



Mark Chingono

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women in the Informal Sector in Southern Africa: A Case Study of Lesotho

ABSTRACT. Originating from Huan Province in China in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic¹, which is raging throughout the whole world, has disproportionately impacted on women in the informal sector in Southern Africa. Adding more burdens to the triple jeopardy of exploitation by patriarchy, capitalism and the state that these women already endure, the lockdown measures meant to curb the spread of the pandemic have been economically, politically, socially and psychologically negative. The pandemic has also exposed the weaknesses of the global economic system, the production and distribution system as well as consumption patterns. The alarmist responses adopted by panicky authorities have amplified the impacts of the pandemic and worsened the plight of women in the informal sector. This paper identifies some of the major challenges that the Coronavirus has presented to women in the informal sector as well as their coping strategies. The paper posits that the pandemic, although devastating in many ways, presents an opportunity to re-organize society by rethinking and reevaluating our core values and practices. It concludes by suggesting policy options to mitigate the impact of the pandemic while allowing the informal sector to thrive.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, coronavirus, informal sector, gender inequality, pandemic, patriarchy, policy, women, traders

Introduction

The 2019 novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which causes the Covid 19 disease, is spreading with epidemic features in the rest of the world (Petrosillo et al., 2020), and has caused untold suffering to women in the informal sector in Southern Africa. The combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic itself and the lockdown measures meant to curb its spread have

¹ According to 'conspiracy theories' circulating on social media, is a result of biological warfare between the emerging superpower, China, and the hitherto dominant one, the US.

been economically, politically, socially, and psychologically damaging. In accordance with lockdown restrictions, governments and businesses in the sub-region have scaled down their operations, closed borders and restricted public gatherings and movement. The ripple effects of these measures, dubbed 'a shadow pandemic', seem more damaging than the pandemic itself. Some of the negative impacts include a rise in: unemployment; poverty levels; crime; gender-based violence; early marriages; teenage pregnancies and unwanted babies; other infectious diseases; and premature deaths.

While almost everyone everywhere is feeling the pressure of lockdown restrictions, women in the informal sector are enduring far more than their quotient of lockdown induced misery, pain and suffering. This is precisely because, before the pandemic women in the informal sector were already poor, eking out a marginal existence and discriminated against in both the public and private sectors. As Moungar and Baldeh (2020, p. 3) aptly observe: "The pandemic has disproportionately impacted women and girls living in fragile contexts with ripple effects on education, livelihoods and nutrition, among others". For women in the informal sector, who are among the most fragile and vulnerable, the pandemic has presented a new set of problems to the myriad of challenges they already endured. Imposed with little or no regard of how the poor majority would survive, the lockdown rules have deepened traditional gender inequalities and exacerbated the fragility of poor women the informal sector.

Focusing on Lesotho, this paper discusses the impact of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions on women in Southern's informal sector. Lesotho's economy, with a paltry GDP per capita of 967.23 USD (which is equivalent to 8 per cent of the world's average) high unemployment rate of 24.40 per cent, inflation of 5.83 per cent and a debt-service ratio of 5.1592 per cent in 2021 (Lesotho GDP Per Capita, 2021), was already in the red. In such fragile contexts, "the burden of conflict, poverty and climate change falls most heavily on already marginalized groups" (Moungar & Baldeh, 2020, p. 3), women in the informal sector in this case. As with much of Africa, about 40% of Lesotho's Small and Medium Enterprises (SME)s are led or owned by women, and by July 2020 80% of these "had to temporarily or permanently shut down their business due pandemic restrictions" (Moungar & Baldeh, 2020).

The aim of this paper is to consider how these poor and marginalized women are enduring the brunt of the pandemic, identify some

of their survival strategies and propose policies for the protection and promotion of their rights. The paper contends that, there is need for a delicate balancing act between meeting the economic needs of the people and the healthy need to contain the pandemic. Sacrificing the economy on the alter of health is short-sighted and self-defeating in the long-run, for we need a vibrant economy to generate funds to purchase and/ produce medicine and to build hospitals. The paper also argues that COVID-19 can spur economic and sociopolitical change if policy responses embrace technological innovation and efficient and productive use of resources. It concludes by proposing short, medium and long-term policy options to assist women in the informal sector and to promote economic development.

1. Methods

The COVID-19 pandemic induced restrictions on movement severely limited the research methods options. Visiting research sites to conduct in-depth interviews or opinion field surveys of female informal traders in Lesotho was not possible. Therefore, the paper is based partly on secondary literature, publications, TV, and social media. The most recent literature on COVID-19 has been reviewed, and statistical data on infections, recoveries and death consulted. The historical part of the paper uses results of an opinion field survey conducted in 2003 by the author. In a word, qualitative in orientation, the paper reveals subtle connections and processes that have coalesced to increase the marginalization and pauperization of women in the informal before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Women in the Informal Sector: A History of Marginality and Vulnerability

Hitherto, the history of women in the informal sector of Lesotho has been a history of marginalization and vulnerability. Operating in a dependent and weak enclave economy which is completely surrounded by South Africa (SA), women informal traders are marginalized by traditional patriarchy, the state and primitive peripheral capitalism. As a consequence of this triple jeopardy of marginalization, women in the informal sector are the most vulnerable social group in Lesotho.

Historically, patriarchal traditions, idioms and ideologies have restricted Basotho women's participation in the public sphere, and instead forced them to remain invisible 'workhorses' of the household (Muel-ler, 1977; Gill, 1997). Traditional patriarchal and religious ideologies and institutions define and/or limit the rights, options and possibilities available to women. The traditional unequal power relationship between the sexes was redefined and buttressed, with ambiguous implications, during colonialism.

The post-independence state, patriarchal in orientation, has pursued gender discriminatory employment practices which have resulted in mas-sive under-representation of women in both the private and public sec-tors. Mapetla and Petlane (2007, p. 30–31) observe, 'unequal gender rela-tions' remain "a common feature of Lesotho society, in both the private and public spheres". In short, thanks to systematic gender discrimination in both the public and private spheres, and as in the pre-colonial and colonial eras, women continue to be marginalized in the political, economic, social, legal and cultural spheres.

With only water as the 'most significant natural resource', which is ex-ported to SA, the Basotho state is a dependent weak state with limited re-sources and options. In other words, the country's heavy dependency on SA and foreign aid has limited its capacity and policy options for promot-ing gender equality, supporting the informal sector, let alone managing the pandemic. With their needs fading into policy insignificance, poor women have flocked *en masse* to the informal sector, which is now the most rapidly expanding sector of the economy.

Practically, the only vehicle for poor women's survival and empower-ment, the informal sector is attractive primarily because of its easy entry requirements: capital, qualifications or experience are not necessarily re-quired, though these are decisive of one's chances of success and prosper-ity. Indeed, today, and as in most developing countries, women constitute a majority in the informal sector and the majority of economically active women are in this sector (Women in the Informal Economy Global Orga-nization, WIEGO, 2003). However, because "Lesotho does not have an in-formal sector policy despite rapid growth of the sector in the past two dec-ades" Mapetla and Petlane (2007, p. 78), women in the sector face numer-ous challenges that make it difficult for them to realize their full potential. Among others, these challenges include: stiff competition; low incomes; the perishability of goods; the failure by debtors to repay; rising trans-port costs; unsupportive policies; and harassment by the police (Chingo-

no, 2016). To optimize the benefits of the informal sector policies should be based on a careful consideration of the benefits and costs of the sector.

2.1. The Benefits and Costs of the Informal Sector

The informal sector, though denigrated by officialdom, bestows many benefits to society. These benefits include, among others: creating employment; providing incomes and livelihood for the poor; enhancing human security; creating wealth; contributing to national income and GDP; catalyzing gender equality; contributing to political stability and bolstering state security; supporting and subsidizing the formal sector; entrenching the much needed entrepreneurial spirit and financial discipline; and finally and especially important during lockdowns and restricted movement, provision of goods and services at the consumer's doorstep and at convenient times (Chingono, 2016). In other words, although not directly taxed, the informal economy offers employment and livelihoods to many, contribute to national economic development, and by absorbing the unemployed who could be potential criminals and rebels, it enhances state security

Notwithstanding its obvious benefits to society, the informal sector also has a 'dark-side'. Poor quality goods, unhealthy food, poor working conditions, oppression and lack of protection of employees, and even crime (especially the sale of smuggled or stolen goods) are some of the common features of the informal economy. This should not be surprising given that, the informal sector is not regulated and that the majority of its actors are semi-illiterate and not aware of some of the hazards that their activities may cause or the laws they may be breaking. A holistic policy framework should therefore seek to optimize the benefits of the informal sector while suppressing its harmful and criminal activities, and should be categorized in short-term, medium-term and long-term.

To recap, the history of women in Lesotho has been characterized by socio-economic and political marginalization. Traditional patriarchal ideologies, religions and gender discriminatory policies have entrenched the subjugation of women. In efforts to reclaim their right to survive, thrive and prosper, increasing numbers of women have become enterprising foot soldiers in the informal economy, where they face a multitude of multilayered challenges. These challenges have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and alarmist responses.

3. The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic for Women in the Informal Sector

As of November 14, Lesotho had 44 deaths 2041 cases and 1056 recoveries, representing a 2.1 per cent case-fatality rate (Worldometers, 2020). This is relatively low as compared to fatality rates of over 10 per cent in “Italy, Yemen and two other countries” (de Best, 2020). With a world fatality rate of 2.3%, which is lower than 9.5% and 34.4% of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) respectively, “it can spread in the community more easily than MERS and SARS” (Petrosillo et al., 2020).

When the novel Coronavirus hit the country in March 2020, the government, and in an endeavour to curb the spread of the pandemic, imposed a strict lockdown. On 3 April the government released and gazetted lockdown regulations which stipulated the rules and expectations thereof regarding movements in Lesotho to curb the spread of the pandemic (Webber Newdigate, 2020). And on 6 May 2020 it announced the “Public Health (COVID-19) Regulations”, 2020 (2) (Laws, 2020). The lockdown rules, among others, restricted movement, confined people at home, banned all public gatherings, limited business activity, closed informal markets, sealed off borders and allowed only essential services to operate. Access to basic services, including food security, nutrition, health, education, and housing was limited. As a result of diminished economic activity and rising budgetary demands, government’s capacity for social protection amid the pandemic also diminished, leaving the poor even more vulnerable. Overall, these measures, implemented with no or little regard of how the poor majority would survive, have worsened the predicament of women in the informal sector.

3.1. The Closure of Informal Markets

The closure of informal markets on the fallacious assumption that they are the major source of Coronavirus infections has increased poverty vulnerability levels among the poor who work in the informal sector. Here it is important to stress that, the claim that informal markets are the major cause of the spread of the pandemic is spurious and not based on empirical scientific evidence. As Madonsela (2020) aptly noted during her SA Women’s Day, one is more likely to get infected with the Coronavirus in enclosed places like malls, supermarkets, and shops than in open air informal markets. In fact, ac-

According to Japanese researchers, one is 20 times more likely to be infected in an enclosed space than in an open space (Russian Television, RT, News, 2020, 7 June). Clearly, the closure of informal markets is not based on empirical scientific evidence, instead it reflects the balance of political power: informal traders are being victimized because they are too weak to influence public policy decisions. If open air is 20 times safer than enclosed spaces, then it is supermarkets that should be closed and/or go open air.

The most immediate effect of the closure of informal markets on women—employers and employees alike—in the informal sector is the loss of income and means for livelihood sustenance. For the majority of women in the informal sector who were already poor and eking out a marginal existence, the loss of income has had many other negative economic, social, psychological and political impacts. According to Hunter and Shand 2020, some of the poorest cannot afford masks and are reusing old ones or even picking up used ones from bins. The loss of earnings have made it difficult for many to earn money to buy food, pay rent and support a family (van Blerk et al., 2020). Put differently, closing the informal sector, the main source of income and livelihood sustenance for poor women, has undermined food security and increased poverty levels among families dependent on the informal sector.

3.2. Closure of Borders and Disruption of the Supply Chain

Completely surrounded by SA, all goods in Lesotho's formal and informal sectors are imported from, or pass through, SA. Not surprisingly, the closure of the country's borders with only neighbor, South Africa, disrupted the goods supply chain which is central to informal trade in Lesotho. The disruption has led to acute shortages of goods, which in turn, have led to a skyrocketing of prices, thereby further undermining the capacity of poor informal traders to survive in these hard times. In a word, alarmist responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have led to many more pandemics of unemployment, poverty, crime, and gender-based violence among others.

3.3. 'Pandemics Within a Pandemic': The Unintended Consequences of Lockdown Measures

Jokingly referred to as 'house arrest', restricted movement, limited public transport and confinement at home have had many unintended consequences for women in the informal sector. First, unemployment and

loss of income have led to failure to buy enough good food. Lack of food has led to malnutrition and poor health, which in turn, made people more vulnerable to the Coronavirus. As van Blerk et al. (2020) observes, “drastically reduced incomes also increase the risk of contracting the virus”, for the poorest cannot afford to buy single-use masks for daily use, and as a result some of them “use discarded masks, exposing themselves to the virus”.

Second, closing the informal sector, restricting movement, and forcing people to stay at home with no income traps women in abusive relationships and subjects them to increased gender-based violence. According to the UN, “since the outbreak of COVID-19, all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, had intensified, with shelters at capacity and helplines in some cases seeing a five-fold increase in calls” (Aljazeera News, 2020, 1 December). As the UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, noted: “Last year, 243 million women and girls experienced sexual or physical violence from their partner...This year... domestic violence, cyberbullying, child marriages, sexual harassment, and sexual violence...” have increased (Aljazeera News, 2020, 1 December). Quarantine measures are “creating conditions for increased murders of women by family members in the same home” (Aljazeera News, 2020, 1 December). In SA too, as president Ramaphosa (News Room, Afrika, 9 August 2020) noted during his address on South African Women’s Day: “We are facing two pandemics, the COVID-19 and the gender based violence against women”.

In response increasing cases of gender-based violence against women, on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, women around the world demonstrated to highlight “how lockdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic have left many trapped with their abusers and exposed to greater danger” (Aljazeera News, 2020, 1 December): Here it is important to stress that, although women are the majority of victims of gender-based violence, some men too suffer gender-based violence from women (Chingono, 1996). Whether it is women or men threatened with violence or when home becomes a battleground of violent conflict, we must never look the other way.

Third, poverty and staying at home have led to rise in early marriages for young women, who could otherwise be fending for themselves through informal enterprising.

Forth, the socio-psychological stress caused by a loss of income has also led to an increase in separations, divorces and gender-based violence (van Blerk et al., 2020), crime and prostitution.

Fifth, limited access to health facilities and staying at home has led to unwanted pregnancies, especially among teens and school girls. It also resulted in a rise in other treatable diseases, and even premature death. Restricted access to health services, such as provision of sanitary pads and contraceptive medicine, effectively amounts to a violation of fundamental human rights. Sixth, as hunger and poverty rob man of civility, there has been a rise in crime and armed robberies. Finally, and even more worrisome, the rising disaffection and frustration could catalyze political instability and ferment rebellion.

To sum up, lockdown restrictions have disrupted the food supply chain, resulting in an absurd situation where many farmers are losing millions of dollars from wasted food crops that cannot be delivered to the market, while many more urbanites starve because they cannot access food. The measures also have entailed deprivation of economic rights, freedom, friends, and support networks. Inevitably, such deprivation led to pauperization, despondency, depression and mental health problems as well as a rise in crime, gender violence, sex work, premature marriages, unwanted pregnancies and teenage pregnancies. Clearly, the good-intentioned lockdown policies have had many bad unintended consequences, and this demonstrates that, good intentioned policies alone are not enough: to be effective and efficient policy needs to be informed by sound theory and science.

4. Policy Options: A Holistic and Integrated Framework

Experts, hiding in their intellectual silos, are divided on the best approach to ensure health while creating wealth and to save lives while sustaining livelihoods amidst the pandemic. Reflecting the intellectual and professional parochialism of the age, the biologist, psychologist, medical doctor, economist, sociologist, and political scientist are all shouting out different messages and recommending different solutions for the same problem. When experts disagree, as amply demonstrated in Southern Africa, it is the poor who suffer most. Indeed, poor women in the informal sector have suffered immeasurably through the closure of informal markets and restricted access to essential goods and services as well as increased violence. Perhaps, the major lesson learned from this sad reality is the need for a holistic approach that builds synergies, and not contradictions, between policies being pursued by different government ministries and recommendations proffered by experts in different fields.

4.1. Health or Wealth, Lives or Livelihoods?

A holistic approach is essential precisely because health and wealth, lives and livelihoods are interdependent and mutually reinforce each other: we need wealth to buy health, and health to create wealth. We need money to buy food, live a healthy life style, build hospitals and produce vaccines. In fact, without food, healthy is so compromised that even the best drugs will not cure a simple ailment, while poor health makes economic enterprising difficult. The challenge is to avoid being like the fool who destroys his health trying to acquire wealth and ends up spending all the wealth trying in vain to buy back his health. Choosing between health and wealth, lives and livelihoods is thus a false dichotomy, for we need both simultaneously. Put differently, undermining wealth creation, through the closure of informal businesses in this case, in an endeavour to ensure health is short-sighted, for we need both. Apart from that, prolonged periods of economic depression, notes Ramayandi et al. (2020), “can inflict significant damage to an economy’s productive capacity—a feature of business cycle ...succinctly dubbed... ‘hysteresis’—and undermine its capacity to recover”. Policy therefore needs to be re-oriented to strike a delicate balance between saving lives and sustaining livelihoods by re-opening the economy, lest the Coronavirus, like HIV, is here to stay.

5. Empowering Women in the Informal Sector

A gender-sensitive policy framework to empower women in the informal economy should start from two interrelated premises viz: gender inequality endangers not only the health and welfare of women, but also of their families and society and that society can neither be democratic nor develop if women, who constitute half its population, are denied their rights. According to Mounzar and Baldeh, 3 (2020), “investing in women generates higher developmental returns”, and this precisely because, “women reinvest up to 90% of their income in providing a social safety net for their families, with a positive impact on health, education, and nutrition”: when they extra income, most men either drink more, buy luxury goods or get more women partners. Clearly, “...women are the backbones of African economic and can be key drivers of transformation as we strive to build back better, more resilient societies” beyond the COVID-19 crisis (Mounzar & Baldeh,

2020, p. 4). Remarkably, the 2015 African Union (AU) summit's theme, 'Gender Agenda', was about empowering African women. This vision should provide the broader parameters within which gender-sensitive and pro-informal sector policies to assist female informal traders during these trying times, should be crafted. Equally important, such transformative policy should be based on empirical scientific evidence and stakeholder consultation.

5.1. Creative Destruction and Development

Recessions, such as the COVID-19 induced one, can unleash what the economist Joseph Schumpeter called the "gale of creative destruction" (Ramayandi et al., 2020). Creative destruction implies abandoning old ways of doing things when they do not work anymore and replacing them with new innovative systems adapted to the new times. It involves, "incessant process of restructuring and reorganization of businesses that revolutionizes the economy from within, through entries and exits of firms due to innovation" (Ramayandi et al., 2020). They add:

Spurred by competition and changing conditions, continuous product and process innovation procedures lead to new and more efficient production units replacing outdated ones, resulting in increased average productivity in the whole economy (Ramayandi et al., 2020).

Creation destruction can also occur because, "lower returns during an economic contraction can lead entrepreneurs and banks to put more effort into selecting investment projects—thus improving the allocation of talent, financial capital and other productive resources in the economy" (Ramayandi et al., 2020).

In addition, recessions can also have a creative destructive effect on the economy: "as less efficient businesses—often referred to as "zombie firms"—are more likely than others to go bankrupt during a crisis, providing room for more innovative ones to flourish" (Ramayandi et al., 2020). Finally, "when times are hard, creditors and lenders typically exert more pressure on business managers to use funds efficiently and effectively" (Ramayandi et al., 2020). Overall, these developments can boost an economy's productive capacity and accelerate economic development in the short, medium and long term.

6. Short-term, Medium-term and Long-term Strategies

Short-term measures should aim to offer immediate relief to the suffering women in the informal sector. Such measures include: opening informal markets; social distancing measures at informal markets; mobile shops; and on-line shopping. Medium-term gender-sensitive and women empowering policies include, among others: changing laws, especially on property inheritance and ownership; offering financial strategic support to female informal traders; offering training in entrepreneurship; and promoting gender parity in power of positions, both in the public and private sectors as well as in families and schools. Long-term policies should seek, through science, technology, and artificial intelligence, to transform the economy and society by changing our production systems and consumption habits. In the short, medium and long-term, as the World Health Organization (WHO) Secretary General has advised (Al Jazeera News, 2020), lockdown should not be used as the primary tool for containing the pandemic. Instead, the main thrust should on testing, tracing, isolating and treatment.

6.1. Short-term Measures

Short-term measures should aim at immediately alleviating the plight of female informal traders. Opening informal markets, introducing social distancing (I wonder why it's called 'social' and not 'physical' distancing) at informal markets, using tri-cycle mobile shops, and on-line shopping are some of the immediate measures that could be adopted.

6.2. Opening Informal Markets

The closure of open air informal markets is not based on scientific evidence, but is instead based on illogical assumptions and reflects the power imbalances in society: informal traders are too weak and powerless to influence policy. As noted above, one is more likely to get infected by the Coronavirus in enclosed places, such as supermarkets, shops and malls, and 20 times less likely to get infected outside in open air than in an enclosed space. The point is, contrary to claims by officialdom, informal markets are not the major source of the spread of the virus. Informal markets should therefore be re-opened in a more controlled and systematic way to curb the spread of the Coronavirus.

6.3. Social Distance at Informal Markets

One simple way of maintaining social distance at informal markets would be, for instance, to allot numbers from 1 to 7 to all informal traders at each market, and then allow them to come to the market only on the day of the week corresponding to their number. Alternatively, even and odd numbers could come to the market on different days. Any other method should ensure that informal trader gets an equal chance to be a market for a few days a week. That way, all informal traders would get a fair chance to earn at least some income and be able to put some food on the table. It must be stressed that, for the poor who share rented rooms, with sometimes up to five people in one room, physical distancing is a luxury that they can hardly afford and can only dream of.

6.4. Tri-Cycle Mobile Shops

Another way of curbing the spread of the pandemic while keeping informal trade alive would be to introduce mobile shops, preferably in the form of zero-pollution tri-cycles. There are many benefits of using tri-cycle mobile shops. First, they are relatively easy and cheap to manufacture, and therefore affordable. Second, their manufacture, servicing and hiring out creates employment. Third, they are environment friendly for they cause zero pollution. Forth, food can easily be delivered at the consumer's doorstep. Fifth, tri-cycles can deliver food to places where there are neither roads nor shops.

6.5. On-line Shopping and Service Provision

On-line shopping using social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, short message service and the internet can considerably reduce the risk of infection. This method of shopping is increasingly becoming popular in Zimbabwe, where companies, like Malaicha and Mukuru, are making brisk business delivering groceries from SA to Zimbabwe; small informal businesses which deliver a wide range of goods—vegetables, fruits, groceries and clothes—are flourishing in Harare. For on-line shopping to take root, there is need to invest in the information, communication and transportation infrastructure (ICTI). Such technology and infrastructure development should propel Africa's rapid growth and economic transformation, as in Kenya where the bulk of trade and economic transaction is effected through cellphones.

In addition to selling and shopping online, many services are now available on-line, and informal traders can venture into these to avoid the risks of sole reliance on one business. Services, which represent two-thirds of global economic output, “more than half of the world’s jobs and about a quarter of direct exports” (Antunes, 2020, p. 1), are key drivers of the economy and can be used strategically to transform society. As Antunes (2020, p. 1) observes, ICT services “can increase efficiency and reduce costs, promote the digital transformation of farming, manufacturing and other sectors”. Digitization of services offered by informal traders, can only help them weather the storm of the pandemic, but can also “help turn the tide by creating opportunities for greater income, food security, productivity, employment, investment and trade (Antunes, 2020, p. 1). Clearly, the ‘forced’ shift to a online shopping and the digital economy is one of the positive unintended consequences of COVID-19 pandemic. In a nutshell, in the short-term, there is need for such innovative approaches to help achieve the twin goals of creating wealth while ensuring health.

7. Medium-term Policy Options

Medium-term solutions to the many demands of female informal traders involve crafting gender-sensitive laws, extending strategic financial support and offering them training and skills.

7.1. Changing Laws

Law is an important instrument for promoting gender equality and empowering women. Yet as a protestor in Turkey on the International for the Elimination of Violence Against Women decried: “The law does not protect women as it should” (Aljazeera News, 2020, 1 December).

New gender-sensitive laws should be crafted to protect and promote women’s economic rights, which are the key to unlocking Lesotho’s future development. Economic “empowerment of women is the link between trade and development” (EmpowerWomen.org, 2015). As Joaquim Chissanno, the former president of Mozambique and co-chair of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), stressed:

Women and girls are Africa's greatest untapped resource, and it is they, not diamonds or oil and minerals, that will be the foundation for solid, sustainable and equitable progress. ...Expanding the freedoms, the education and opportunities for women hold the key to kick-starting inclusive economic growth (NA, 2015, p. 45).

Customary laws and traditional practices that discriminate against women, for example on inheritance and ownership of property, should be abolished for they limit women's potential.

7.2. Financial Strategic Support

Without assistance in accessing capital, technical know-how and the application of knowledge-based practices, the full potential of women informal traders will not be realized, and they may be doomed to 'boondoggling', that is, producing bad goods, with bad methods and tools and making bad returns (Lipkin & Gillis, 2000). Strategic financial support could help women become financially independent, and thus reduce gender-based violence. In partnership with the private sector and donors, the government could establish a fund or trust, like the Swaziland Women Empowerment Trust (SWEET), which offers credit, training and skills to its members. The informal sector could also be taxed, and thus expand and boost government revenue. Others have suggested a feminist business model, which is a social, and not profitable, business with a human face, and which is sensitive to women's needs.

7.3. Training

The limited training and skills in the informal sector, its major attraction to the poor and unskilled, is also its major shortcoming. Lack of skills means poor quality goods, customer service, productivity and marketing, all of which undermine the profit base of the enterprise. Thus, training in, for example, business management and production of certain household goods like soap, sanitizers, and dish washes would immensely empower female informal traders. As Dewar and Watson (1991, p. 183) point out, there should be "a careful disaggregation ... to determine exactly where the possibilities of expansion or contraction are likely to be", and where training can be offered.

7.4. Promoting Gender Parity in Powerful Positions

Promoting gender parity in powerful positions in cabinet, parliament and private business has been identified as one way by which women can be empowered. Empowering women involves, “increasing women’s representation in government, in the judiciary and other public and private institutions and their participation at the tables in peace negotiations” (NA, 2015, p. 45). The point is, since women account for over half Lesotho’s population, development would be incomplete, and even inconceivable, without gender equality. Critics note, however, that, even if they are on the table, women are often side-lined.

8. Long-term Holistic Policy Options

A lasting solution to the multiple developmental challenges facing Southern Africa in general and Lesotho in particular, should address some of the root causes of fragility, vulnerability and poverty, which force many into the informal sector. These include, among others: dependence and marginalization in the international system; population explosion; youth’s dislike of agriculture and preference for informal dealing and entrepreneurship; climate change; and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses to these challenges should be coordinated at a national, regional and global level and should involve participation and reform of some multilateral institutions, such as the UN and its agencies.

8.1. Break Economic and Financial Dependency on the West

Lesotho’s economic, financial, scientific and technical dependency on SA in particular and the West in general, severely limits its developmental policy options and room for economic manoeuvre, thus leaving its poor with no option other than join the informal sector. Through colonial era multilateral institutions like the United Nations (UN) and its agencies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the West controls small states like Lesotho. [The idea of veto power of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—a privilege that the most powerful five states that won the Second World War selfishly accorded to themselves—exposes the hypocrisy of the powerful states

in preaching democracy to the weak while practicing the exact opposite through veto power]. Continental level efforts, through the African Development Bank, which is still a weak infant player in global economics, should be directed towards breaking the yoke of dependency, democratizing international institutions, restructuring the international trade system and establishing a more equitable global economic order. When that happens, Lesotho's chances of economic growth, and hence capacity to create jobs for informal traders, will increase.

8.2. From a Raw Resource-based Economy to A Production and Knowledge-based Economy

Excessive reliance on the export of raw materials which, due to deteriorating terms of trade, fetch less and less on the international market and cause budget deficits, imposes considerable economic constraints to the poor 'Kingdom in the Sky'. The country needs to diversify its production base and move away from a resource based to a production and knowledge based economy. In other words, to expand the economy and create employment, it is necessary to rethink developmental priorities and focus on industrialization and building smart cities instead of celebrating agriculture as the backbone of the economy.

8.3. Poor Governance, 'Politics of the Belly' and Prebendal Politics

Poor governance and corruption, what Bayart (1993) calls 'politics of the belly', deprive a country of opportunities economic growth and development, and create unemployment, poverty and ultimately the informal sector. The colonial state, designed to exploit and oppress the indigenous people, was inherited intact at independence, and its enormous power has been used by the ruling elite to consolidate its position and accumulate wealth. To achieve development and create employment for the poor in the informal sector, there is need for better systems of economic and political governance and strong institutions. In particular, the core principles of good governance—accountability, inclusivity, participation, transparency among others—should be upheld to achieve effective and effective, and efficient government and economic development.

8.4. Population Explosion and Resource Wars

Malthus' theory of 'exponential population growth and arithmetic food supply' (Malthus, 2013) was severely criticized by many. In Africa, notwithstanding the critical critics, the evidence of Malthus' core argument is glaring: not only is population growing faster than food production capacity, but also urban areas are increasingly getting congested and the informal is burgeoning. Rapid population growth stretches the budget for social welfare, education and health as well as increase unemployment, crime, violence, the demand for land and resource wars. It also intensifies the conflict between man and the wild life—snakes, lions and elephants etc.—as human settlement increasingly encroaches on their natural habit leaving them with nowhere to go and threatening them with extinction, which in turn, causes tremendous ecological disequilibria. In a nutshell, rapid population growth, in a context of diminishing output from overused and degraded land, not only force many into the informal sector, but is also a recipe for political explosion. To avert this, policies should be crafted to manage and reduce population growth.

8.5. Managing the Impacts of Climate Change

Humanity is waging war against nature through, for instance, air and water pollution, land degradation, deforestation, farming, hunting, building new cities/settlements/industries and mining, among others. These have led to global warming and climate change, which is characterized by erratic weather systems of drought, flooding, cyclones and storms, all of which contribute to human insecurity, which in turn, is forcing many into the informal sector. In a vicious circle, the activities of some informal traders, such as cutting trees for sell as firewood, farming in wetlands and river beds, and poaching, also contribute to ecological degradation, global warming and climate change. To end this self-defeating war, better ways of producing food to feed a growing population without destroying the planet must be discovered. Agriculture needs to be revolutionized in order to produce enough food to feed everyone while saving the planet, keeping the climate cool, and limiting the spread of COVID-19.

8.6. Revolutionizing Agriculture and Food Production

To combat the effects of climate change, it is vital to change the current system of producing food and our eating habits, both of which are not sustainable and are reducing land's capacity to sustain life. For example, agriculture currently uses one third of fresh water and contributes to about a quarter of greenhouse gases emissions, and "of all the greenhouse gases, two very deadly ones come from animal agriculture—nitrous oxide and methane" (Gray, 2019). Therefore, agriculture needs to be revolutionized through, for instance: new ways of farming; new types of farms; hybridization and genetically modified foods (GMF); and changing eating habits.

New ways of farming could involve transitioning from chemicals-based farming to organic farming, from ploughing to zero tillage, and from meat-farming to cricket farming, as in China. Agriculture could also be revolutionized through introducing new types of farms: houses that have veggie gardens at roof tops, balconies and indoors; and high-rise storey car park style farms that harvest water from the top floor to water crops in all the other floors. Such 'vertical farms', which have been introduced in urban areas in Sweden, and which involve growing crops on house and building walls (Al Jazeera News, 6 July 2020), would certainly de-congest the informal sector by offering alternative income opportunities.

Another way of de-congesting the informal sector and ensuring food security would be to build smart cities across the country. As people move from squatter camps and shanty towns to the new planned smart cities, service delivery, population management and census should improve too. The global movement in urban farming should therefore be supported, through for instance, urban council by-laws permitting, managing and taxing it, as well as by harnessing advances in science and technology. In short, such innovative farming, food production and efficient land use, will not only decongest the informal sector, but will also, and even more important, but will also help better absorption of greenhouse gases and slower global warming and climate.

8.7. Changing Eating Habits

Our eating habits, and especially our voracious appetites for meat, are a major factor in undermining food security and driving many into

the informal sector. Necessarily, these eating habits ought to change and be aligned with the demands of climate change, ailing economies, exponentially growing populations and Coronavirus. Since meat production in general, and beef production in particular, is more harmful to the environment than vegetable farming (see above), there is need to move from meat-based diet to vegetables—Impossible Foods Company is leading the way in plant-based meat burgers (Al Jazeera News, 6 July, 2020). Also, we need to desist from wasteful consumption and throwing food away.

To recap, to effectively contain the spread of the Coronavirus and to deal with the many challenges facing Southern Africa in general and Lesotho in particular, there is need for a paradigm shift from a patriarchal and formalistic bias to a holistic gender sensitive approach that optimizes the potential benefits of gender equality and informal sector entrepreneurship. Optimizing the developmental potential of the informal sector requires reconciling and harmonizing, through policy, the needs of informal traders and the interests of the state in the short, medium and long term. As they reproduce themselves on an extended scale, these nascent capitalists without capital could graduate into formal entrepreneurs, and make greater contribution to human security, national development, and peace and stability. In a nutshell, the challenges presented to the informal sector by the pandemic require a sensitive policy that treads a delicate balance between saving lives and sustaining livelihoods.

9. Summary

As shown above, the Coronavirus has negatively affected food production, distribution and food security, especially in poorly governed states of Southern Africa. In particular, the closure of informal markets, the disruption of the goods supply chain, restricted movement, and lack of assistance, have been devastating for women in the informal sector. The effects of the pandemic have been compounded by the alarmist responses adopted by panicky authorities, which are probably more damaging than the pandemic itself.

Economically, the lockdown restrictions have disrupted production and distribution, leading to huge losses and even collapse of formal and informal businesses, rising unemployment and shortages of essential goods and services. Politically, the restrictions have shrunk the political space and led to the loss of personal liberties. Socially the restrictions

have led to a spike in gender-based violence, divorces/separations, sex work, early marriages, unwanted pregnancies and babies. Psychologically, cases of depression, mental illness and suicides have increased. The pandemic has also amplified the effects of climate change and exposed weaknesses in the global food supply chain in general, and the vulnerabilities of city dwellers in particular. Overall, the restrictions have led to a deterioration of the standards of living and quality of life, the loss of livelihoods and lives, and threaten an economic recession of unprecedented proportions in peace time.

Since the majority of economically active women are in the informal sector, society cannot develop or be democratic if these women do not have full economic and political rights. Therefore, policy must aim to give a positive form to efforts of female informal traders so that they can survive, thrive and even prosper during and after COVID-19. The challenge, therefore, is to optimize the benefits of the informal sector and strengthen female informal traders while curbing the spread of the pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had catastrophic consequences for poor women in the informal sector of Lesotho. Marginalized by traditional patriarchal practices, the state, and the Bretton-Woods institutions, and now by the gender-insensitive alarmist responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, female informal traders are doing something to solve these problems. These capitalists without capital be praised not just for their resilience, but also for providing essential goods and services at the consumer's doorstep and at convenient times during these trying times.

As we seen, alarmist government responses are not only undermining these resilient entrepreneurs' efforts but are also spreading paranoia and consequently compounding the problem instead of solving it. To effectively address the many and multi-layered challenges posed by the pandemic for female informal traders there is need for a holistic and gender sensitive approach that aims to save lives, sustain livelihoods and promote sustainable development. The challenges of the new times demand that, informal traders and the nation as a whole be flexible, innovative, embrace technology, celebrate uncertainty, and avoid over-reliance on one product/service. Specifically, breaking the vicious circle of poverty demands a fundamental change in thinking about informal traders, from viewing them

as a 'nuisance' to acknowledging them as entrepreneurs with a potential to contribute to national development and combating the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, coronavirus presents an opportunity to change the way we live, our values and practices and to transit to a new civilization based on different socio-economic and political arrangements and ethos.

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