



Rebuilding an Inclusive World in the Wake of the Pandemic: Women's Cooperatives Lead the Way

A Policy Note by SEWA Cooperative Federation

Introduction

The [SEWA Cooperative Federation](#), Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising ([WIEGO](#)) and the International Cooperative Alliance: Asia-Pacific ([ICA-AP](#)) organised a webinar on November 19th, 2021, titled *Rebuilding an Inclusive World in the Wake of the Pandemic: Women's Cooperatives Lead the Way*¹. The webinar focused on the role that women-owned cooperatives have played during the COVID-19 pandemic in protecting the lives and livelihoods of their households, and their communities. This note outlines the emerging evidence from studies that was presented in the webinar and women cooperators' experiences in their voices. It also presents recommendations for action to strengthen women's cooperatives and to create an enabling environment for their growth, thereby strengthening local economies.

The informal economy employs a majority of the world's workforce, particularly women workers. In India, 94 per cent of the female workforce is informal, lacking work and income security,

¹ The webinar consisted of 3 panel discussions - Panel 1 on 'Presenting Evidence - Studies on the Effect of COVID-19 on Informal Women Workers and The Role of Cooperatives/Collectives in Response' (Janhavi Dave, [HomeNet International](#); Palak Gadhya, [SEWA Cooperative Federation](#); Simren Singh, [ICA-AP](#)).

Panel 2 - 'Women Workers in their own Voices: Rebuilding Post the Pandemic' (Frances Onokpea, [Federation of Informal Workers Association, Nigeria](#); Regee Khadgi, [SABAH, Nepal](#); Ruth Diaz, [COOPFENAMUTRA, Dominican Republic](#); Hitakshi Gamit, [Megha Agriculture Cooperative, India](#)).

Panel 3 - 'Strengthening Collective Social Enterprises: The Way Forward' (Simel Esim, [ILO](#); Yamini Atmavilas, [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#); Balasubramanian Iyer, [ICA-AP](#); Mirai Chatterjee, [SEWA Cooperative Federation](#))

social security like healthcare, childcare, insurance and food security. This lack of basic protection made these workers extremely vulnerable during the pandemic, which they experienced as a *triple crisis*: a public health crisis, a livelihood crisis with the continued lockdowns and impact on the economy, and a care crisis, as women have been disproportionately burdened with unpaid care work within the household. The closure of creches and other support services due to the pandemic only exacerbated this situation. All of this affected their ability to work, earn, and engage with the labour market. The triple crisis has had multiple impacts that will be felt for a long time, across many generations of women informal workers, their families and their communities.

Evidence on the Role of Women-Owned Cooperatives during the Pandemic

There have been a number of studies emerging on the effects of the pandemic on the economies of countries across the globe. However, there are still few studies on the role of women informal workers during the pandemic.

Research conducted by HomeNet International, SEWA Cooperative Federation and SEWA Bharat found that a large proportion of women reported an **inability to work**. 38 per cent of respondents in the HomeNet International study mentioned this was due to increased care work responsibilities. Other reasons included lockdowns and ensuing mobility issues, cancellation of orders and services, and increased cost of raw materials and seeds, among other reasons.

Major Findings from the studies

- Across sectors, **more than 60 per cent of workers lost their livelihood, and there was a 65% reduction in income** ([SEWA Cooperative Federation study](#))
- Women's collectives were quick to respond – **60 per cent of members from the SEWA Cooperative Federation study reported that they reached out to their cooperatives for support, and 71 per cent of those that reached out received livelihood support.**
- **76 per cent of home-based workers reported that the main reason for not being able to work was restrictions on movement and travel due to lockdowns. 41 per cent reported that their orders had been cancelled or they did not receive orders during that time** (HomeNet International study)

- **74 per cent of home-based workers borrowed money from informal sources to procure food for their families. 57 per cent of them borrowed for medicines and medical treatment.** (HomeNet International study)

Women workers also reported **increasing borrowing and debt**, mainly from informal sources, to meet basic household expenses. Frances Onokpea, a worker from Nigeria's Federation of Informal Workers, reported, "*The pandemic was a setback to our members who are daily wage earners. They lost their work and income. They were dependent on their savings for survival*". In India, SEWA's Delhi Credit Cooperative reported a 12 per cent increase in overdues, as workers could not repay their loans.

The pandemic also put huge stresses on countries' public health infrastructure. Most often, the systems and infrastructure were overwhelmed and unable to cope. This led to an increase in costs of medicines, transport, and testing, all of which were a drain on workers' resources. In addition, there was very **little accurate information on the coronavirus** available to workers, particularly those in rural areas, especially on identifying symptoms, steps to mitigate the effects of the virus and where to seek treatment.

In the face of the crisis, cooperatives made all efforts to protect their members. **Women cooperators were at the frontlines to distribute relief measures and services, awareness-building and linkages with the health system for preventive care and treatment.** One example presented at the webinar was from the agriculture sector, where Megha women farmers' cooperative reached the last-mile through its local cooperative leaders. They reached 3,795 farmers with seeds and working capital and 36,000 farmers with health information on the coronavirus –simple do's and don'ts and where to seek care. Hitakshiben Gamit, a cooperator and farmer from Megha Cooperative, one of 1,000 indigenous women farmers and share-holders, reported, "*Due to the pandemic, as well as unexpected rains, farmers faced massive losses. At this time, our cooperative stepped in to reach small amounts of capital, enough to purchase seeds, so that we could sow on time. We are now thinking of ways to strengthen our livelihoods through various alternatives such as mushroom cultivation.*"

In the manufacturing sector, **cooperatives were able to pivot quickly**, along with the support of SEWA Cooperative Federation and SEWA Bharat. Both these have Women's Enterprise Support Systems (WESSs) to provide marketing, business development and capacity-building support. The pivots included mask and sanitizer production, tiffin services for COVID-affected families, and sales of sanitation and hygiene products.

Capacity-building and skill development remained essential aspects of COVID mitigation.

Regee Khadgi, a home-based worker from SABAH in Nepal, reported, *“My producer company enabled me to build my skills through the lockdown. Through this, I was able to access work and ensure some livelihood generation for me and my family. I was also given an award for being a COVID hero which made me feel proud and encouraged me to serve more home-based workers..”*

Coupled with health awareness and livelihood protection, cooperatives also ensured access to insurance coverage. VimoSEWA, a multi-state insurance cooperative promoted by SEWA in India, developed a COVID-insurance product, reaching 3,000 women workers across eight states.

The Women's Enterprise Support System enabled access to working capital, digital literacy and business pivots through its specialised services, including market research, communications, business planning and online marketing.

Cooperation among cooperatives also increased, increasing workers' faith in the solidarity economy and their collective strength. For example, SEWA's Lok Swasthya Health Cooperative worked with other cooperatives, including the Megha Women Farmer's Cooperative, in essential health information dissemination and training of the cooperative's members on preventive care during the pandemic ensuring that informal women workers in remote areas received essential health education.

Recommendations

A number of important lessons and ideas for action developed by women's cooperatives during the pandemic emerged, both from the studies presented and women's testimonies. The

cooperatives' approaches and methods adopted by the cooperatives can help inform policy, design and implementation of programmes with women's active participation.

- 1. Taking lessons forward:** Given that women's cooperatives have played a significant and crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, they must be involved in current and all future efforts to respond to disasters and pandemics. They can act as aggregators, reaching the last mile in a timely and appropriate manner. Hence, they must be involved in all planning and roll-out of programmes and services, including:

 - A. Emergency relief
 - B. Livelihood restoration
 - C. Social protection
- 2. Investment in cooperatives:** There is a need to develop a women's cooperative development fund which can serve as an important source of finance, like working capital and loans, in times of crisis. Women's cooperatives need both simple processes and procedures, as well as support in actually accessing such a fund. Cooperative federations, such as SEWA's in Gujarat, can effectively operationalize such a fund and reach it to women and their cooperatives.
- 3. Support with marketing and procurement:** Women's cooperatives need support with marketing and procurement, including preferential purchase and user-friendly interfaces in government and private e-marketing portals.
- 4. Tax Waivers for Re-building:** Tax waivers up to a certain turn-over, for example, Rs 100 million (USD 13 million), should be put in place to help women's cooperatives rebuild and restore their collective businesses.
- 5. Support and promote Women's Enterprise Support Systems (WESS):** Enterprise Support Systems for women's cooperatives are important sources of support. Through their specialised services, they have enabled women's cooperatives to become more agile, pivot business models and strategies through investment, technical support and

capacity-building. This is essential at all times and especially during periods of crisis like the pandemic.

6. **Digital inclusion:** Women's cooperatives need financial support and investment for digitalisation. This includes ensuring access to technologies and devices and capacity-building to use these technologies productively and to grow their businesses.
7. **Enabling policy environment to start and run cooperatives:** While local laws generally differ, there is a need to simplify and enable the development of women's cooperatives. This includes, for example, simplifying registration processes and compliance.
8. **Investment in Continuous Capacity-building:** Women's cooperatives need continuous capacity-building and technical training to grow and remain competitive. These must be developed in consultation with the cooperatives to suit their needs and contexts.
9. **Universal social protection: The pandemic has underscored the need for social protection for all.** It is evident that without effective and affordable social protection, women informal workers cannot work and earn. SEWA's experiences demonstrate that universal social protection, implemented by cooperatives and their women leaders, can effectively reach the last mile and protect the unprotected.
10. **Research and Documentation on the Contribution of Women's Cooperatives:** There remains a gap in our knowledge and understanding of women's cooperatives, including their contribution to the local and national economy, their role in facilitating female labour force participation, and in ensuring access to decent work. Research and evidence-building, both through small-scale and large-scale studies, can help fill this gap.
11. **Voice and Representation in Policy-making:** All policy-making must include the voices and experiences of women cooperators by including them in consultations and efforts in designing programmes, regulations and actual implementation. This entails

having representation of women cooperators and their cooperatives at all levels – local, national and international.

The webinar – *Rebuilding an Inclusive World in the Wake of the Pandemic: Women's Cooperatives Lead the Way*---provided evidence from workers and studies to show what works to strengthen informal women workers and their cooperatives, especially in a crisis like the current pandemic. The recommendations showed the way forward and how these could be achieved. Discussions included, first and foremost, the importance of organising informal women workers into membership-based organisations like cooperatives, as these have clearly shown that they can respond to workers' needs and in a rapid and appropriate manner.

In addition, there is a need for evidence-building which can help policy-makers develop effective solutions to respond to the needs of women's cooperatives. Further, to achieve these steps, a continuous dialogue is needed at local, national and international levels, facilitated by continued cooperation among international organizations, governments, cooperatives and their federations and civil society organisations. Finally, informal women workers must be central to all efforts, guiding the processes of recovery and future growth and development with their experiences and lived realities.