

Invisible Work, Visible Impacts: Gender, Migrants, and Informal Food Trade amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Global South

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Abstract

This paper examines the abrupt and far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on women engaged in the informal food sector within the Global South. It highlights the deepening effects of the pandemic on food insecurity, gender inequality, and economic disparities. Based on a case study of three groups of women – internal migrants, international migrants, and cross-border traders – engaged in informal food work within and across countries and regions of the Global South, the paper investigates the compounded challenges they face, as well as their exacerbated risks and vulnerabilities. The analysis exposes the complex interplay between gender, migration, and food security through the pandemic. The results also reveal significant gaps in government responses during the pandemic in addressing the specific needs of women in general and female migrant workers in the informal food sector more specifically. By recognizing the important contributions of women and women migrants to food security, the paper makes a case for stronger efforts to support these informal enterprises.

Keywords

COVID-19, informal food sector, Global South gender, internal migrants, international migrants and informal cross-border traders

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Cover Image

A fruit vendor waits for customers at a wholesale food market in Mexico City in June 2020. Credit: Imago/Alamy



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forged disastrous consequences for informal economies in the Global South, including workers active in the informal food sector. Moreover, many of these workers did not receive the social protection, access to credit, and government relief needed to prevent themselves from slipping further into poverty. Considering that approximately 60% of the world's workforce is informally employed (ILO, 2023a), with many in the Global South, the livelihoods of millions of people in all regions have been jeopardized by the COVID-19 crisis. Women workers have been especially affected since they make up much of this sector, relying on this work to support themselves and their families. Since the COVID-19 virus appeared to have originated in a wet food market in Wuhan, China, food markets came under enormous scrutiny in many countries and regions in the Global South, especially in the urban areas. In several countries, authorities imposed stringent restrictions on small food vendors and informal food markets as concerted efforts to contain the coronavirus infections (Balbeuna & Skinner, 2022; Si & Zhong, 2024).

This paper examines the broad outcomes of the COVID-19 crisis and related restrictions on women workers in the informal food sector in the Global South. It explores how the interactions between gender, migration, and food security unfolded in the COVID-19 context, and how the pandemic exposed the risks and precarities entrenched within this relationship. The multi-country and multiregional analysis undertaken in this study evaluates the complex and varied impacts of COVID-19 on three migrant groups active in the informal food sector – internal migrants, international migrants, and informal cross-border traders.

The paper is organized in four sections. The first provides a general background on women workers within the informal food sector in the Global South by focusing on their roles and contributions, as well as their challenges prior to the pandemic. This is followed by a discussion on the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the socioeconomic circumstances of those working in the informal food sector. The analysis also focuses attention on the gendered dynamics of these impacts. The next section offers a brief analysis of the economic, social, health and other types of pandemic-induced consequences encountered by three migrant groups involved in informal food trade – women cross-border traders, internal and international migrants. Examples are provided from Africa, Asia, and Latin America & the Caribbean.

Contribution of Women Food Workers and Cross-Border Traders

Women informal food vendors and informal cross-border traders are central actors in food systems in the Global South, although their contribution to food security has been largely ignored and at best under-recognized. Women informal food workers are the backbone of local food systems and food supply chains, and they perform important

roles in feeding the cities where they live and work. From participating in food production and making food available, to food distribution and selling street food, to food utilization and preparing food to be consumed, women and girls play a pivotal role in all three components of food security: production, distribution, and utilization (Doss et al., 2020). Informal vendors are often the main sources of affordable and nutrient-rich foods for vulnerable, impoverished communities (Termeer et al., 2024). Women food vendors are crucial in providing cheaper priced, diverse and nutritious foods for marginal and poor communities in many urban centres. Thus, these women constitute significant actors in supporting household food security in many parts of the world.

Globally, women in informal employment are overrepresented in the food services and food retail sector in comparison to men (ILO, 2023b), making it a critical source of livelihoods and incomes for women. For example, a recent study showed that of the 93,000 people involved in informal employment in Windhoek, Namibia, 43,000 (46%) were women (Nickanor et al., 2019). Nearly 60% of surveyed households in informal settlements regularly utilize informal vendors operating in the city's open markets (Nickanor et al., 2019), making them an important source of food for communities in Namibia. These women informal vendors often follow construction sites and sell cooked food to workers. This pattern is consistent with several other countries in Africa and Latin America, such as Mozambique. Another study found that almost all households in Maputo city in Mozambique regularly obtained food from informal sellers (Raimundo et al., 2018). With more than four million women involved in the city's informal economy, they dominate the informal food sector in large and smaller cities and contribute greatly to providing a wider variety of food for urban households (Chikanda & Raimundo, 2016).

Likewise, Mexico City has over 300 public markets in which informal food vendors play an important role in supplying food to many neighborhoods (Capron et al., 2017). In low- and middle-income areas, street food stalls are often located at high-traffic points, such as outside metro stations. More than 60% of urban households buy from informal food vendors' shops on a weekly basis (Capron et al., 2018), making informal food vendors a crucial source of modestly priced foods in Mexico City. Similarly, in Kenya, women are instrumental in making cheap food available for their communities. Within Nairobi, approximately half of all employed adults operate in the informal sector. Among these informal enterprises, 45.5% were food vending businesses, of which women were overrepresented compared to men (Owuor et al., 2017). Because food vendors provide food close to where urban dwellers live and work, offer small quantities for purchase, and sell food more cheaply than formal outlets, they are an important source of food for the urban poor. It was found that more than 80% of consumer food purchased in Nairobi is bought in the informal food sector (Owuor et al., 2017).

The informal food sector constitutes a vital cornerstone in the sustenance of economically disadvantaged communities in many urban centres across the Global South. This

sector, predominantly made up of women, is a crucial source of affordable, diverse, and nutritious food options to urban dwellers. The significance of women's participation in this sector is evident in various metropolitan landscapes, exemplified by their pivotal roles in large cities in Africa and Latin America such as Windhoek, Namibia, Maputo, Mexico City, and Nairobi. Women's presence in the informal food sector emerges as a lifeline for urban communities grappling with constant food insecurity and economic precarity.

The informal cross-border trade (ICBT) or small-scale border trade (SSBT) in food and agricultural products, including livestock, is another important dimension of the linkages between gender, migration, and food security. The transnational movement of raw agricultural produce and processed foods (including nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables, meat, and fish) is a core activity of ICBT, especially in regions such as Africa and parts of Asia (Tull, 2021). These activities promote food security by expanding the availability of affordable and diverse varieties of food across countries and regions (UNCTAD, 2019). In many parts of Africa, women traders play a central role in the informal cross-border trade and transnational circulation of food commodities. Although this phenomenon is not very well-documented globally, early estimates by UN Women (2010) suggest that women constituted the largest segment (up to 70%) of informal cross-border traders in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. A new study commissioned by UNDP's Africa Borderlands Centre (2023) in collaboration with Sauti East Africa shows that between 75 to 85% of informal cross-border traders in East Africa are women and 68% constitute youth aged below 35 years. Another recent study of ICBT across Gambia and Senegal in West Africa found that nearly half of the Gambian traders were women, in particular, young mothers without any formal education, who had involved their children in their small-scale trade activities (Gaardner & Fatou Senghore, 2023).

ICBT represents the movement of commodities across borders outside the formal system and involves multiple types of processes, ranging from very small traders carrying minuscule quantities to those engaging in larger volumes of trade. Malawian and Mozambican 'bakkie brigade traders' and 'day traders' travel to South Africa for varying periods to buy food at cheaper prices from cooperatives, local farmers, and supermarket chains such as Shoprite to sell in their own countries (Finmark Trust & FSD Network, 2023a, 2023b). In the borderlands of countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Myanmar, women traders act as couriers carrying smaller quantities of allowable products or function as 'suitcase traders' (Taneja et al., 2018). Women traders sell a variety of food products in the *haats* or border markets jointly established in the border zones of India and Bangladesh (Livani & Solotaroff, 2019). In some localized areas such as India's Mizoram state, cross-border trade with Bangladeshis at the *haats* is the main occupation of many women (Nasreen, 2020; Taneja et al., 2018). A study found that Mozambican women crossed borders to purchase goods in South Africa, while male members of their households sold these products back home (Raimundo & Chikanda, 2016).

A new study on the India-Bangladesh border zones confirms that these traders enhance cross-border food security directly and indirectly by making food products available at lower prices for marginal households and offering additional livelihood opportunities for indigent, less-qualified women (Nasreen, 2020). In fragile countries such as Zimbabwe, the informal cross-border trade in food items has played an important role in mitigating the large-scale food shortages and rampant food insecurity caused by the country's prolonged economic crisis and recurring episodes of hyperinflation (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017). Since most of the food traded across borders is sold in the informal markets in Zimbabwe, it increases both food availability and access to marginal households in the receiving urban areas, such as Epworth near Harare (Tawodzera, 2022). Informal cross-border trade has also provided livelihoods to many Zimbabwean women in a crisis-ridden environment of weak economic opportunities (Chikanda, 2024).

Pre-existing Challenges of Informal Food Workers

In addition to feeding the cities where they live and work, women informal food vendors are largely responsible for the domestic duties at home, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children and elderly relatives. This unequal distribution of responsibilities and labour within the household means that women do most of the care work, which limits their time and efforts to expand their business, effectively producing negative impacts on their earnings (Doss et al., 2020). As informal workers, women already faced many challenges working outside of the legal framework before the pandemic. Women informal food vendors across the Global South have often lacked access to credit and social protection, faced numerous legal hurdles, and had few social safety nets to prevent themselves from slipping further into poverty (UN, 2020). Despite informal vendors' key role in food provisioning for urban dwellers, local authorities have been unsupportive and often hostile to such informal activities. Numerous policies have been put in place to restrict the activities of informal food vendors. Other challenges they face include lack of access to legal and social protections, irregular working hours, barriers to accessing grievances and remediation mechanisms, and vulnerability to excessive fees and migration-related costs (IOM, 2021b).

For example, unplanned marketplaces in Maputo, Mozambique have been treated as 'illegal' activities, even though the local government collects fees (in the form of taxes) from many of the informal vendors operating at these sites (Chikanda & Raimundo, 2016). In Mexico City, several state measures have been introduced to restrict or displace the activities of informal vendors, especially in the higher-income and central areas of the city. Increased police presence has contributed to the strict enforcement of such measures (Capron et al., 2017). This lack of legal security places informal workers in a vulnerable situation. International migrants who work as food vendors and in other informal food businesses often contend with extra challenges due to their status as non-citizens. This is especially the case in settings that have witnessed rampant discrimination

and prejudice against such migrants. A study in Limpopo, South Africa found that two-thirds of migrant and refugee vendors were paying significantly higher rents for their shop premises to private landlords when compared to their South African counterparts (Crush et al., 2017). This cohort has also been targeted more often by police and other local authorities. In 2012, a police operation in Limpopo called “Operation Hardstick” forcibly closed 600 small businesses run by migrants and refugees (Crush et al., 2017).

Informal food vendors often start their informal businesses with their own savings or using family loans (Raimundo et al., 2020). Considering that the average income earned from informal work in places like Mexico City was only about USD 308 before the COVID-19 pandemic (Capron et al., 2018), at least some women working in this sector have been operating in the survivalist mode. This lack of financial security indicates the absence of opportunistic business strategy and the marked economic vulnerability of many women informal food workers (Crush et al., 2023).

Women food workers already faced several hurdles before the pandemic hit. In some urban centres, there has been a reluctance to formally accept women as vendors and operators of small food businesses. A large study with street vendors in New Delhi, India found that about half of the women street vendors were operating carts not registered in their own names, but rather under their husband’s or family’s names (Vyas et al., 2023). Despite this lack of recognition, nearly 80% of women were responsible for managing the carts and performed main tasks, such as purchasing items to be sold, cleaning, sorting, and preparing the food. In cases where both the husband and wife ran the same stall, vending certificates were usually found in the husband’s name. Less than one-third (31%) of women street vendors held a vending certificate. This absence of vending licences made women vendors in New Delhi much more vulnerable to threats of eviction and greater harassment from police in addition to being more likely to face physical, verbal, and sexual violence in public places (Vyas et al., 2023).

Women informal cross-border traders faced multiple challenges before the unfolding of the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, notably, steep custom duties, processing delays, confiscation of goods, harassment and corrupt government officials, lack of access to credit, and weaker access to capital to establish and build their businesses, among others (Finmark Trust & FSD Network,

2023b; George et al., 2017; Tull, 2021; Yusuff, 2014). Female traders have been susceptible to sexual harassment and forced to offer sexual favours to officials to be able to successfully carry their goods across borders. Since informal traders operate outside the legal and regulatory framework of sending and receiving countries, they are overlooked in the policy frameworks. When they do receive attention, it can often be negative, forcing informal traders to deal with hostile and unsupportive local officials (Tull, 2021).

COVID-19 Crisis, Gender and the Informal Sector

The gendered impacts of COVID-19 have been profound and far-reaching, with women experiencing unique challenges due to patriarchy and gendered sociocultural norms. These factors have pushed women and girls into precarious informal employment with no job security, exposing them to additional risks and vulnerabilities. UN Women (2022) reported that globally between 2019 and 2020, women’s employment declined by 4.2%, representing a staggering drop of 54 million jobs. It has been suggested that the phenomenon of women experiencing higher job losses than men during the pandemic triggered a “She-cession” (Alon et al., 2022). Due to COVID’s damaging socioeconomic effects on countries, as many as 100 million people have been pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020. Populations experiencing the highest degree of marginalization include women and girls and workers in informal markets (UN, 2020).

Gender mainstreaming has been insufficient in the policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and women and girls have been left behind in these measures (UN Women, 2021c). According to the UNDP and UN Women *COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker*, out of the 4,968 global response measures, only 1,506 (32.30%) were gender-sensitive, indicating a lack of prioritization of women’s needs and challenges by governments (Table 1) (UNDP, 2024). Measures addressing women’s economic security, violence against women, unpaid care, and informal sectors were lacking or weakly present in many parts of the world (UN Women, 2021c). Measures to support unpaid care were especially lacking, with only 226 measures introduced globally. Inadequate attention to the gender dimensions of COVID-19 by many governments resulted in weak policy reactions to the challenges faced by women in the informal sector, including the informal food sector.

Table 1: Gender-Sensitive Pandemic Response Measures by Income Groups

Income groups (country)	Total COVID-19 response measures	Gender-sensitive measures	No. of measures for women’s economic security	Measures to address violence against women	Measures to support unpaid care
Low income	372	126	63	62	1
Lower middle income	966	409	152	236	21
Upper middle income	1,580	509	193	264	52
High income	1,965	546	114	285	147
All income groups	4,968	1,605	526	853	226

Source: Compiled from UNDP and UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker (2024)

The Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) network has highlighted the “triple crisis” for informal women workers, with difficult outcomes for their care responsibilities, paid work and earnings (WIEGO, 2022a). Already facing a difficult set of challenges before 2020, the pandemic forced women informal workers into even tougher survivalist strategies. This large study on the COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy examined how women workers engaged in various economic activities from 11 cities in 9 countries were faring in mid-2021, compared to their pre-COVID financial conditions in February 2020 (Reed et al., 2021). It found that in the 12 months preceding the 2021 survey, 46% of respondents had been forced to borrow money, 35% drew on already meager savings, and 26% reduced their household spending. In addition, the vast majority (82%) of respondents who drew on these savings since the beginning of the pandemic were not able to replace them at all by mid-2022. In Accra, Ghana, the median monthly earnings of workers were only one-third of their pre-COVID levels, with rising prices of raw materials presenting significant barriers for 76% of street vendors (WIEGO, 2022b). Informal workers reported working fewer days and earning less than before the pandemic, with street vendors managing to recover only 15% of their pre-pandemic earnings by mid-2021 (WIEGO, 2022b). In Cali, Colombia, street vendors experienced an abrupt decline in monthly income to 48% of the minimum wage during the pandemic (Martinez & Young, 2022).

Many women vendors faced the existential dilemma of “dying from hunger” or “dying from the virus” during the pandemic (Zhanda et al., 2022). Informal workers were forced to resume their work to earn their livelihoods and in defiance of public health measures in some instances, but they exposed themselves to the higher risk of COVID-19 infection in the process. If they opted to stay at home and did not earn an income, then they risked not being able to feed themselves and their family. Food insecurity threatened most informal workers in urban centres across the Global South. Nearly one-third of respondents from the WIEGO survey with informal workers said that someone in their household had gone hungry over the last month and 57% reported eating less varied food and/or skipping meals (WIEGO, 2022a). It is not surprising then that the number of people facing chronic hunger rose from 650 million in 2019 to between 720-811 million people in 2020 (CFS, 2021). In Uganda, the three hard lockdowns exacerbated food insecurity for women market and street vendors and their households. Many of them were unable to access relief measures, such as food aid and grants as well as relief from business rents, taxes, and loans to buffer the economic shock of COVID-19 (SIHA Network, 2022). Due to the curfew conditions, women vendors had to sleep at their workplaces, which produced other challenges for them, such as the safety and care of their children, increased health risks at the market, and higher exposure to sexual violence.

Many women were also forced to stop working during the pandemic to take care of their families. The closure of schools and day-care centres compelled many women to drop out of the labour force entirely to provide at-home care

and supervision of children (Chakraborty, 2020). Studies have shown that increased care duties towards immediate and extended family members during the COVID-19 crisis have intensified inter-generational poverty through its damaging and direct effects on asset depletion (Ogando et al., 2021). For female-headed households, the burden was reported to be even worse. A market vendor in rural Philippines said that her “worries had been doubled” due to the inter-generational responsibilities of care for her adult children and their families, especially economic responsibility (Davies et al., 2024). Staying at home not only increased the volume of women’s work it also widened the pre-existing gender gaps in the rates of labour force participation (Karkee & Sodergren, 2021). For women workers, COVID-19 added an extra layer of risk to their physical and mental well-being. There was an unprecedented increase in gender-based violence globally, which has been characterized as the “shadow pandemic” (Nyabeze & Chikoko, 2021; UN Women, 2021b). As a result of the pandemic-related financial strains and heightened general anxiety, women experienced elevated levels of domestic violence manifesting as physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse within the household.

Women informal workers across most regions lacked social protection and support mechanisms when they lost their livelihoods. They had few safety mechanisms or alternative income sources to fall back on during times of crisis. Rather than supporting this group, women informal workers were largely neglected in the pandemic relief and recovery process. The criminalization of unlicensed food vendors was witnessed in some settings, with this group mostly shut out of government pandemic relief. New studies have highlighted how informal workers engaged in food trade were “locked out” of their livelihoods (Rogan & Skinner, 2021) and “locked down and locked out” of their economic activities and pandemic relief measures that would aid recovery from the pandemic’s socioeconomic shocks (Bassier et al., 2021).

Even when governments responded to the social and economic protection of women when carrying out COVID-19 response measures, those engaged in informal work rarely benefitted from government stimulus measures because these supports often did not extend to informal enterprises (UN, 2020). For example, the government did not provide any cash grant relief for informal workers in Accra, Ghana, to help rebuild capital or cope better with their economic losses (WIEGO, 2022b). While a loan programme for small businesses was created under a special Coronavirus Alleviation Program, an extensive online application process and other requirements acted as bureaucratic hurdles. Globally, very few informal workers received government relief to survive or rebuild their livelihoods, with only 39% given cash relief (WIEGO, 2022a).

COVID-19 and Migrants in the Informal Food Sector

Next, we examine the effects of the pandemic on women internal and international migrants working in the informal food sector as well as female migrants engaged in informal cross-border food trade in the Global South. As govern-

ments worldwide implemented lockdowns and restrictive measures to curb the spread of the virus, many internal and international migrants found themselves facing job losses, reduced working hours, discrimination by city-level officials, and limited access to social protections. With informal food markets often operating in crowded and unregulated environments, migrants working in these sectors faced heightened health risks and inadequate protection measures. Additionally, travel restrictions and border closures disrupted migration patterns, leaving many migrants stranded without access to livelihood opportunities or support networks. A study with older migrant street vendors in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam found that they experienced greater burdens during the pandemic (Thanh & Duy, 2024).

Economic Consequences

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profoundly damaging effect on the livelihoods and economic conditions of women migrant informal traders across many countries and regions. ICBT experienced a near collapse in many parts of Africa, especially in areas where the borders were shut down and non-essential transnational passenger movement came to a near halt for an extended period. These circumstances imposed 'extreme challenges' on informal cross-border traders, with women traders being particularly affected (Sauti East Africa, 2020; UNECA, 2021). Informal cross-border trade occurring by foot or as part of passenger traffic was excluded from COVID-19 border management responses (UNECA, 2021). The Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG)¹ documented a sharp decline in the informal trade in some staple grains such as maize and dry beans, along with livestock across many national borders in East Africa due to the abrupt contraction in ICBT related to border closures, strict restrictions on non-essential travel and other measures to limit infections (FSNWG, 2020). An IOM (2021a) rapid assessment study on ICBT at the Mchinji border in Malawi showed that women informal traders were more badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions. This is because they relied entirely on their cross-border trading activities for their earnings, unlike their male counterparts who had other livelihood sources. Informal cross-border traders were negatively affected during the pandemic in other ways, including disruptions in their business operations and its slowdown, sharp declines in numbers of customers and sales, and depletion of their savings, among others (IOM, 2021a). Since cross-border travel was highly restricted at many borders, informal traders were forced to use more risky, illegal routes and methods to cross borders and continue their economic activities.

New requirements also directly contributed to a sharp decline in the movement of small-scale traders even when the borders were open, such as the Mahagi-Goli crossing between DRC and Uganda (Mvunga & Kanuka, 2021). Small-scale cross-border traders were required to pay new levies imposed by governments, around \$10 for the *laissez-passer* which replaced the free *jeton* (day pass) for crossing between DRC and Rwanda and a \$50 visa fee for trading in border areas (Mvunga & Kanuka, 2021). They had to additionally provide negative COVID-19 test results to cross

the border and carry out their work. These tests cost \$5 between DRC and Rwanda border but were priced as high as \$50 at some other borders. The absence of testing facilities at some border posts in the Great Lakes region constituted another significant hurdle for informal cross-border traders.

Similarly, the sudden onset of lockdowns, mobility restrictions, and reduced consumer purchasing power dealt a severe blow to the livelihoods of internal and international migrant food vendors. With many informal food markets experiencing sharp declines in sales and foot traffic, these migrant workers faced unprecedented challenges in sustaining their regular incomes and supporting their households. For example, before COVID, one in three (31%) surveyed international migrants in Thailand were paid less than the minimum wage of 313 THB per day (IOM, 2021b). As of March 2021, the number of migrants who were paid below the minimum wage rose to three out of five (42%). For women migrants, the situation was even worse. Women were already more likely to have been paid below the minimum wage prior to COVID, but during the pandemic, more than half of surveyed women migrant workers reported being paid below the minimum wage (IOM, 2021b).

New research based on a variety of different urban settings has confirmed that informal workers in the urban food environments were less productive and faced job insecurity combined with substantial income losses across all regions of the Global South during and after the pandemic. Business operations within the informal food sector were also severely affected. Another study in Mumbai city, India, highlighted the steep incomes losses for migrant street food vendors (Jagannarayan & Jayachitra, 2020). In Limpopo, South Africa, refugees faced additional financial burdens, such as annual business license fees, despite operating primarily in the informal sector (Rogan & Skinner, 2020). In Myanmar, women who were either unemployed, doing unpaid work for their families, or taking time off were significantly impacted, particularly those working in restaurant businesses on the border with Thailand (IOM, 2021b).

In some instances, new requirements and restrictions were imposed during the pandemic, which prevented a segment from operating their businesses. In South Africa, during Stage 5 of the country's "full lockdown", informal traders were not treated as essential workers and therefore not allowed to operate their businesses (Rogan & Skinner, 2020). Only supermarkets were allowed to operate initially after the lockdown measures were announced and these exemptions were later extended to the spaza shops (Battersby, 2020; Rogan and Skinner, 2021). However, confusion about implementation led to forced closures of spaza shops and migrant-operated spazas were excessively targeted. Street food vendors were allowed to function two weeks into the lockdown, but required municipal permits generally not held by most vendors. For the spaza shops, new requirements of registration with the South African Revenue Services and possession of operating licenses were other barriers for continuing their business operations. In other areas, the informal food sector were exempt as essential services despite strict lockdowns. For example, in Chiang Mai, Thailand,

street vending and the informal food sector were allowed to continue during lockdowns and curfews, as these workers were treated as essential food and goods providers (Langill et al., 2022). However, here too, vendors experienced income losses due to the declining number of customers.

Health Consequences

The working environments of the informal food workers elevated their exposure to the coronavirus and brought other negative health consequences. As frontline workers in local food markets, migrants generally operate in crowded and unregulated environments, which heightened their personal risks to the COVID-19 infections. For example, the UN HABITAT (2022) pandemic vulnerability assessment for Mozambique found that markets were risky environments for contagion in both large and smaller urban areas. The nature of their work, which involves close interactions with customers and handling of food items, further amplified migrant food workers' susceptibility to the virus. Moreover, many migrants lacked access to workplace health benefits, adequate sanitation facilities, and personal protective equipment (PPE), further exacerbating their vulnerability to COVID-19 and its severe health consequences (CFS, 2021).

Due to the economic shocks triggered by the COVID-19 crisis, many households of informal migrant food workers had to resort to consuming cheaper and less nutritious foods. The lowered consumption of healthy foods was evident in Hanoi, Vietnam, with many migrant workers reported reducing their meat intake and opting for more affordable, less healthy food options to stretch their limited resources (Langill et al., 2022). Similarly in Nanjing, China, the pandemic negatively impacted the consumption of staple foods among internal migrant households, with a reduced intake of important items such as pork, beef, lamb, and fruits, affecting overall dietary diversity (Xu et al., 2022). It is important to note the gendered impacts of this diet change. Limited food had profoundly negative impacts on pregnant and lactating women, with respondents in India being unable to breastfeed their newborns due to severe nutritional deficiencies (Vyas et al., 2023).

Migrant workers also faced heightened exposure to the novel coronavirus and other communicable diseases due to their inadequate living conditions. A study with Zimbabwean female migrants in Durban, South Africa found that many of them resided in dilapidated and overcrowded blocks, where rooms were divided only by cardboard boxes and shared communal toilets with very poor sanitary conditions (Mutambara & Naidu, 2023). These undesirable housing conditions elevated their risk of contracting COVID-19. Facing the health impacts of food insecurity as well as exposure to the virus, left many migrant workers in a precarious dilemma. Across all regions, it was clear that many felt they had to make a tough choice between dying from COVID-19, or from hunger. That is, putting their lives at risk to go to work and make a living, or stay at home and starve. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, the need to find food often outweighed fears of contracting COVID-19 among migrant populations. As a food vendor in Chiang Mai described it, "nobody cares about

the virus anymore now. Now they're scared of dying from hunger rather than dying from the disease" (Langill et al., 2022, p. 1229).

Social Impacts

As discussed earlier, the pandemic intensified gender-based violence and this was also the case among migrant populations. For example, Zimbabwean female migrants in South Africa were exposed to intimate partner violence, with some participants indicating that they were unable to leave their abusive partners because they were economically dependent on them (Mutambara & Naidu, 2023). Many of these women were hesitant to report abuse to the police out of fear of discriminatory reactions, trapping them in these abusive situations. In this case, Zimbabwean female migrants' exposure to gender-based violence was amplified by the intersections of gender, migration status, race, and social class during the COVID-19 crisis. In a similar vein, 18% of participants in a study on informal women workers in New Delhi, India reported experiencing domestic violence since the onset of the pandemic (Vyas et al., 2023).

Female migrants working in the informal food sector also encountered increased difficulties in their interactions with customers, prominently the hardening of xenophobic attitudes and increased discriminatory treatment. International migrants in South Africa faced violent xenophobic attacks, with some citizens accusing migrant workers of spreading the virus and depleting scarce resources during the pandemic (Ramogwebo et al., 2024). Xenophobic attacks on migrant businesses in South Africa were generally ignored before the pandemic and dismissed as general criminality by the police and city officials, leaving migrant workers highly vulnerable to public violence and various forms of discrimination (Crush et al., 2017). Women were especially susceptible to violence in public spaces, further highlighting the vulnerability of women migrants working in the informal food sector. In New Delhi, India, women were far more likely to face physical, verbal, and sexual violence in public spaces than their male counterparts (Vyas et al., 2023). These sets of vulnerabilities were also faced by female migrant street workers in the informal sector in Dhaka city, with their financial difficulties compounded by gender-based violence involving assault and harassment, social stigma, extortion and bribery (Sifullah et al., 2023).

Institutional Impacts

Many governments implemented strict lockdown measures and enforcement protocols as efforts to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, which produce multiple adverse outcomes for migrant vendors. International migrants in the informal food sector found themselves at the forefront of these strict institutional responses, contending with heightened surveillance, regulatory crackdowns, and arbitrary enforcement actions by police and other authorities. The pandemic also exacerbated existing discrimination and xenophobia targeting migrant food workers, further marginalizing them in the receiving countries. In Luang Prabang, Laos stay-at-home orders for businesses were also en-

forced, and additional road barriers were put up to prevent people from coming and going (Langill et al., 2022). These actions underscore the unsupportive role of city officials in regulating migrants' mobility and their economic activities during the pandemic.

Vendors in some cities did not report the same challenges. For example, in Cali, Colombia, there were no reported evictions of street vendors from public spaces. This is due to a decade-long Constitutional Court ruling that banned the eviction of street vendors from public spaces, as it would be violating the "right to work" (Martinez & Young, 2022). However, here too, street vendors reported increased police harassment during the pandemic, with 22% of vendors in the city declaring that police harassment had worsened during this crisis (Martinez & Young, 2022). It is interesting to note that women respondents in this study reported more trust in the police than men did – representing an outlier in this analysis. Police misconduct and harassment seemed to be a common issue across regions, with international migrant workers in South Africa (Ramogwebo et al., 2024) and internal migrants in India (Vyas et al., 2023) reporting threats of eviction and harassment by police.

In Bloemfontein, South Africa, migrants faced threats of evictions, and reported verbal abuse, physical assaults, and damage to property, with law enforcement agencies such as police often exploiting the pandemic to target migrant-owned businesses through raids and solicitation of bribes. Migrant vendors who lacked municipal authorization and permits were forced to close their businesses (Ramogwebo et al., 2024). In India, state governments strictly enforced the permit system under the Street Vendors Act (2014) as part of their special orders for pandemic control, which immediately led to a criminalization of unlicensed vendors who lacked such permits (Chaudhry & Srivastava, 2023). Migrant workers were forced to offer "bribe money" to continue operating their businesses during the pandemic in South African cities (Mutambara & Naidu, 2023; Ramogwebo et al., 2024). This coping mechanism by informal workers highlights the abuse of power within institutional frameworks, and the systemic challenges that exacerbate migrants' precarious situation.

In Nanjing, China, internal migrants faced extra challenges due to the *hukou* system, which restricts their access to social benefits available to local residents, exacerbating inequalities and vulnerabilities (Xu et al., 2020). *Hukou* is both a system involving prefecture-level registration and provides identity status that distinguishes between local and nonlocal residents, and unequal their entitlements. Residents with local *hukou* have access to a range of social benefits which are not available to migrants. Households with non-local *hukou* do not enjoy the same access to children's education, healthcare, and state-subsidized benefits. The migrant population in China is massive, with rural-urban migrants making up 376 million people in 2020 (Xu et al., 2022). These migrants faced greater restrictions on mobility, reduced access to markets, and higher income loss when compared to their non-migrant counterparts during the COVID-19 crisis (Xu et al., 2022).

Government Relief Measures

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed glaring disparities in access to government relief measures, particularly for internal and international migrants working in the informal food sector. As countries grappled with the economic fallout of lockdowns and restrictions, relief programs were rolled out by governments to cushion the impact on vulnerable populations. However, many international migrants found themselves on the periphery of these initiatives, facing exclusion from benefits and programs due to their status as non-citizens, precarious immigration status in some cases or informal employment arrangements. Because of their tenuous immigration status, irregular migrants in Bloemfontein, South Africa, were excluded from government assistance programmes, such as health care, food, cash, rent relief and housing, aimed at mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ramogwebo et al., 2024).

State-led relief measures for internal migrants in the informal food sector during the COVID-19 pandemic varied significantly across national settings. In Hanoi, Vietnam, despite being eligible for government stimulus packages, complicated documentation requirements prevented informal vendors from accessing support, highlighting a prominent gap in assistance delivery to those in the informal sector (Langill et al., 2022). Bureaucratic requirements in Vietnam included providing proof of income and city residency, and because most informal vendors held no labour contract, and many did not have lawful registration of residency in Hanoi, getting these documents to meet the eligibility criteria was difficult (Langill et al., 2022).

There were differences in pandemic relief measures across countries, with some governments in the same region providing direct financial assistance, while others focused on food distribution or suspensions of utility payments. On the negative side, government support was absent in some settings. For example, government support was nonexistent in Luang Prabang, Laos, despite promises of loan suspensions and discounted utilities, leaving migrants working in the informal sector unable to rebuild their businesses and recover the economic losses they faced during the COVID-19 crisis (Langill et al., 2022). On the positive side, street vendors in Chiang Mai, Thailand, received some government support through cash transfer programs and neighborhood food distributions, totaling THB 15,000 (approx. USD 480) over 3 months (Langill et al., 2022). Another less-common positive example is the Ingreso Solidario (Solidarity Income) program in Cali, Colombia, which provided much-needed financial aid to over four million households in the country during the pandemic, demonstrating the potential impact of targeted relief measures in alleviating economic hardships. This program began in March 2020 and extended through 2022, offering subsidies based on the number of household members and levels of poverty, ranging from US\$116 (for one person) to \$152 for a household of five (Martinez & Young, 2022). It is not clear how many internal and international migrants engaged in informal food work in Chiang Mai and Cali received these benefits.

Effects on Migration Patterns

The COVID-19 pandemic produced abrupt changes in migration patterns, especially for international migrants. As the virus spread rapidly across borders, governments worldwide implemented stringent travel restrictions and border closures, disrupting regular migration flows. Many international migrants found themselves navigating unprecedented challenges, with some opting to return to their countries of origin in the face of uncertain employment prospects and health risks, while others had to remain in their host countries, grappling with economic instability and social upheaval. In Hanoi, Vietnam, many internal migrant vendors returned to their rural hometowns in anticipation of lockdown measures, fearing further restrictions on their trade, their ability to travel home, or being concerned for their health (Langill et al., 2022). Similarly, in Cambodia, many migrant workers returned to their hometowns. However, returnee migrant workers reported experiencing a substantial reduction in income, at an average of 40% decline (IOM, 2021b), and women's incomes declining more than their male counterparts, underscoring the gendered impact of the COVID-related migration patterns. In contrast, the average income of workers who stayed to work only reduced by 9% (IOM, 2021b). In Bloemfontein, dire economic conditions in South Africa due to the pandemic's economic shocks, coupled with weak social protections offered to informal workers, prompted some migrants to return to their home countries, highlighting the personal sacrifices and instability associated with return migration (Ramogwebo et al., 2024).

In a study organized by the International Organization for Migration, 76% of the 1,369 surveyed migrant stayers in Thailand during the pandemic were from Myanmar (IOM, 2021b). Many possessed only temporary border pass visas that served as temporary permits to work in one specific area. With reduced agricultural production after the onset of the pandemic and decreased demand from production factories, many Myanmar migrant workers found themselves unemployed or forced to search for other work outside the area where they were permitted to work, putting them at risk of arrests and deportation for such infringements. Migrant women from Zimbabwe who migrated to South Africa are predominantly engaged in low-wage informal sector employment, as independent traders and street vendors among other forms of work (Mutambara & Naidu, 2023). Before COVID-19, many of these women were already involved in informal cross-border migration and stayed in South Africa temporarily for short periods. However, due to the worsening economic situation in Zimbabwe and closed borders, some decided to migrate to South Africa on a semipermanent basis to seek sustainable livelihoods. Migrant workers in Thailand found it difficult to acquire formal migration status before the pandemic. The Royal Thai Government created new regularization opportunities for irregular migrants in 2020 and 2021. But administrative challenges and costs associated with maintaining their immigration status were significant barriers for migrant workers and weakened the significance of this positive initiative (IOM, 2021b). Migrants in irregular situations were unable to access social protections during this difficult period of emergency.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the gendered dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis. It has also highlighted the various ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has produced unprecedented negative outcomes for women in the Global South who work in the informal food sector, deepening food insecurity, gender inequality, and economic inequities in many areas. Female internal and international migrants working in the informal food sector as well as migrants engaged in informal cross-border food trade, experienced an additional set of new challenges, exacerbating the preexisting vulnerabilities of such informal workers. Border closures and lack of exemptions for informal cross-border trade brought this activity to a complete halt and produced new hardships for women cross-border traders. For internal migrants in the informal food sector, job losses, reduced incomes, heightened vulnerability, and limited access to social benefits and relief measures pushed workers into damaging survival strategies. International migrants working in informal food trade felt the economic, social, health, and institutional shocks of the pandemic, uncovering the reality of informal workers surviving with limited social security. The findings of this paper underscore the need to support women and migrant-led businesses in the informal food sector. It highlights the urgent need for targeted policy interventions to support the livelihoods of migrant workers, including enhanced social protection measures, access to financial resources, and tailored policy responses to address the unique challenges faced by these vulnerable cohorts.

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Endnote

- 1 The Market Analysis Sub-Group of the Food Security and Nutrition Working Group (FSNWG) monitors the informal cross-border trade of 88 food commodities and livestock in eastern Africa (Burundi, Democratic Rep, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda) and its quantifiable effects on regional food security. It draws on data provided by the Eastern Africa Grain Council (EACG), the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS Net), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the National Bank of Rwanda and the World Food Program (WFP).

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