

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Gender analysis should be a core component of policy planning
- Women should be seen as an important driver of economic recovery
- Best practices generated by women should be documented and shared
- COVID-19 response and planning structures should seek greater representation by and participation of women's groups

AT A GLANCE

The COVID-19 pandemic severely restricted socio-economic activity in Lesotho, particularly during the period of national lockdown during which almost all businesses were prohibited from operating. The lockdown had its most significant effects on the informal business sector and the textile industry. These two highly affected sectors are notable because they employ mainly women. However, women are particularly vulnerable to the pandemic's effects in other ways too. Domestic violence, which mainly affects women, has increased, in line with global lockdown trends. The flow of remittances from the neighbouring South Africa, where many Basotho migrant workers are employed in mining, manufacturing, and farming, has declined as many workers lost their jobs. With little to no social protection in Lesotho, the impact of this drop in income is felt disproportionately by women, because of their vulnerability and burden of home-based caring roles.

This situation created significant challenges in a country already struggling to generate sustainable economic growth. However, because women and youth are commonly less economically secure than men, they are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of any economic downturn. This policy brief explores how the lives of Lesotho's women and girls are changing in the wake of COVID-19 and outlines priority measures for recovery efforts.



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely restricted socio-economic activity in Lesotho, particularly during the period of national lockdown, which began on 29 March 2020. During this period, almost all businesses were prohibited from operating, with the exception of essential services, such as grocery shops, chemists and pharmacies, health facilities and limited public transport, which must observe social distancing regulations. Schools, hotels, restaurants and bars were closed and there were also restrictions on movement inside the country.

This situation created significant challenges for Lesotho as a whole, a country already struggling to generate economic growth and prosperity through the implementation of its national development agenda. However, because women and youth are commonly less economically secure than men, they are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of any economic downturn. This policy brief explores how the lives of Lesotho's women and girls are changing in the wake of COVID-19. It outlines suggested priority measures for both the immediate response and longer-term recovery efforts to ensure that interventions address the multiple ways in which women have been affected by COVID-19.

SOCIOECONOMIC EFFECTS

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only revealing the gaps in health systems and infrastructure, but also highlighting the high levels of vulnerability of individuals, families, and the whole economy. The pandemic exacerbated gender-based violence, which primarily affects women. UN Women (2020) affirms that in developing countries, the vast majority of women's employment is in the informal economy - about 70% - and that COVID-19 quarantine policies have caused a spike in domestic violence levels.

In addition, the human rights protection deficit and socioeconomic challenges for women and youth during COVID-19 restrictions were exacerbated because the government system was slow to respond. The overly securitised response by government further amplified the problem, especially with respect to human rights violations.

The lockdown had its most significant effects on the informal business sector, which depends primarily on daily sales and restocking of product. Initially, there was

no government support available for economically vulnerable groups, such as street vendors, whose products perished while their businesses were closed. The textile workforce was also significantly affected: many jobs were lost due to the drop in international demand for garments resulting from the pandemic.

These two highly affected sectors - the informal sector and textile manufacturing - are notable because they employ mainly women. According to Bureau of Statistics Report (2020), 59.3% of households stopped working because the business or government offices were closed due to COVID-19 legal restrictions. It further found that 64.1% of people experienced either a reduction in income or did not receive anything at all during lockdown.

A further concern is the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the flow of remittances, mainly from the neighbouring Republic of South Africa. Many Basotho migrant workers employed in mining, manufacturing, and farming lost their jobs, and therefore could not continue to send money home. According to the World Bank, remittances were projected to fall by 20% globally severely impacting vulnerable households. While at the same time the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that about 1.6 billion informal workers lost 60% of their income, with little to no savings and no access to social protection. The impact is felt disproportionately by women because of their vulnerability and burden of home-based caring roles.

Lesotho like many other African countries is not fully covered by social insurance which can help to alleviate the risks of poverty caused by crises. Old age pension payments, which commonly supplement the income of households where older women are resident, are insufficient to cater for the needs of their target population plus children and grandchildren who are suddenly unemployed.

In some incidences, domestic violence has been exacerbated due to the fact that family resources are not adequate which creates stress and tension in the home. In situations like these, it is important to remember that it is not only younger married women who are targets; older women are also vulnerable to abuse. It is therefore important to recognise the immeasurable contribution they make to families and communities. This role must be recognised and be given the necessary acknowledgement by government.



vulnerabilities and inequalities across the country that must be addressed to ensure that the country meets its development targets. Women and youth should be encouraged to take a leading role in the country's socioeconomic recovery in recognition of their potential to add significant value in the long-term.

RESPONSE MEASURES

Women and youth have been comparatively neglected in the official COVID-19 response from Government, even though these groups have borne a disproportionate burden of the pandemic's effects. In the context where gender intersects with other challenges such as HIV, age and disability, existing inequalities have widened, creating a difficult challenge for the recovery period.

GENDER ANALYSIS OF POLICY IMPACT

Given that gender is a key factor influencing the differential burden of COVID-19 impacts on women and men, all policy options being considered for the recovery phase should be preceded by a thorough gender analysis that documents the predicted effects on different population groups and highlights relevant risks.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

As the economy starts to open up, it is important to recognise that women are a key driver of economic development and their contribution to the nation's prosperity, particularly through micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), is crucial. Empowerment strategies and programmes by women and for women to maximise their economic contributions should be considered as a high priority.

COLLABORATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

COVID-19 provides an unexpected opportunity to increase the engagement and participation of women's groups in various socioeconomic activities. However, it is important that government, development partners and civil society seize the opportunity for stronger collaboration and cooperation as they agree on the way forward post-COVID-19. Best practices and solutions derived from women's on the ground experience running their businesses, will have a positive impact for recovery phases.

INCREASED STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

The Government of Lesotho established the National Emergency Command Centre to lead the national response to COVID-19. The Command Centre was not initially popular and was therefore replaced with National COVID-19 Secretariat (NACOSEC), a multi-sectoral team headed by the Ministry of Finance, to manage and coordinate the response to the pandemic. The NACOSEC is yet to gain trust and credibility that was lost by its predecessor. As such, regular and adequate stakeholders' consultations, involving all sectors of society and particularly women's groups, should be considered.

CONCLUSION

The health and economic crisis triggered by the presence of COVID-19 presents new opportunities for Lesotho to undergo introspection regarding its socioeconomic policies and gender equality. This policy brief is meant to highlight key issues regarding gender empowerment in the context of COVID-19. 

