

TWICE AS VULNERABLE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: BEING A WOMAN AND WORKING IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Description of the topic and presentation of the theoretical framework

The conceptual framework of O'Donnell *et al.*, 2021 postulates that health crises expose girls and women working in the informal sector to cumulative vulnerabilities that affect both their economic and social status. This is due to the vulnerability of the informal sector and the additional domestic work they face because of their place and role in the sexual division of labour. In fact, injunctions for the cessation of economic activities increase the loss of jobs and income, which is already very low for these girls and women. The consequences are even more important, as they rarely have personal savings and/or compensatory income that would allow them to suspend their activities without running the risk of falling into extreme poverty for a long time. Lockdowns that force people to stay at home increase the amount of unpaid domestic and care work traditionally done by women and girls in households. Prolonged confinement also exposes them to gender-based violence.

Governments initial response to a health crisis is to slow or limit the spread of the disease within the population by introducing barriers and restrictive measures. However, these measures are not without consequences for the population, especially for women and girls in the informal sector, who are often more afraid of the consequences of these measures than of the disease itself. The Burkinabe government, like other governments around the world, has not deviated from this response plan to the COVID-19 pandemic. The measures taken have greatly affected activities in the informal sector: 87% in Bobo Dioulasso and 84% in Ouagadougou (MINEFID, 2021). Those in precarious employment were most affected (INSD, 2020).

The informal sector employed 93.3% of women in the non-agricultural income-generating sector in Burkina Faso in 2018, 53% of whom worked in precarious jobs (INSD, 2020). Although this group of the population has been very exposed to the negative consequences of COVID-19, gender-specific data on the extent of these consequences is still poorly known, even if studies have been conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on the economic situation and living conditions of the population in Burkina Faso (MINEFID, 2021; INSD, 2021; Zahonogo and Alban, 2021) and on the informal sector in particular (MJPEJ, 2021).

The aim of this paper is therefore to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic has created or increased the vulnerability of women actors in the informal sector in Burkina Faso.

Research objectives

The main objective of this communication is to examine the impact of Covid-19 interventions on adolescent girls and women in the informal sector. More specifically, it analyses the impact of these interventions on both their economic activities and their social status

Data and Methodology

We draw on a mixed quantitative and qualitative study conducted among adolescent girls and women aged 15-64 living in Bobo-Dioulasso or Ouagadougou in March 2020, who were economically active in the informal sector. The aim of the survey was to document the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic response and mitigation measures on the economic activities and mental health of adolescent girls and women in the informal sector in the two cities, and the extent to which they were included in the definition of these measures. The quantitative survey involved 1609 women and adolescent girls. The qualitative survey included 29 focus and 22 autobiographical interviews with adolescent girls and women in the informal sector with different profiles, seven focus groups with men and husbands of women in the informal sector, and 29 individual interviews with religious, customary and administrative leaders.

The analysis of the quantitative data consisted of descriptive analyses highlighting the different impacts of interventions on women actors in the informal sector, both on their economic activities

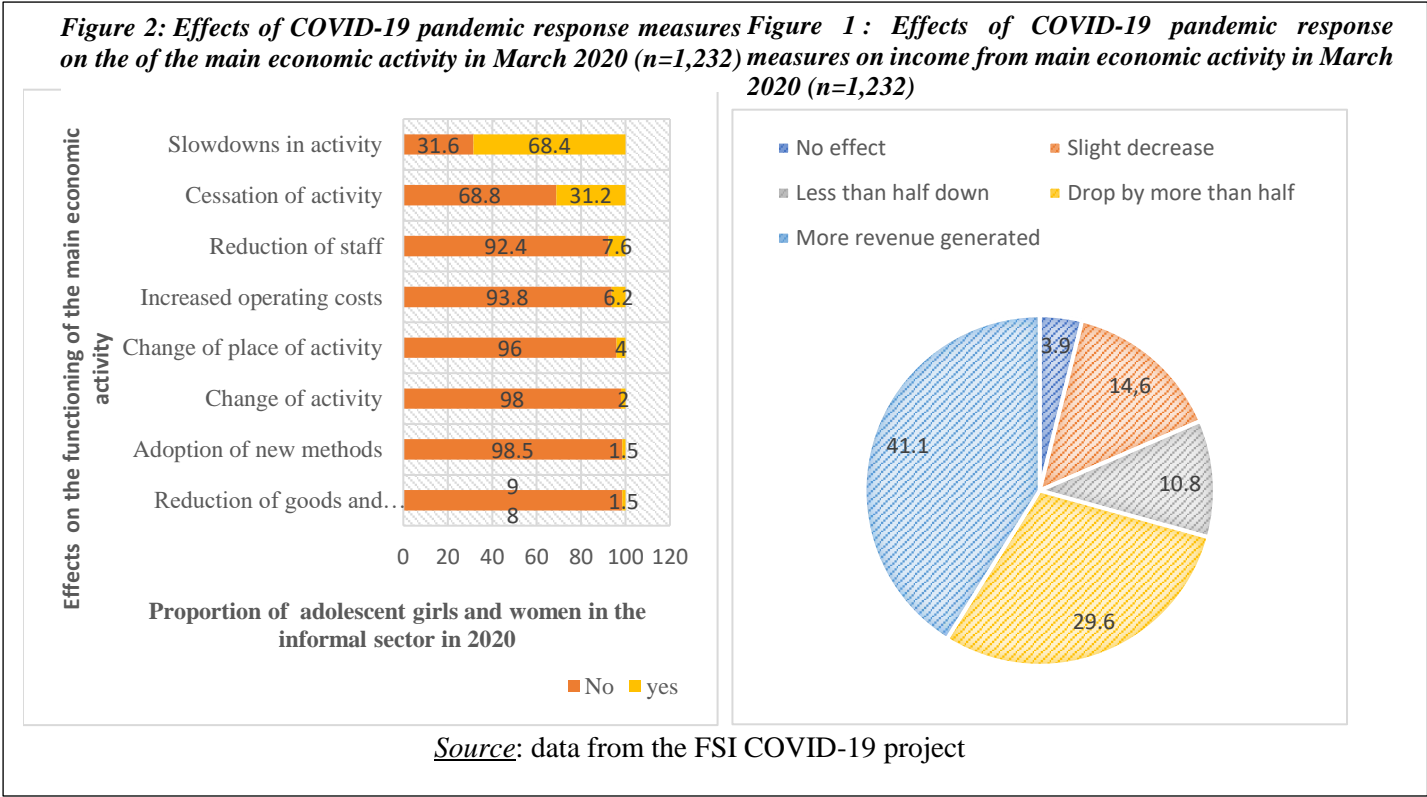
and on their living conditions within the household (food security, unpaid care, domestic violence). Qualitative data underwent initial thematic analysis.

Results

1. Impact of the response to COVID-19 on the functioning of economic activities and on the income of adolescent girls and women in the informal sector

The results of the quantitative data indicate that 77% of adolescent girls and women surveyed, i.e. 1,232, believe that at least one of the measures taken in response to the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on their main economic activity in March 2020. Of those who reported being affected, 68.4% experienced a slowdown in economic activity and 31.2% lost their jobs (see **Figure 1**).

Regarding the impact on the income usually generated, 41.1% of women who reported having experienced the effects of COVID-19 response measures said that their activity no longer generated income (see **Figure 2**)



2. Differentiated consequences depending on the type of economic activity carried out

Retailers and restaurant owners were more affected than those in personal services in other activities. Indeed, the loss of goods affected between 11 and 27% of distributive trades and restaurants compared to 4 to 9% of services and other activities, while the loss of income affected between 75 and 90% of distributive trades and restaurants compared to 52 to 65% of services and other activities.

Traders attribute the negative impact of the response measures on their income to the loss of goods due to their perishable nature (fruit, vegetables, juices, meals, etc.), but also to the difficulty of complying with the barrier measures.

"I was selling condiments... You go to get your goods to come and sell, but you can't sell so everything goes wrong. You stay in debt" (Participant in a group discussion of street vegetable vendors in Ouagadougou, 60 years old, married)

At the time of the coronavirus, our tables and benches were exceedingly small to respect the distance of one metre and to accommodate several people at the same time. People no longer ate at random. Before the coronavirus you could prepare five rice dishes [the dish alludes to a unit of measurement like the kilogram], during the coronavirus you could only prepare one rice dish. While I have set up the place and it is clean... Our money is gone, the working capital is over, and we have started to take out loans. (46 years old, married, five children, restaurateur, FGD).

3. Deterioration in household food security

Analysis shows that during the implementation of the COVID-19 response, the food situation in the households of adolescent girls and women in the informal sector deteriorated. The proportion of respondents living in households experiencing moderate hunger increased from 12.8% 30 days before 26 March 2020 to 20.1% 30 days after 26 April 2020. It decreased to 18.2% 30 days before 1 July 2020. Similarly, the proportion of respondents living in households where members were severely hungry increased from 2.7% 30 days before 26 March 2020 to 5.8% 30 days after 26 April 2020, before decreasing to 3.9% 30 days before 1 July 2020, before decreasing to 3.3% 30 days before 1 July (see Figure 3).

Figure 4 : Changes in the food situation of the household

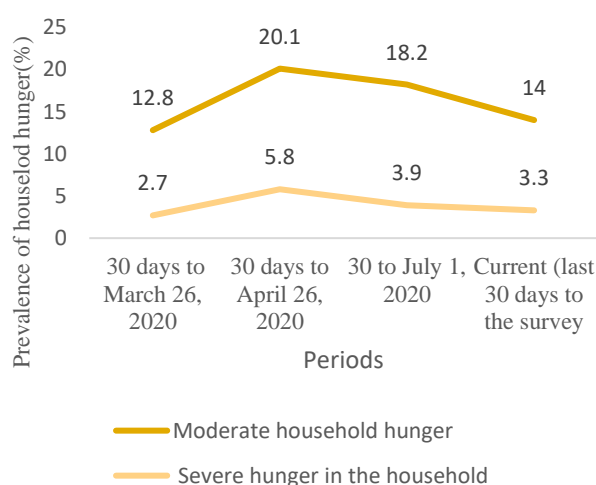


Figure 3 : Perceptions of domestic violence between March and June 2020

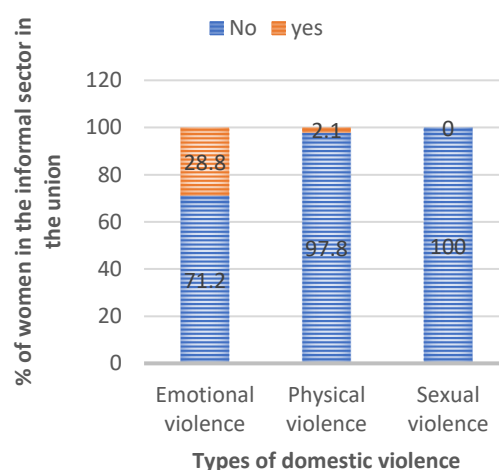
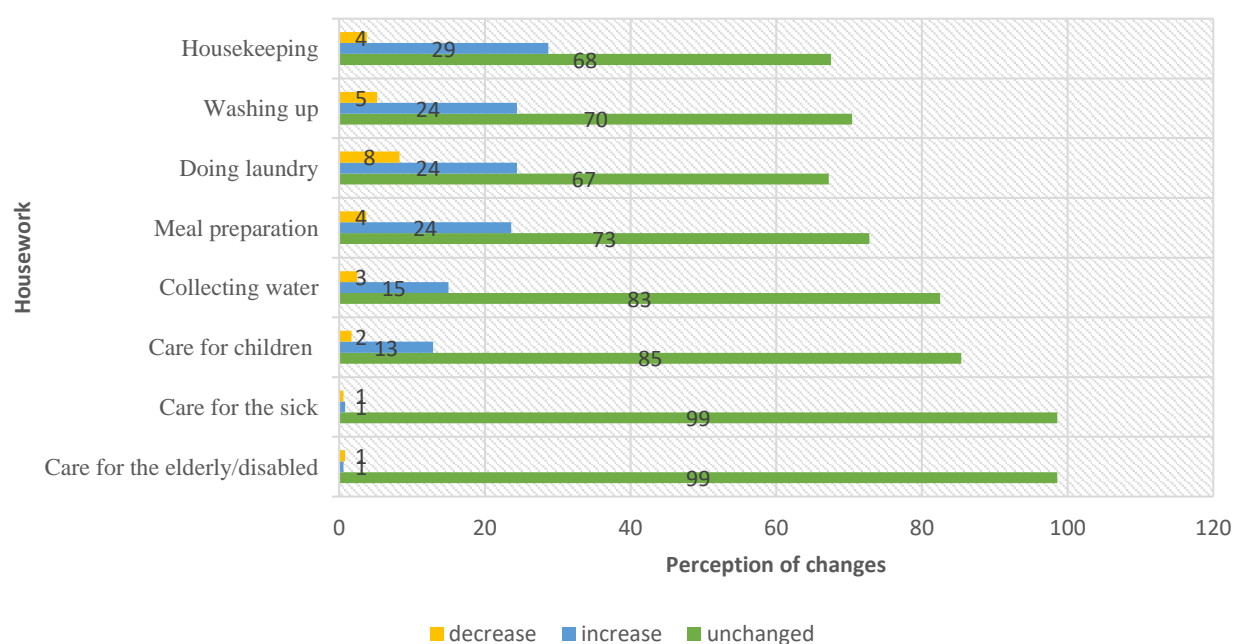


Figure 5 : Perception of changes in the amount of housework to be done between March and June 2020



4. Incidence of domestic work, unpaid care work and violence by intimate partners

Almost all respondents reported that their caring responsibilities had remained the same, except for those for young children where 13 per cent reported an increase. In terms of domestic work, just under a third (29 per cent) reported an increase in housework, around a quarter (24 per cent) in meal preparation, laundry and washing up, and 15 per cent in fetching water (see **Figure 5**). These relatively low proportions may be explained by the fact that children who were confined to the home at this time were involved in domestic work, as the following comments illustrate.:

"... The children help us work, they don't go anywhere" (33 years old, single, 1 child, focus group participant of night vendors).

"So far, the children continue to do this. When they get up in the morning, whoever must do the washing up does it, the one who must clean the house cleans. When I go to buy the condiments and come back, whoever must help helps. You assign the roles, and they carry them out" (48 years old, single, 2 children, focus group participant of night vendors).

In terms of domestic violence, a significant proportion of respondents (28.8%) reported an increase in emotional violence and 2.1% reported an increase in sexual violence (see **Figure 4**). There was no change in the incidence of physical violence (73.42% of respondents were in a union, i.e. 1,145 out of 1,609).

Conclusion and discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting response measures have slowed down or stopped the economic activities of women in the informal sector in the cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso and led to a general decline in income, affecting some more than others. In addition, the proportion of women experiencing severe or moderate hunger increased during this period. In terms of the impact of the measures on domestic work and care, the results show an increase in domestic work in particular, which is in line with the O'Donnell's theoretical framework. Domestic violence, particularly emotional violence, also increased. Our findings suggest that responses to sanitation crises need to consider the specific conditions in which vulnerable groups such as women and adolescents in the informal sector live and work, in order to minimise the impact of these interventions on their situation.

References

1. O'Donnell, M., et al., *The gendered dimensions of social protection in the COVID-19 context*. 2021. 5 p.
2. Ministry of Economy, Finance and Development (MINEFID), *Study of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in Burkina Faso*. 2021, MINEFID: Ouagadougou. 140 p.
3. Ministry of Youth and the Promotion of Youth Entrepreneurship, *Study of the impact of Covid-19 on actors in the informal economy in Burkina Faso*. 2020, Directorate of the Informal Economy: Ouagadougou. 98 p.
4. National Institute of Statistics and Demography (INSD), & World Bank, *Socio-Economic Impacts, of COVID-19 in Burkina Faso: Results of a High-Frequency Household Telephone Survey. Second passage*. 2020, INSD: Ouagadougou. 47 p.
5. INSD, *Covid-19 monitoring impacts at the household level*, INSD, Editor. 2021, INSD: Ouagadougou. 4 p.
6. Zahonogo, P. and A. Alban, *Impact of public policies related to the Covid-19 pandemic on the informal sector, women and youth: The case of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal*. 2021, IDRC: Burkina Faso. 56 p.