



Gender-Responsive Pathways to Post-COVID-19 Recovery: Improving Employment Outcomes for Women in Low-Resource Urban Communities

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and deepened long-standing gender inequalities in labour markets across developing economies, disproportionately eroding women's incomes, job security, and access to other economic opportunities. As governments and development actors design recovery strategies, they must place women's economic participation at the centre of this dialogue and dismantle the structural barriers that have long constrained women's work opportunities. This policy brief highlights how COVID-19 affected the livelihoods of two groups of women in Abuja, Nigeria. It sets out the structural barriers that constrain women's economic participation and proposes gender-responsive policy measures which can be adopted by governments and development partners to improve employment outcomes for women in low-income households and strengthen their resilience against future crises.



Vulnerable Women, Socioeconomic Shocks, and Intersecting Vulnerabilities

Women in low-resource urban communities across several developing economies are disproportionately exposed to development challenges, yet they remain key contributors to household income through both informal work and unpaid care¹. Studies have shown that marginalised populations, and women in particular, bore a disproportionate share of the socioeconomic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic²³. Findings from my doctoral thesis also highlight that the pandemic did not create new inequalities; instead, it exposed and deepened existing ones, underscoring the need to address how crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic intersect with pre-existing vulnerabilities. This is especially urgent for women in urban low-income households, who combine unpaid caregiving with substantial, often unrecognised, contributions to household income.

Evaluating the Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Livelihoods through the Institutional Structuralism and Capabilities (ISC) Framework

This research centred on two groups of women in Abuja: women internally displaced persons (IDPs) and women in Abuja's local communities (ALCs), both living in low-income households and engaged in informal or low-paid formal work. These women were identified as vulnerable and marginalised due to the intersection of gender, low income, poor living standards, and residence in urban low-resource communities. The study examined their livelihood capabilities, resilience, and intersecting vulnerabilities before and during COVID-19, drawing on focus group discussions with both groups of women, interviews with camp and community gatekeepers, state and non-state organisations, as well as analysis of secondary data.

¹ UNDP. (2022). *Uncertain Times, Uncertain Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World*. https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22reportenglish_0.pdf

² UN Women. (2020). *Gender and the COVID-19 Response in Nigeria*. UN Women.

³ World Bank. (2020). *An inclusive response to COVID-19 for Africa's informal workers*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/inclusive-response-covid-19africas-informal-workers>



The analysis was grounded in an Institutional Structuralism and Capabilities (ISC) framework, developed by the researcher to examine how structural barriers and individual capabilities shape livelihood outcomes for women in low-resource settings. The ISC framework is an integration of James Midgley's⁴ Institutional Structuralism as a theory for social development and Amartya Sen's⁵ and Martha Nussbaum's⁶ Capabilities Approach. This framework was applied in the study to (a) capture women's agency; (b) identify the intersecting socioeconomic and structural barriers that reinforce vulnerability; and (c) evaluate whether institutional processes enhance or constrain women's capabilities. Applied to the two groups of women in this study, the framework traced vulnerability to different structural roots: for women IDPs, vulnerability stemmed primarily from displacement, which stripped away existing livelihoods and income⁷; for women in Abuja's local districts, it is rooted in urban development processes that have dispossessed native residents of land assets and other socioeconomic opportunities^{8 9}. Examining livelihood capabilities, structural constraints, and vulnerability together, the findings highlight how COVID-19 did not create these development challenges but exacerbated pre-existing ones.

The implication for policy design is that short- and long-term social development interventions in developing economies should be inclusive and sustainable. These policies should prioritise women's agency and address the structural barriers that reproduce socioeconomic vulnerabilities of women, particularly during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴ Midgley, J. (2014). *Social Development: Theory and Practice*. SAGE.

⁵ Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom* (Vol. 525). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Sen, A. (2005). Human rights and capabilities. *Journal of Human Development*, 6(2), 151–166.

⁶ Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. United States of America: Harvard University Press.

⁷ Ekoh, P. C., Okoye, U. O., George, E. O., Chukwuemeka, E., & Agbawodikeizu, P. U. (2022). Resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria: The housing problems facing IDPs in Abuja camps and the risk of homelessness and secondary displacement. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 32(2), 263–271.

⁸ Mohammed, F. K. (2017). *The Causes and Consequences of Internal Displacement in Nigeria and Related Governance Challenges*. SWP Berlin.

⁹ Barnabas, S. G. (2018). Abuja peoples of Nigeria as indigenous peoples in international law. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 25(3), 431–457.



Key Findings

- Several IDP women were economically self-reliant before displacement and the COVID-19 pandemic: Women IDPs had engaged in entrepreneurial activities such as weaving, cap-making, food vending, and waged employment prior to displacement by the Boko Haram insurgency; women in local districts had diversified from farming into petty trading and low-wage formal employment as Abuja urbanised.
- Displacement did not entirely erode livelihood activities: In IDP camps, women continued cap weaving, food vending, and other small-scale enterprises, adapting existing skills within their constrained environment.
- COVID-19 triggered a hunger shock and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities: The pandemic increased unemployment, income losses and restricted access to healthcare.
- Structural barriers, not lack of agency, create constraints: Limited access to finance, scarce formal employment opportunities, and inadequate social protection systematically constrained women's capabilities and deepened their vulnerability before and after the COVID-19 lockdown.
- Existing state and non-state social development interventions have been inadequate: Policies, programmes, and projects intended to support these women were insufficient in design, reach, and implementation to mitigate the socioeconomic shock resulting from COVID-19.



Policy Recommendations

Improving employment outcomes for women in urban low-resource communities in developing economies such as Nigeria requires coordinated action from diverse development actors across three areas: skills training, livelihoods opportunities, and social protection. This includes:

1. Investing in vocational and digital skills training: Design women-focused entrepreneurship schemes that build on the trades women already practise (such as weaving, food vending, petty trading) while opening pathways into higher-return digital and vocational sectors.
2. Expanding access to finance and social amenities: Address the structural financial barriers that constrain women's livelihood capabilities, including access to credit, market infrastructure, and basic amenities in both IDP camps and local urban communities.
3. Building shock-responsive social protection: Scale up conditional cash transfers and subsidised childcare programmes that can be expanded rapidly during future crises, reducing the adverse effects of hunger and income shocks.
4. Strengthening institutional capacity and intervention coordination: Improve the design and implementation capacity of state and non-state social development actors, addressing both structural constraints and individual agency, so that interventions reach women in urban low-income communities.
5. Integrating crisis preparedness into social development programme design: Embed shock-responsive strategies into current livelihoods and social protection programmes before the next crisis occurs.

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