2020).

- [The African Feminist Post-Covid-19 Economic Recovery Statement](#) prioritises debt cancellation, urging African governments to reject conditionalities on financial support, particularly concerning deregulating the private sector as well as the privatisation of public services (African Feminism, 2020).
- The call for debt cancellation has been echoed across different groups and organisations, including the [Women's Major Group](#) (2020a), an official UN participant on Sustainable Development; [APWLD](#) (2020); Public Services International (Pavanelli, 2020), a global union federation; and many others who endorsed an open letter in October 2020 that demanded immediate and unconditional debt cancellation for the next four years. The [letter](#) has been signed by a range of feminist organisations, such as AWID; Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a network of feminist scholars, researchers and activists from the economic South; the African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET) (APMDD, 2020c).

Reform trade and investment rules

- The Women's Working Group on Financing for Development [asserts](#) that, “the current trade and investment framework has played a major role both in intensifying this crisis and in constraining governments from responding adequately to it” (Women's Working Group on FfD, 2020, p.2). Trade must also therefore be part of feminist macroeconomic reimaginations.
- The Gender and Trade Coalition, a global coalition of feminist activists, [underlines](#) that trade policies should first and foremost “affirm the primacy of governments' human rights obligations under the UN Charter” (Gender and Trade Coalition, n.d.).
- The Women's Major Group (2020a) also [calls](#) for the end of unfair trade agreements, and [the African Feminist Post-Covid-19 Economic Recovery Statement](#) highlights the colonial legacy of trade practices that needs to be tackled (African Feminism, 2020).
- Current trade policy also impacts on vaccine distribution, contributing to vaccine inequity (Feminists for a People's Vaccine, 2021). In line with this, the People's Vaccine Campaign, a global coalition of organisations and activists, [demands](#) an end to vaccine apartheid, calling on leaders to “break the shackles of intellectual property on vaccines and Covid-19 knowledge” (The People's Vaccine, n.d.).

5.6 Re-evaluate the goals of economic activity to put people, wellbeing and sustainability at its centre

Many of the feminist alternatives proposed have at their core a shared commitment to re-framing the goals of economic activity and rejecting the old economic orthodoxies of growth and exploitation. With that in mind, all of the statements below call for new economic models built on care, environmental sustainability, solidarity and the transformation of unjust international economic systems.

- Friends of the Earth International, a global grassroots environmental network; World March of Women; and the Latin American Network on Women Transforming the Economy (Red Latinoamericana de Mujeres Transformando la Economía – REMTE) jointly [call](#) for a fair and just recovery that “must break completely from the heteropatriarchal, capitalist, racist, colonist and destructive model” (Nansen & Faria, 2020, p. 5). This includes demands for the reorganisation and redistribution of domestic and care work, as well as continuing the fight against global debt.
- AWID [calls](#) for a new economic model with a lower and more sustainable level of production and consumption, to be achieved by downsizing resource-, energy- and emission-intensive superfluous production, particularly in the North, and directing investments instead into the care sector, social infrastructure and environmental restoration. Central to this is a redefinition and validation of care work, both unpaid and paid, challenging gender stereotypes and embedded notions of productive labour (AWID, n.d.). AWID also [advocates](#) recognising a plurality of economic models – community economies, informal economies and solidarity economies, amongst others – given their potential for reimagining and reshaping the global economy (AWID, 2020).
- [The Feminist Degrowth Statement on the Covid-19 Pandemic](#) calls for recognition, regeneration and strengthening of the spheres of social and ecological reproduction; a caring economy that equitably re-values both paid and unpaid care work; North-South solidarity and the implementation of a global Green New Deal; debt cancellation; and refusal of austerity and structural adjustment (FADA, 2020).
- The International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, a global human rights movement, [demands](#) that alternative economic models be “grounded on solidarity, cooperation, mutual support and participatory economies, which value the social contribution of care and other forms of work and the mutual well-being of people and nature” (ESCR-Net, 2020).
- The Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA), which represents more than 400 mostly women-led grassroots organisations, [calls](#) for alternative economies

Annex – Case Studies

Argentina

- to include actions in areas such as community financial support, collective care and community exchange of food (Wenham et al., 2020).
- The Feminist Economic Justice for People and Planet Action Nexus, led by FEMNET; the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO); the Women's Working Group on Financing for Development; and the Panafrican Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA) [demand](#) a feminist and decolonial Global Green New Deal to create “a new paradigm that forges active links between climate change, racialized and gendered labor exploitation, trade rules and economic structures that reproduce inequalities both within and among nations” (Muchhala, 2021, p. 1).
 - The global coalition Feminist Agenda for a Green New Deal [advocates](#) for feminist principles to guide climate action, including revaluing and centring care work in our new economy (Feminist Agenda for a Green New Deal, 2019).
 - [The African Feminist Post-Covid-19 Economic Recovery Statement](#) emphasises that the Covid-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the link between the environment and health. The statement calls for the sustainable use of biodiversity, especially for those communities on the frontlines of climate change that have been these resources' custodians for centuries (African Feminism, 2020).
 - The Women's Budget Group's Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy [calls](#) for a caring economy as an alternative economic model that “puts people and planet first”, and emphasises that this model would simultaneously support wellbeing, sustainability and gender equality (Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, 2020, p.3).

This case study is based on research conducted by Eleonor Faur, a Professor at the National University of San Martín in Argentina and a Researcher at the Institute for Economic and Social Development (IDES Argentina). Her findings are based in part on work done with Karina Brovelli, Magister in Social Policy, at Hospital Fernandez in Buenos Aires (Faur, E. and Brovelli, K., 2020). The research explores the issue of care work, given that it is a vital activity for the wellbeing of the population and an essential part of societal and political organisation. Three sectors of care workers – domestic service, community childcare workers and community care workers at food banks – were chosen to allow for an intersectional exploration of class and gender while reclaiming the voices of women belonging to community organisations. These are also sectors in which Argentinian women from less affluent backgrounds often work and which were strongly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit in different ways.



This case study was compiled using a combination of a desk-based review and a total of 30 semi-structured virtual interviews with women working in the three care sectors studied. The interviewees are from the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires and are representatives of social and trade union organisations and officials from each sector. These included representatives from canteens run by community organisations *Movimiento Evita* in San Martin and *Movimiento Barrios de Pie* in Avellaneda and an independent canteen in Berazategui. Coordinators from Red El Encuentro community centres and kindergartens in La Matanza, Buenos Aires province were also interviewed, along with eight domestic workers and a representative of a domestic workers union. The names of interviewees have not been included to protect anonymity. The research and fieldwork for this case study was conducted between August and October 2020.

1. Background

As an upper-middle income country, Argentina suffers from acute socioeconomic inequalities. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the country was facing a crisis that critics have suggested was due to four years of neoliberal governance between 2015 and 2019 (Kovalski, 2019; Weisbrot, 2019). Economic recession and soaring rates of inflation saw workers' purchasing power diminish, average wages adjusted to below inflation levels and the proportion of minimum income spent on public utilities tripled. During this period the government introduced fiscal consolidation measures as a condition of a US\$57 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – the largest in the country's history (Wahren et al., 2018; UNDAV, 2018; Kovalski, 2019). The assault on basic public services like healthcare and education was clear when the government approved US\$10 billion in cuts to essential services in its 2019 budget (Brunswijk, 2018). This included a 19 per cent overall decrease in spending for gender-focused programmes that, in turn, threatened the fulfilment of women's human rights in Argentina and promised to intensify existing gender inequalities (CEPA, 2018). These events helped to mobilise large-scale protests and social movements, including the *feminismo popular* movement in 2019, founded on the country's longstanding Latin American socialist traditions (Broggi, 2019).

By the time of the election of a new Peronist government in late 2019, labour force participation rates among men in Argentina were 71 per cent compared to just 51 percent among women. As of 2017, the income gap between men and women stood at 27 per cent (UNDP, 2020; Strada et al., 2018). This is in part explained by the disproportionate amount of unpaid care work undertaken by women, which is an additional 15 hours per week compared to men, thus limiting their ability to take on paid work (Strada et al., 2018). Where women do undertake paid work, they are over-represented in the informal sector compared to men and in feminised and devalued professions such as healthcare, teaching and domestic services (DNElyG & UNICEF, 2021). Therefore, while the new government aimed to alleviate the critical socioeconomic situation it had inherited – in part by taking up feminist demands and establishing the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity – the Covid-19 pandemic hit the country only a few months after the new government took office, threatening these efforts to combat inequalities.

2. Impacts of Covid-19 in Argentina

Analysis by the Argentinian government estimates that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the value of unpaid care and domestic work was US\$67.438 million, equivalent to 16 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and representing the largest sector in the economy (Ministry of Economy Argentina, 2021). Critically, it identified that at the height of the pandemic, while many productive sectors had drastically reduced their activities, unpaid care and domestic work increased to 22 per cent of GDP (Ministry of Economy Argentina,

2021), thereby highlighting its importance and value for sustaining functioning economies. This rise is also reflected in our research with domestic, community and canteen workers.

Domestic workers

Paid domestic work is an important source of income for many Argentinian women and exemplifies the way care work is undervalued in many societies. For lower-income women with low educational credentials, domestic employment is a gateway to the labour market with relatively few barriers. The sector employs around 1.4 million women, approximately 17 per cent of the economically active female population and 22 per cent of the country's salaried women. Women account for 99 per cent of the workforce within this sector (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2020). During the first months of nationwide lockdowns, two out of three domestic workers were laid off and one in five were no longer paid (Donza, 2020). In 2021, the occupation that used to represent 17 per cent of the female workforce showed a loss of 430,000 jobs. As a result, Argentinian domestic workers suffered some of the largest job and wage losses in the economy as a whole, while female labour participation shrank by 8 per cent (DNElyG & UNICEF, 2021). Despite the existence of a legal framework protecting their rights, for a myriad of reasons, 77 per cent of domestic workers in Argentina are not registered, thereby losing many of the labour rights that would have been otherwise afforded to them (López Mourelo, 2020; Pereyra, 2017).

Based on interviews conducted with three domestic workers in October 2020, in addition to job losses, Argentinian domestic workers also faced serious income constraints and often had to resort to support from family members and friends to stave off debt and a general deterioration of their livelihoods. Uncertainty became the common denominator in domestic workers' experiences as they took more unpaid work within their employers' homes and saw their incomes shrink or disappear.

Community care filling the gaps in public provision

As a result of recurrent socioeconomic crises that have swept the country since the 1980s,⁹ Argentinian neighbourhoods and communities developed grassroots safety nets and informal solidarity mechanisms that have helped support people and sustain life, particularly in the absence of sufficient state responses. In Argentina, the system of trueque, or bartering, is one of the ways this manifests; community canteens and kindergartens are another (Gómez, 2015). Due to the lack of a legal framework consistent with the tasks they perform, community care workers in Argentina are neither public nor private employees. Instead, they are usually considered "volunteers" as state financial support to these community services does not include the payment of salaries or fees for those who work there.

⁹ In the 1980s, a severe crisis swept through the countries of Latin America, resulting in increased poverty and widening socioeconomic gaps. This process was aggravated during the 1990s, when a neoliberal model of structural reforms and privatisation of social services (education, pensions and health) was imposed. During this period, community kindergartens and community canteens expanded.

While community canteens respond to immediate subsistence needs, community kindergartens – most of which started off as community canteens – provide support for food assistance and childcare, although they lack the regulations or recognition of educational kindergartens. Nevertheless, they play a key role in some poor areas where provision of kindergartens is scarce (Faur & Pereyra, 2019). Community workers, 86 per cent of whom are women (Faur & Brovelli, 2020), made the most of the resources available as the pandemic hit, at the cost of intensifying care work and sacrificing the quality of services. They saw their workload increase significantly with notable likely costs to their personal lives, mental and physical health, and self-care.

As relayed by many interviewees, higher rates of unemployment during the pandemic meant increases in the food aid needs of lower-income populations. This enhanced demand on community canteens amid scarcity at home and inadequate state resources, putting pressure on community workers. According to figures from the Ministry of Social Development, the number of people attending canteens increased by 40 per cent, from 8 million to 11 million nationwide (Ministry of Social Development, 2020).

Community workers – largely women – had to cover the state's financial shortcomings in the midst of its Covid-19 policy response to care and to address the surging social needs of local populations. Estimates by some of the social organisations that run these spaces (such as *Movimiento Evita*, *Barrios de Pie* and *La Poderosa*) indicate that community canteens tripled the rations they prepared as soon as the lockdowns began (Peralta, 2020). According to interviewees, these women increased their working hours, reporting that at the peak of the pandemic they had “no work schedule” and even compromised their own already-strained financial resources to buy more food in order to cater for everyone’s needs. Similarly, community childcare workers put in more unremunerated working hours to attend to families’ and children’s needs due to school closures. This is a pattern repeated the world over as women’s time and resources, especially in times of crises, are often considered elastic (Díaz-García et al., 2021). As we will see in the next section, insufficient policy responses doubled the care burdens these women experienced.

3. Policy responses from the Argentinian government

The UN “tracker” ranks Argentina third in the Americas for the 43 measures it has instituted so far. Of these, 36 were considered gender-sensitive, the highest number recorded by the tracker system. Seven of these measures addressed women’s unpaid care, 10 sought to address violence against women and girls (VAWG) and nine were aimed at women’s economic security (UNDP & UN Women, 2021). The “tracker” also revealed that 53 per cent of the government team in charge of designing measures to deal with the crisis were women (University of Pittsburgh, UNDP & UN Women, n.d.). In total, the Argentinian government

invested 6.6 per cent of GDP in the assistance package to contain the insidious impacts of the pandemic on the welfare of the population (DNElyG & UNICEF, 2021).

At the start of the pandemic, the Argentinian government introduced a package of initiatives that sought to protect jobs and incomes and support the most socially vulnerable sectors of the population. The measures targeted both the formal sector and informal and low-income workers. These included protections against dismissals in both public and private employment and a series of social protection measures. The emergency family income was one example of this, providing a monthly income of 59 per cent of the minimum wage for informal workers, the unemployed, lower categories of single tax-paying workers and all domestic workers both registered and unregistered. It reached 8.9 million people, just over half of whom were women (ANSES, 2020).

Other measures to support income were the reinforcement of monetary allowances such as pensions, retirement benefits, the universal child allowance and the universal pregnancy allowance (Health Emergency Decree - Argentinian Government, 2020a; ADB, 2021). For workers in private homes, paid leave was granted by means of a special governmental decree (Decree 297/2020 – Argentinian Government, 2020b), but this did not include domestic workers who performed care work – for children or the elderly, for example – as they were characterised as essential workers and expected to continue working.

Community canteens also received increased budget allocations and provision of commodities, with the Ministry of Social Development transferring more than 900 million Argentinian pesos (approximately US\$8.5 million) to around 3,000 school canteens, community canteens and picnic centres that do not participate in its food assistance programmes on a regular basis (Faur & Brovelli, 2020). This increase in funding was fuelled by the Covid-19 related death of shantytown leader Ramona Medina in May 2020. An activist of *La Poderosa* movement and canteen worker, Medina had condemned the lack of water in Villa 31, where she lived, over social media for preventing people in neighbourhoods like hers from washing their hands and sanitising their homes effectively in the middle of the pandemic (Buenos Aires Times, 2020). Her activism and death inspired an increase in the government’s budget allocations to community canteens.

The government also launched the inter-ministerial Committee on Care Policies, led by the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity together with twelve other government institutions. Tasked to coordinate care activities across different sectors, reviewing policies and producing a guiding document to place care at the heart of government policies, the Committee’s first annual report was published in May 2021 and entitled 100 Actions on Care (Mesa Interministerial de Políticas de Cuidado, 2021). The Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity convened an *ad honorem* experts’ commission to draft a bill to create a national comprehensive care system in Argentina. By strengthening public services and recognising care work, it sought to close social and gender gaps and redistribute care provision between

institutions (state, market, families and community) and genders. However, after a poor mid-term election result for the government in November 2021, the bill was deprioritised and never presented to either House of Congress. As the economic situation worsened in Argentina with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and an intensifying external debt crisis, the issue of care was side-lined.

4. Impacts of policy responses

The worsening socioeconomic situation in 2021 saw 41 per cent of Argentina's population living below the poverty line (INDEC, 2021). Even though the Argentinian government introduced the greatest number of gender-sensitive policy responses to the pandemic, according to the UN "tracker", ultimately, the recovery process has not been even between men and women (UN Women & UNDP, 2021). While 390,000 more men were employed in the first months of 2021 than in the previous year, this positive differential was almost entirely offset by the 360,000 fewer women who were employed over the same period (CETYD–IDAES, 2021). As outlined previously, the domestic services sector played a key role in the loss of women's employment and also underscores the reality of uneven recovery between women from different income groupings, with lower-income women more deeply and adversely impacted (CETYD–IDAES, 2021).

Overall, it can be argued that the government's progressive orientation was central to defining and financing gender measures in a context of macroeconomic restriction. However, the measures did not go far enough to address existing pervasive inequalities. Measures protecting workers frequently did not extend to domestic workers, failing to acknowledge their precarious employment status as they continue to be perceived as "help" rather than as employees by those who employed them. For example, among the eight domestic workers interviewed for our research, only two took the leave to which they were entitled and received their pay on time, despite being registered and working for a single employer. Other women domestic workers lost their jobs, were suspended and stopped receiving their wages, had their income reduced in a discretionary manner or were registered as carers to justify their continued attendance at work. Uncertainty was the common denominator for most of these women workers, which saw many taking out loans, seeking help from their families and resorting to food aid to survive. Furthermore, many accepted changes in working arrangements without additional pay as one domestic worker explained:

My job was only cleaning the house, washing clothes and shopping, but after the pandemic, I took care of the children too, the food and everything, so that their mother could work a little. (Online interview, October 2020)

A representative of union of auxiliary workers in private homes (UPACP) in Buenos Aires points to the urgent need to recognise domestic workers as workers:

Many employers still argue, "why should I pay my worker if she doesn't come to work?" ... This is where we realise that the domestic worker is not seen as a worker. (Online interview, August 2020)

The same interviewee also pointed out that some employers used the fact that workers had access to the emergency family income initiative to exempt themselves from paying domestic workers their wages. This helps highlight the inherent power dynamics at play in this kind of employment – in which women are over-represented, and much of which takes place in the private domain, often beyond the reach of government legislation.

Amongst community canteen workers, workloads intensified as they attempted to cushion the socioeconomic fallout of the pandemic. Although the government acted quickly to protect food security during the Covid-19 crisis, the exponential increase in demand for food meant that state allocations proved insufficient. This meant making the most of the resources available, at the cost of increasing care work and sacrificing the quality of services, as a canteen worker in Avellaneda explained:

We try to make enough ... instead of using one bag of potatoes for two pots, we use it for five. So clearly the nutrients are reduced. But well, it's the only way to stretch, that is, it's the magic that our cooks do. (Online interview, September 2020)

A lack of fresh food is a constant; workers make up for this shortage in different ways, including by preparing meals to sell outside the canteens in order to invest the proceeds in food for the community. This significantly increased the workloads of the women running the community canteens also extended their working hours, while contending with situations of violence and investing their own resources to supplement national and provincial payments. A worker in one of the canteens run by *Movimiento Evita* explained,

As for food, we receive part of it through the Movimiento Evita and another part from the municipality. The rest comes from our own financing, we put in 200 pesos every month and we buy some fresh food, replace the gas cylinder, we pay for the electricity. (Online interview, August 2020)

The voices of the community canteen workers reveal that none of the policies implemented for the sector would have been successful without the organisational groundwork and the additional care work of those who run the canteens, which made the response possible. For those working in community kindergartens and child development centres, work increased considerably despite children being out of school. The food that used to feed the children attending the centres began to also feed their families, including those neighbourhoods that had no previous contact with the centres. A coordinator of the *Red El Encuentro* community centres observed:

We are covering 50 to 60 per cent more people, and this comes at the expense of the quality of the food, which is certainly not the same nutritionally. (Online interview, August 2020)

Yet, the community kindergartens where interviews were conducted did not receive any additional funding from the different governmental entities they work with, and those dependent on fees rather than state funding were at even greater risk during lockdowns. The coordinator went on to explain:

They didn't give us a single extra peso ... the only thing that happened is that the food programme enabled us to spend the same amount of money faster. (Online interview, August 2020)

Furthermore, the shift from classroom childcare and teaching to the production and distribution of home learning materials forced the community centres to invest not only more time but also more resources to buy materials, when they could not recycle what was available. According to a community centre educator:

Preparing material for 130 children takes a lot of effort. Before, we used to make two or three games for the classroom and share them together, now we have to make 130. We are doing our best to replicate the same games they have so that they can enjoy them at home with their families. (Online interview, September 2020)

Community kindergarten workers also took on the added responsibility of checking on women and mothers in their communities when they came to pick up their meals, and sometimes even going out to look for those who missed their pick-ups, with rising levels of domestic violence and illness and death from Covid-19 in mind.

These impacts among domestic workers, community canteen workers and kindergarten workers indicate that – despite the government's relatively large number of gender sensitive responses – there are still critical gaps in its approach to recovery. Essentially, the response overlooks or fails to address the structural inequalities faced by women and particularly those in the lowest income brackets, working precarious jobs and in the most marginalised communities.

India

This case study is based on the work of Nikita Chettri, Salonie Muralidhara Hiriyur and Palak Gadhiya who are members of the Research Team at Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Cooperative Federation. Based in Gujarat, SEWA Cooperative Federation's main role is to support SEWA's cooperatives in capacity building for management and marketing as well as policy and advocacy work with key stakeholders. It is part of SEWA, a trade union of 1.9 million low-income, self-employed women workers in the informal sector.

The aim was to capture and highlight the experiences of women in cooperatives in the informal sector, drawing on the work of SEWA Cooperative Federation during the Covid-19 pandemic and its decades of experience working with women workers hold up the Indian economy and society with their labour. Given the SEWA Federation's diverse sectoral and occupational membership, this case study captures learnings from various sectors including agriculture, services, social security and manufacturing. It includes findings from interviews they conducted with 260 of its members in Ahmedabad city, Gujarat in April 2020, and some additional phone interviews with cooperative leaders. More detailed analysis of their findings is also available (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). The case study also draws on other research done with SEWA members (WIEGO & SEWA, 2020).

1. Background

India's economy is one of the largest in the world, with historic successes in reducing rates of absolute poverty, but the country was nonetheless already struggling prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2021a; Inamdar & Alluri, 2021). There is currently a strong focus on privatising and liberalising the economy through a variety of measures, such as reducing corporate tax rates and abolishing the country's wealth tax, as well as working to create a business-friendly regulatory environment to encourage foreign investment. This has included repealing many of the country's labour laws and making it more difficult for workers to unionise. This mix of neoliberal economic reforms has seen rates of inflation and unemployment rise, as well as produced a ballooning fiscal deficit. This has also been accompanied by a notable reduction in public spending, especially on poverty reduction and social welfare programmes, including a 15 per cent cut to health and 16 per cent to education spending in the government's inaugural budget – all undermining the previous administration's many rights-based welfare initiatives (Ruparelia, 2015). Furthermore,



while gender budgeting has been in effect at the national level since 2004, the gender budget has consistently accounted for less than 1 per cent of total GDP and spending on gender equality has tended to be concentrated in a small handful of ministries, with limited transparency about the true impact of its allocation and spend (Shekhar, 2020).

Understanding the Indian economy

The informal economy makes up 90 per cent of India's economy, employing 420 million workers, with informal employment rates as high as 98 per cent in the agricultural sector and 72 per cent in the services sector (Bacil & Soyer, 2020; National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, 2009). The agricultural sector is the largest source of informal employment in rural India with 75 per cent of women workers engaging in agricultural activities, compared to only 55 per cent of male workers (Agarwal, 2021). Even beyond agriculture, in sectors like domestic work, home-based work, street vending, construction and waste picking – which account for 36 per cent of total informal employment in the country, all without contracts – 54 per cent of these workers were women compared to just 31 per cent of men (Chakraborty, 2021).

As has been widely documented, work in the informal economy has tended to be marked by insecure employment, poor working conditions, limited labour rights and little access to social protection (ILO, 2018a). The intersections between gender, household income and various other socio-cultural indicators such as caste, class and religion further disenfranchise women workers (Chen, 2001). Like much of the world, women-dominated sectors also pay less than those dominated by men in India. For example, home-based and domestic workers receive less than half the remuneration of construction sector workers, with women also undertaking up to 60 per cent higher levels of unpaid care work compared to men (Chakraborty, 2021; Chen, 2001). In both rural and urban markets, women are already concentrated largely at the lower end of the income scale and also had less secure work and fewer formal employment opportunities, thus increasing their risk burden in the face of economic shocks (Agarwal, 2021).

2. Impacts of Covid-19 in India

Informal sector workers hardest hit

The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, in March 2020, had a particularly severe impact on women across India's informal sector (Bacil & Soyer, 2020). With nationwide lockdowns enacted almost overnight, much of India's population was unable to prepare for the fallout, particularly migrant labourers and wage workers in the informal economy (Kidangoor, 2020). Women were severely affected not only because of their higher levels of participation in the informal economy, but also because they were overrepresented in the most hard-hit sectors or trades and had fewer options and resources to transition to self-employment as easily

as men (ILO, 2020; Basole et al., 2021). While around 61 per cent of working men retained their employment and only 7 per cent lost it permanently after lockdown, women had a much tougher time: only 19 per cent remained employed while 47 per cent suffered permanent job loss with many others temporarily losing their employment during the initial phase of the pandemic (Basole et al., 2021). Women workers in India's sizeable garment industry also experienced considerable layoffs following a drastic decline in demand from Western clothing companies (Bain, 2021). Dalit women facing an intersection of class, gender and caste discriminations were forced to work seen by others as "unclean" such as sanitation work, exposing them to the virus and to greater stigma as they came to be seen as carriers of the illness (Asia Dalit Rights Forum, 2021).

Women-owned enterprises at risk

Likewise, informal enterprises also faced challenges during the pandemic with about 90 per cent of women-owned enterprises in India operating in the informal sector (IFC, 2014). Women-owned enterprises in India are overwhelmingly home-based with small scales of production and service provision, low rates of savings and investment, and small capital accumulation, all of which makes them particularly vulnerable to economic shocks (Raveendran, 2017; Chen & Beard, 2018). During the pandemic, they also encountered barriers in accessing formal financing and largely depended on informal financing methods to survive (IFC, 2014).

Increased debt burdens

Seventy-eight per cent of women SEWA Cooperative Federation interviewed had already exhausted savings by April 2020. When in need of financial assistance, they reported resorting to borrowing from family members or taking loans from banks and money lenders with heavy interest rates (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). One interviewee advised,

I faced financial hardship and we had very little savings in the bank which we could not access due to lockdown restrictions. In these difficult times borrowing money from family members would be difficult because they would be in a similar financial situation. (Interview, Reshmaben, Patchwork artisan, Abodana Cooperative, in April 2020)

The rising rates of unemployment caused by lockdowns, coupled with Covid-19-related medical debts, costs for funeral arrangements and everyday necessities, has seen household debt burdens rise, particularly in rural India, with almost two-thirds of households taking on debt (Ahmed & Sharma, 2021).

Increasing unpaid care and domestic work

During the course of the pandemic, Indian women also faced surging unpaid care and domestic work burdens – an increase of nearly 30 per cent – which limited their wellbeing and ability to undertake any opportunities for paid work, even after lockdown measures were lifted (Deshpande, 2020; Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic also increased the level and intensity of care work in the household, particularly as people fell sick in overcrowded living compounds. SEWA members found that with more family members at home all day cleaning duties increased as a preventive health measure (WIEGO & SEWA, 2020). Local community childcare facilities and the government-run Anganwadi centres stopped operations with the first lockdown in 2020, adding to the care work burden for mothers, as documented by SEWA Sangini, a childcare cooperative that provides facilities for women informal workers (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). The cooperative runs 11 centres across the city of Ahmedabad. Faridabibi, a home-based worker and beneficiary of SEWA Sangini, explained,

I can concentrate on my work when I drop off my children to the centre. In the past year, the centre has been closed and my children have been home. Although they receive their meals from the centres, with them in the house my work efficiency has decreased. (Interview, April 2020)

Additionally, surges in unpaid care and domestic work resulted in Indian women facing increased restrictions from family members that prevent them from taking up employment, even after lockdowns were lifted in India, as Bhartiben, manager of SEWA Homecare, a domestic workers' cooperative, explained:

The cooperative has seen a surge in demand for 24-hour domestic and care work shifts post lockdown. However, there has been resistance from the family for women to take up 24-hour shifts since it hinders their household responsibilities. For those who have lost work, the cooperative has been thinking of alternative livelihood options. A few members have shown interest in carrying out stitching work, but currently the cooperative is not being able to find stitching jobs. The coop also proposed vegetable vending as an alternative source of livelihood, but again women are not willing to take it up because of resistance from their families. (Interview, April 2020)

3. Policy responses from the Indian government

The UN “tracker” ranked India first across Asia, with 18 out of its 35 measures considered “gender sensitive” (UNDP & UN Women, 2021). Of those, only one aimed to address unpaid care, while 11 were for VAWG and six looked at women’s economic security. Following

the first wave of Covid-19 cases, national and state governments introduced a series of emergency relief measures (IMF, 2021; ADB, 2021), but many of these policies were not extensive enough to minimise the severe impacts of the second wave.

The government introduced a US\$22.6 billion package under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) scheme to provide relief to vulnerable people (Ministry of Finance, 2020). This package included the implementation of new social security schemes and the adaptation of previous schemes (Bacil & Soyer, 2020) including:

- A cash transfer scheme supplementing farmers’ income and supporting agriculture-related expenses for beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi programme, an initiative that provides all farmers with annual minimal income support (Hindustan Times, 2022). This was delivered alongside an increase in the daily wages of workers registered under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which provides a legal guarantee of 100 days of waged employment per financial year to adult members of a rural household who seek employment and are willing to do unskilled manual work (Rural Development Department, 2021). This aimed to benefit approximately 136.2 million families (Ministry of Finance, 2020).
- Additional temporary income for elderly people, widows and people with disabilities under the National Social Assistance Programme (Ministry of Rural Development, n.d.).
- Expanded health insurance for Covid-19 health care workers in government hospitals and healthcare centres.
- Expansion of the public distribution system with the distribution of free food staples to beneficiaries of the National Food Security Act of 2013, which provides subsidised food grains to approximately two-thirds of the country’s population (Department of Food & Public Distribution, 2013). The system’s benefits were extended to cover the second wave of the pandemic until November 2021.
- Cash payments of 500 Indian Rupees (US\$7) for three months to women members of Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana, a national financial inclusion scheme to ensure access to financial services. This scheme was expected to reach 200 million women account holders.
- The government also adapted and extended previous health care and insurance schemes, and those with valid cards could secure free Covid-19 testing and treatment in health institutions under the scheme (Kumar et al., 2020).
- A social and financial assistance scheme for businesses worth US\$265 billion (equivalent to 10 per cent of India’s GDP) was introduced to cater to various sectors, including cottage industries and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) (Kumar et al., 2020).

In addition to the financial assistance for MSMEs, the government also authorised procurement of PPE products through the public procurement platform, which has a special provision for women-owned enterprises (Indian Government, 2018).

4. Impacts of policy responses

Despite the policy measures put into place by the government, the reality of women's lives in the informal and undocumented sectors has meant that even well-meaning programmes have not reached them.

The informal sector is arguably unrecognised by the government or disregarded as "casual labour", even though it comprises such a large part of the Indian economy (Harriss-White, 2020). Various studies conducted by SEWA Cooperative Federation sister organisations have found that there were many ambiguities in government provisions that restricted benefits for informal workers such as insurance coverage often falling only to those with formal contracts or implementation problems for cash transfers (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). There was also a lack of awareness about entitlements to government programmes and limited use of digital financial services, as 40 per cent of SEWA members surveyed did not have a bank account or access to digital financial services (WIEGO & SEWA, 2020). Additionally, a study by communications provider GSMA reported that in 2020 only 25 per cent of women respondents in India owned smartphones, as opposed to 41 per cent male respondents, thereby furthering the digital divide (Carboni, 2021). Among women workers in India's significant manufacturing industries, the dominance of informal work arrangements (83.5 per cent) in the sector led to many being laid off and those in the tailoring, sewing and embroidering industries due to a drastic drop in demand (Kapoor, 2020; Bain, 2021). Also critically missing were adequate policy measures to address the needs of garment workers, including home-based workers in global supply chains whose work was deeply impacted by the pandemic. That said, no provisions were made as part of the government's response to specifically address the economic security of this group (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020).

There have also been no provisions made to aid women-owned collective enterprises, which have been excluded from Covid-19 assistance programmes. Barriers in accessing online and offline markets, securing capital support and lack of ownership of digital assets have persisted. Business recovery schemes introduced by MSME have been beyond the reach of women-owned small-scale enterprises (SEWA, 2021). In agriculture, the cash transfers scheme – dependent on named landholdings – left out a large portion of women farmers, who own less than 2 per cent of India's farmland (Mehta, 2018). Protections for domestic workers and institutional cleaners to ensure paid leave by their employers during lockdowns were also absent.

The pandemic has shone a light on the need for social protection reforms. While the government introduced several measures to meet needs of the poorest and most vulnerable, there still remain gaps in awareness, accessibility and implementation, whereby

schemes fail to recognise existing inequalities as barriers to access. Policies and welfare programmes designed to provide relief and recovery have been plagued with exclusionary errors as a large proportion of informal workers were either unregistered (and therefore ineligible) or unaware. This has been compounded by the glaring gender digital divide in the country that has further created barriers in accessing critical information and registration for emergency welfare schemes, including those specifically targeted towards women beneficiaries (Nikore & Uppadhyay, 2020). For example, the Ayushman Bharat National Health Protection Scheme was extended to provide free testing and treatment of Covid-19, but digital registration effectively excluded informal workers (particularly women), and public mistrust of government health institutions in the wake of the pandemic meant that uptake was poor (Nandi, 2020). The government's health care insurance coverage extensions also failed to incorporate community front-line health workers and childcare workers (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). State- and national-level studies have reported lower enrolment for the extended health insurance scheme in remote rural areas, poorer districts and among socioeconomically vulnerable groups, indigenous (or tribal) communities and women-headed households (Nandi, 2020). The requirement of documentation and official paperwork and registration processes has also excluded many women informal workers from accessing health services (RamPrakash & Lingam, 2021).

Similarly, while the government provided food relief, the scheme had various implementation problems as women once again did not have the required documentation. Many reported that they were not able to access the distribution centres due to lack of transportation, outdated ration cards and ration cards from different locations (Hiriyur & Chettri, 2020). In a study by WIEGO and SEWA (2020), about 15 per cent of respondents were not aware they were entitled to food aid, and over half (54 per cent) did not have a ration card or other necessary documentation.

Lastly, the UN "tracker" found only a single policy measure to address unpaid care which points to a notable oversight in the government's response as rising care needs and diminishing supports markedly shaped women's realities in India during the course of the pandemic (UNDP & UN Women, 2021). Those care measures which were introduced tended to be around ensuring the elderly and vulnerable received the care they need, but the increased burden of care placed on women was largely ignored.

The Philippines

This case study is based on research conducted between May and September 2021 by Rowena Laguilis-Timog, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Women and Development Studies at the University of the Philippines. The case study examines how women's experiences were not considered in the government's Covid-19 response, and the subsequent fallout of this oversight.

It is founded primarily on desk-based research, alongside virtual interviews conducted in June and August 2021 with the following representatives from women's rights organisations across the Philippines:

- Primar Jardeleza, Vice President of the National Network of Informal Workers in the Philippines (PATAMBA) and President of Home-Based Workers International Network (HomeNet) Philippines. The organisations support home-based workers to advocate for their rights, as well as conducting community education and livelihood training. During Covid-19, they have distributed hygiene kits and produced and sold face masks and PPE.
- Amparo Miciano, Secretary-General of National Coalition of Rural Women, and Luz Bador, a farmer, indigenous peoples' community leader and member of the National Coalition of Rural Women. The organisation has conducted community education on various topics related to the pandemic and the government response, led donation drives with the help of local and international partners, and worked to secure seed banking to assist with agricultural production.
- Anna Navarro and She Gonzales, caseworkers at the Center for Migrant Advocacy. The center assists migrant workers, including those abroad, and initiates dialogues with government agencies and officials, as well as conducting education and discussion forums around migrant workers' issues.
- Cham Perez, Executive Director of the Center for Women's Resources, and Emily Barrey, Center for Women's Resources. The Center works with and supports various workers' unions, conducting research, education and training, as well as policy and advocacy campaigns.



1. Background

By 2019, the Philippines was ranked as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world with annual growth rates of up to 6.4 per cent, while also appearing to be one of the most gender-equal societies in the world (World Bank, 2021b; World Economic Forum, 2018). However, these successes masked an economy that was built on remittance-led growth and service-based industries, especially tourism, that were all highly vulnerable to disease outbreak (Mendoza, 2021). In 2019 alone, remittances from overseas Filipino workers (OFW) were estimated to make up to 9.3 per cent of GDP, with women accounting for 56 per cent of OFW (World Bank, 2021b; PSA, 2020).

In 2019, labour force participation rates among women in the Philippines was 46.1 per cent as compared to 73.3 per cent for men and, in 2018, 37 per cent of women's paid jobs were categorised as "vulnerable employment" compared to 30 per cent of men's (UNDP, 2020; World Bank, 2021c). Meanwhile, regardless of employment status, women in the Philippines were already doing more than twice as much childcare, elder care, and housework as men (Abrigo & Francisco-Abrigo, 2019). It is estimated that women's unpaid care work in the Philippines constitutes the equivalent of 18.6 per cent of the country's GDP (Abrigo & Francisco-Abrigo, 2019). Yet, as this case study demonstrates, it continues to be severely under-valued. Even before the pandemic, women spent on average 30 hours per week on unpaid care compared to men's 18 hours, which in part explains why more women work in the informal sector, where working hours are more flexible (Bayudan-Dacuyucuy, 2019).

Further still, the current government's socioeconomic priorities in recent years – from development strategies firmly rooted in neoliberal economic doctrine to a deadly "war on drugs" policy – have paved the way for many of the challenges the country has faced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Palatino, 2017; Ramos, 2021).

2. Impact of Covid-19 in the Philippines

The Covid-19 pandemic hit domestic and informal workers in the Philippines particularly hard, as an independent survey conducted at the end of 2020 showed that almost half (47.9 per cent) of women respondents reported having lost their jobs (SWS, 2021a; Purugganan, 2020). In an interview, Primar Jardeleza, of HomeNet noted that informal workers were not alone:

A lot of people lost jobs from the formal sector. There are those who worked from home, some were laid off, and there are others that were totally neglected especially if they were among the rank-and-file. Many turned to the informal sector. (Online interview, June 2021)

Workers in global supply chains, the majority of whom are women, were also impacted with over 20,000 workers in Philippines' textile, garment and leather goods laid off by June 2020 due to reduced demand (IndustriALL, 2020). Some 998,342 MSMEs also reportedly closed down during the pandemic (IBON Foundation, 2021). Inflation rates reached a two-year high of 4.7 per cent in February 2021, thereby lowering people's incomes and purchasing power overall (Caraballo, 2021). People tended to buy less even from vendors and sellers from the informal economy (Online interview, Primar Jardeleza, June 2021).

The impact on overseas Filipina workers (OFW)

An estimated 300,000 to 400,000 OFW, largely in domestic and care work, were affected by job losses and pay cuts when the Covid-19 pandemic hit (Ang & Opiniano, 2020). Based on interviews conducted as part of this research, in the midst of the pandemic, women OFW experienced job-related displacement and difficulties in traveling back to the Philippines given varying quarantine protocols. Additionally, interviewees highlighted how OFW struggled to receive government assistance, on top of facing the usual realities of wage theft, debt bondage and abuse from their employers. There were also reports of employers abroad withholding their workers' passports or making them sign waivers to renounce their remaining salaries in exchange for allowing them to receive exit visas (Online interview, Anna Navarro and She Gonzales, June 2021).

While wage theft is not a new phenomenon for migrant workers, our research identified that it did become particularly challenging for OFW to fight back against such injustices in the midst of lockdown measures (Piper & Foley 2021; Online interview, Anna Navarro and She Gonzales, June 2021). Violence also surged for domestic workers abroad as they were confined with abusive employers. Reductions in income caused by the Covid-19 pandemic also resulted in increasing debt levels for Filipinas, who turned to informal (family, friends, employers) and formal (banks, money lending outlets) networks for financial assistance (Online interview, Anna Navarro and She Gonzales, June 2021).

Increasing unpaid care work

The Philippines implemented one of the world's longest lockdowns, leading to prolonged school closures and remote education that contributed to increases in women's unpaid care burdens (Madarang, 2021; UN Women, 2020). In rural areas, this situation became more challenging as technology is less accessible, internet connectivity is unreliable and digital literacy is low (NICTHS 2019, cited in Tabuga & Cabaero, 2021). A common observation from the interviewees for this research is how mothers and carers took on more unpaid work as they helped children with their school tasks, daily lessons, project submission, online classes and exams. As a result of increases in unpaid care and domestic work in the midst of the pandemic, 57 per cent of Filipinas reported that they had experienced stress (UN

Women, 2020; SWS, 2021b). Indeed, the socio-emotional impacts of the Covid-19 crisis are understudied hidden costs experienced by women and other social groups around the world.

3. Policy responses from the Philippines Government

Despite being ranked highly in the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2018), the Philippines is ranked 16th (last place in Asia) based on the UN "tracker", with only one of its 19 measures – a measure aimed at targeting VAWG – counted as "gender sensitive" (UNDP & UN Women, 2021).

To date, the key policy responses to the pandemic and its economic impacts were the Heal As One Act (Bayanihan 1) and Bayanihan Recover as One Act (Bayanihan 2) (Congress of the Philippines, 2020a and 2020b). These affirmed a state of national emergency, granted the president emergency powers to realign the national budget to create a Quick Response Fund, detailed the quarantine restrictions to be put in place and provided for financial relief for selected portions of the population through national programmes and by authority of local government units.

Bayanihan 1 provided financial relief packages for certain portions of the population, including the Social Amelioration Program under the Department of Social Welfare and Development, which was set to provide a maximum of two payments of US\$100 to US\$160 per poor household in areas with high quarantine restrictions. It also provided coverage for Covid-19 expenses to members of PhilHealth, the national health insurance programme, as well as up to US\$2,000 for front-line health workers should they contract Covid-19 and develop severe symptoms, and up to US\$20,000 for their families should those health workers die of the disease.

Bayanihan 2, enacted later in 2020, brought more one-time financial relief packages. These included continued cash aid for low-income households in the highest quarantine restriction areas and scaled cash assistance for health care workers who contracted Covid-19, dependent on the severity of their symptoms, or support to families in the event of death. Also provided under Bayanihan 2 were imposed grace periods ranging from 30 to 60 days for residential and commercial rent, utility bills and financial loans.

Other initiatives introduced by the government include the Covid-19 Adjustment Measures Program, which provided US\$100 for displaced workers in the private sector (Department of Labor and Employment, 2021); cash-for-work for 10 days of work at minimum wage rates for displaced, marginalised and self-employed workers; and a lump sum for displaced migrant workers. For agricultural workers, there are also financial relief packages of US\$100 and no-interest loan packages of up to US\$500 for individuals, as well as up to US\$20,000 for MSMEs.

4. Impacts of policy responses

Neither Bayanihan 1 nor Bayanihan 2 have particularly targeted women, nor were they designed to respond to the gendered impacts of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. While there was some distinction for particular economic groups, there was no direct appreciation that women are affected in specific ways that require tailored responses. For instance, the government's Covid-19 response measures failed to recognise gender gaps in the sectors most impacted by job losses during the pandemic. This includes women working in the services industry, as well as women OFW working in domestic and care work, which tended to be the least paid with the most insecure conditions.

Our research suggested that the Bayanihan programmes had minimal positive impacts on the lives of women in terms of providing economic security. Women from across different work sectors welcomed these cash aid packages, but the gap between what they provided and what was needed remained stark. As Luz Bador of the National Coalition of Rural Women stated,

[The cash aid] is easily used up. You can't even buy food. You have to pay for bills first. For electricity, for example, they provided for a grace period, but the bills remained the same. And you have to pay or else you will get disconnected. (Online interview, August 2021)

Given the gaps in government provision, interviewees report that women's organisations have played a great part in responding to the impacts of the pandemic and the lengthy lockdown, both of which had severe economic impacts.

Furthermore, women's increasing unpaid work at home, as well as their heightened vulnerability to domestic violence caused by prolonged lockdowns, do not appear to have been reflected anywhere in the policy measures. It was only in December 2021 that the national emergency line finally began providing specialist support to survivors of violence against women and children, due to pressure from local and international advocates (The Asia Foundation, 2021).

On top of this, under the cover of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has been able to pass repressive legislation – in particular the Anti-Terrorism Act – that criminalises any defence of human rights or democracy, thereby shutting down political space (Sajor, 2020).

Issues around access and implementation

Emergency financial subsidies were limited in responding to women's urgent financial needs, as pre-existing gender inequalities hindered access. Interviewee Amparo Miciano noted that accessing information about the programmes was not an easy or uniform experience (Online

interview, June 2021). Rural isolation, transport challenges and substandard infrastructure – including low levels of digital access – also proved barriers. The shutdown of a major local broadcast corporation during the pandemic made the information challenge worse, even as many communities still have no access to cellular phone signals, television signals and internet access (Tabuga & Cabaero, 2021). Cham Perez described how information about relief programmes was not clear or consistent, with a lack of clarity in some instances over who should file a claim (e.g., the employer or employee) and confusions around eligibility. Experiences across cities and municipalities varied, with some more organised and systematic while others saw rampant political patronage in determining beneficiaries (Online interview, June 2021).

Qualifying for the programmes was also difficult for many women. In the agricultural sector, for example, women are usually not recognised as workers in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture, making them ineligible for relevant cash aid (Ani & Casasola, 2020). This reflects the structural challenges women faced pre-pandemic: with only one farmer or fisherfolk allowed to be registered per household, most would default to a father or husband due to the male breadwinner bias (Online interview, Amparo Miciano, June 2021). Some entitlements were also mutually exclusive, meaning that if a woman who lived below the poverty line lost her job, she could only claim either the assistance for poor households or for those who were displaced from their jobs, but not both (Online interview, Cham Perez, June 2021; Online interview, Amparo Miciano, June 2021). Such policy choices did not recognise the often multiple and intersecting oppressions faced by many Filipina women. Claiming cash aid has also proved problematic for many due to poor distribution methods and the cost of travel to distribution centres, with one interviewee sharing how a member had to return cash aid when she was later informed that she was not a beneficiary after all (Online interview, Primar Jardeleza, June 2021).

While women workers in the formal sector had been able to access cash aid across the various programmes, as did some displaced farmers, the expected reach of many of these packages fell short in terms of the amount distributed, who they reached and how long they took to be delivered (Online interview, Cham Perez, June 2021; Online interview, Amparo Miciano, June 2021; Online interview, Primar Jardeleza, June 2021). As Amparo Miciano further elaborated,

The relief operations by the local government units, despite being inadequate, probably still helped, and the Social Amelioration Program, too. Some were even able to use the cash aid for livelihood. (Online interview, June 2021)

However, she added that any possible gain begs questions of access to information about the program, qualifying for the program and meeting various requirements (Online interview, June 2021). It bears reiterating that, at most, these relief programmes could only

address women's immediate and material needs. Referring to relief they received from local governments, Emily Barrey commented,

Relief means receiving three kilos of rice. That's all it takes to say you received assistance, but we're not talking about relief that even reaches a week. Perhaps that's good for only a couple of days. If you received three cans of sardines, that's already considered relief. (Online interview, August 2021)

One of the problems identified was the lack of consultation in programme design, Luz Bador pointed out that policymakers “should come to our villages and ask what could sustainably work for us. Small farmers should be consulted about their own situation” (Online interview, August 2021).

Policymakers clearly do not have a full view of how the pandemic and the lockdowns have affected women as they struggle for their own, their families' and their communities' survival. So long as policy responses are devoid of a feminist perspective, women's rights – which must entail access to decent work, adequate social services and social security, and freedom of expression and from discrimination – will continue to be threatened.

Uganda

This case study is based on research conducted by Eunice Musiime, the Executive Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), a feminist pan-African leadership organisation based in Kampala, Uganda.



The Uganda case study was compiled using desk-based research and a telephone interview in December 2021 with Janepher Nassali, the General Secretary of Uganda's Horticultural, Industrial, Service Providers and Allied Workers Union (UHISPAWU). AMwA's own briefings on Covid-19 were also used (Rebecca, S., 2020; Muhwezi-mpaga, P., 2020; Musiime, E., 2020; Nampewo, Z., 2020). The research shines a light on the pervasiveness and scale of gender inequalities in Uganda and how they have severely limited the scope and impact of the government's Covid-19 response measures.

1. Background

As early as 1981, Uganda saw the introduction of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programmes with the deleterious consequences having been well documented (Baffoe, 2000; Ddumba & Kasekende, 2005; Kayizzi-Mugerwa & Bigsten, 1992). Although these reforms were introduced over 40 years ago, the Ugandan government has maintained strong relations with the Bretton Woods institutions and has been championed as an “African success story”, which in turn helps explain the trajectory of the government's economic decision-making since then (Lagarde, 2017; Wiegratz et al., 2018).

In Uganda, despite some progress in addressing gender inequalities in terms of frameworks and institutions, women's lives and livelihoods remain unequal and often precarious (Kwesiga, 2003; OSIEA, 2019). As of 2019, female labour force participation rates in Uganda stood at 66 per cent compared to 73 per cent for men (World Bank, 2022; World Bank, 2021d). Furthermore, with the informal sector employing 85 per cent of the population, and with women making up 73 per cent of informal sector workers, women are truly overrepresented in low-paid, precarious jobs with limited labour rights (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2020; UN Women, 2015; ILO, 2018a). This is compounded by estimates that only 16 per cent of Ugandan women own land in their own right, despite agricultural self-employment being the main source of cash income for 84 per cent of women (Kes et al., 2011). Meanwhile, even before the pandemic, women in parts of Uganda already spent on average eight hours a day on domestic and unpaid care work, compared to just four hours for men (Oxfam & Uganda Women's Network, 2018).

2. Impacts of Covid-19 in Uganda

The impact on women's work

In Uganda, AMwA reports that Covid-19 restrictions have drastically impacted on women's economic security and livelihoods as jobs have been lost in both the formal and informal sector. By July 2020, 4,200 companies had already closed down because of the pandemic. Flower farms, an important source of employment for women, laid off about a third of their workers, many of whom were sent home without pay. They go on to cite a business survey that found that three-quarters of businesses had laid off workers, especially in the agricultural sector (Nampewo, 2020). Even for those women working in the formal sector, the gendered division of labour meant that women were more vulnerable to unemployment than men as a result of the myth of the "male breadwinner" (Muhwezi-mpaga, 2020). The gendered division of labour also left women more precarious under lockdown, with women concentrated in client-facing roles and in the leisure and hospitality sectors that remained closed longer, while male-dominated sectors like construction and manufacturing were allowed to re-open after only a short cessation. Moreover, workers in the informal sector, many of them women, were also excluded from many social protections (Nampewo, 2020).

Informal market traders (who are mainly women) were allowed to continue trading during lockdown to appease the demand for essential foodstuffs, thus demonstrating how the state is able to draw down on women's labour – often on more exploitative terms – amidst the economic crisis. AMwA observed that in Kampala and surrounding towns women vendors were allowed to go on trading on the condition that they slept in the markets to reduce transmission of the virus, despite the fact that this left them more exposed to violence and at higher risk of contracting Covid-19 and other diseases like malaria (Nampewo, 2020). As relayed by the researcher for this case study, the changing operating context in Uganda has also presented new challenges to women's rights organising, with implications for the sustainability of women's movements. Key among these is the shrinking civic space that has constrained activism.

Small businesses

In 2020, the Economic Policy Research Centre forecasted that 64 per cent of Ugandan MSMEs would close for business and 38 per cent of their workers would lose their jobs as a consequence of Covid-19 (Economic Policy Research Institute & UNICEF, 2020). This was particularly true for women-owned MSMEs, which were hit especially hard due to their small size and concentration in the hardest-hit sectors including hospitality, trade and education (IFC, 2021). However, during the peak of the Covid-19 crisis, access to credit and financing was extremely challenging for the informal sector, particularly for low-income women in relation to registration requirements and the need for collateral in order to access credit (Owori, 2020).

Increasing unpaid care

Research by AMwA found that, as a result of Covid-19, Ugandan women – like their counterparts in other countries – saw their unpaid care and domestic work increase significantly (Nampewo, 2020). Critically, with Uganda only just ending the world's longest school closures in January 2022, the country will have seen at least 10 million primary and secondary school pupils out of formal education for over one and a half years (Agence France-Press in Kampala, 2022; Nampewo, 2020).

3. Policy responses the Ugandan government

The UN "tracker" ranks Uganda eighth in Africa in terms of the policy changes made during the pandemic (UNDP & UN Women, 2021). Of the 19 policy measures recorded by the "tracker" 13 were deemed "gender sensitive". Nine were aimed at addressing VAWG, four targeted women's economic security and none directly targeted women's unpaid care.

The Ugandan government initially responded to the pandemic with increased budget allocations; however, although the budget was increased, it remained focused on infrastructure rather than increasing funds to health or social care (Owori, 2020). In the 2020–21 budget, allocations to support businesses far outweighed funds provided for social welfare (Owori, 2020). There was some expansion of social protection programmes and the labour-intensive cash-for-work programmes – although these only benefitted 500,000 individuals – and a national single registry for the beneficiaries of safety net programmes was established (EASSI, 2020). For businesses, and in a bid to ensure adequate access to credit, the Bank of Uganda lowered its lending rate from 9 to 8 per cent in April 2020 (Owori, 2020). One of the largest components in the 2020–21 budget was 1,045 billion Ugandan Shillings (US\$298 million) provided to recapitalise the Ugandan Development Bank (UDB) by providing low-interest finance to manufacturing, agribusiness and other private corporations (Owori, 2020).

4. Impacts of policy responses

Development Initiatives Uganda highlights that government Covid-19 measures have unequally targeted different citizens. For example, although an estimated 8 million people in Uganda (19.7 per cent) live below the national poverty line, the Covid-19 relief programme providing food and other items targeted only 1.5 million people, and these were concentrated in urban areas of Kampala and Wakiso Districts. There was also a clear absence of gender-targeted measures on social protection, economic and fiscal support, labour market considerations or unpaid care (Owori, 2020).

Government measures to protect business also targeted larger businesses, rather than small women-owned enterprises. It is notable that the most heavily financed measure from UDB – the offer of low-interest financing to manufacturing, agribusiness and other private sector firms – was of limited value to women on low incomes. To access a credit facility at UDB, businesses must be registered with the Uganda Registration Service Bureau, and the minimum loan request is 100 million Ugandan shillings (US\$30,000) secured with collateral. This is a clear impediment to the majority of Ugandan businesses, where 70 per cent of firms generate 5 million shillings (US\$1,300) or less in annual turnover and only about 10 per cent have an annual turnover of more than 10 million shillings (US\$2,600) (ISER, 2020). This is particularly difficult for women-owned small businesses (World Bank, 2021d).

The government's April 2020 economic stimulus package, which supported MSMEs and other business enterprises with major cash flow challenges, was largely targeted at formal employment and larger, registered enterprises as opposed to the informal sector (Owori, 2020). The Bank of Uganda's interest rate cut is also unlikely to reach most women living in poverty, who do not have the collateral or savings to meet loan requirements in a country where only 4 per cent of adults access credit through formal lenders (Owori, 2020). In fact, most of the packages do not address the existing and entrenched gender barriers that women face, especially given their significant presence in the unprotected realms of Uganda's large informal sector. Even with the focus on private sector recovery, the packages ignored the barriers to women entrepreneurs' growth and access to business opportunities. Requirements to post collateral and documentation are automatic disqualifiers, as studies show that African women do not have equal access to collateral and struggle to source the necessary paperwork (African Development Bank et al., 2020).

For women workers, provisions for job security were also lacking. The flower industry has been ravaged due to lockdowns in Europe and the closure of the Dutch auction, where most of the flowers from eastern and southern Africa are sold. Many growers in Uganda were forced to either close down, downsize their workforce or engage them on different terms including compulsory unpaid leaves and salary cuts. In a sector comprising approximately 80 per cent women workers, the impact of the pandemic reduced its workforce by 50 per cent (Hivos Uganda & Akina Mama wa Afrika, 2020). With fewer workers on farms, the workload doubled alongside reduced wages and gruesome working environments. This compounded the devaluation of women's labour and increased exploitation, where women were already disproportionately on the most insecure contract terms (Hivos Uganda & Akina Mama wa Afrika, 2020). In an interview, Janepher Nassali described the situation from the union perspective:

The pre-pandemic inequalities in the sector were multiplied when the pandemic hit. For example, due to government control measures, flower farms put in place temporary sleeping conditions for workers, and for many single mothers, this meant that they could not opt-in to be among the workers retained at the farm and leave their children at home without care. This automatically excluded them from employment.
 (Telephone interview, December 2021)

However, during a time of such job insecurity, clear examples of women's leadership abounded. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic in Uganda, Nassali recounted her experience visiting all 14 flower farms in the country to ensure that thousands of workers retained their jobs. Under her leadership, the UHISPAWU is reported to have been able negotiate collective agreements benefiting thousands of workers, while helping to save numerous jobs during the pandemic (Musiime, 2020).

Other gendered realities also contributed to women's experiences in this sector, which the government response package did not recognise. For instance, on one of the farms in Uganda, out of a workforce of 445 only 145 were retained. The majority of women were left out due to the precarious nature of the temporary sleeping arrangements that were put in place (Hivos Uganda & Akina Mama wa Afrika, 2020).

In the area of social protection, while Uganda registers several social protection measures on the UN "tracker", many of these suffer from low reach in terms of numbers of beneficiaries and locations. Many social protection proposals were also never implemented, including strategies for delivering the existing Senior Citizens Grant in a shock-responsive manner, direct income support to vulnerable persons with disabilities who were unable to engage in any kind of economic activity, a universal cash transfer to all children aged two years and under, and a monthly cash transfer to all informal sector workers for at least three months.

Overall, the Ugandan case study has exposed longstanding gender inequalities that have been deeply engrained in how the country operates, as well as in how the government has responded to the pandemic.

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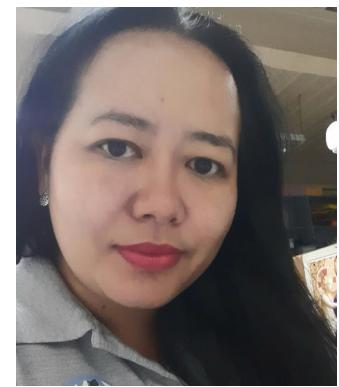
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Below are some of the women who gave up their time to be interviewed and whose lives we have written about.



Amparo Miciano, Secretary General of the National Coalition of Rural Women, interviewee from the Philippines



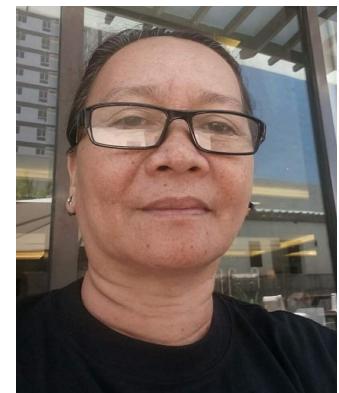
Anna Navarro, caseworker at the Center for Migrant Advocacy, interviewee from the Philippines



Cham Perez, Executive Director of the Nexperia Philippines Workers' Union (within the Centre for Women's Resources), interviewee from the Philippines



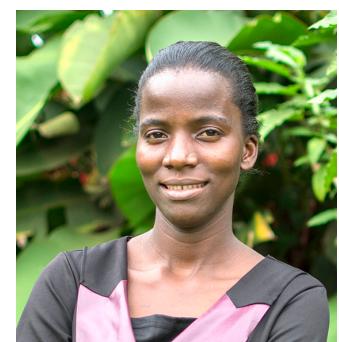
Emily Barrey, Vice President of the Nexperia Philippines Workers' Union (within the Centre for Women's Resources), interviewee from the Philippines



Luz Bador, a farmer, indigenous peoples' community leader and member of the National Coalition of Rural Women, interviewee from the Philippines



She Gonzales, caseworker at the Center for Migrant Advocacy, interviewee from the Philippines



Janepher Nassali, General Secretary of the Uganda Horticulture, Industrial, Service Providers and Allied Workers Union (UHISPAWU), interviewee from Uganda



Lataben (left), President of Megha Indigenous Women's Agriculture Cooperative with her co-Board member Ratilaben (right), interviewees from India



Women traders sleeping in markets in Uganda, photograph taken by Isano Francis



Rehatben (left) and Shahinben (right), interviewees from India

