

COVID-19 AND ITS SOCIOECONOMIC EFFECTS ON WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA: CASE STUDIES FROM FOUR REGIONAL STATES

Messay Mulugeta¹, Besufikad Enideg^{1,2}, Gedion Jalata, Teferee Makonnen⁴

¹ College of Development Studies, Center for Food Security Studies, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

² College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Department of Plant Sciences, Gambella University, Gambella, Ethiopia

³ Center of Excellence International Consult, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

⁴Associate professor at College of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to explore the effects of COVID-19 on women and girls in Ethiopia and possible mechanisms to improve responses. Both qualitative and quantitative data were generated using focus group discussion, key informant interviews, survey questionnaire, and desk review. The result indicated that loss of job, reduced income, gender-based violence, deteriorated standard of life, school dropout; child labor, and lack of health information were the major socioeconomic impacts on the respondents. The pandemic's impact stretches as far as derailing the country's progress to achieve the sustainable development goals. The respondents used the support of family/relatives, NGOs, government organizations, diversification of livelihoods mechanisms, and involvement in low-paying jobs as a coping mechanism. Cash support, provision of seed money to re-start businesses, strong market linkage for their livestock products, food aid, and improved access to health facilities is important to tackle the negative impacts of COVID-19 on women.

Keywords: Socioeconomic impact, Gender-based violence, Covid-19, IDPs, Host Community, Sustainability, Sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 was recognized first, in a seafood market in Wuhan city of Hubei Province in China, at the end of 2019 (Zhu *et al.*, 2021). Since February, COVID-19 cases escalated across most parts of Europe, the United States, Australasia, Asia, and Africa. In 213 countries, 201,224,770 people were infected and 4,274,727 people were killed till 05 August 2020 (Yaya *et al.*, 2020) since then COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. Ever in the history of human civilization, no virus has spread swiftly and ubiquitously in only about four months since it has appeared in China, in early December 2019 (Ansori *et al.*, 2020; Guner *et al.*, 2020). COVID-19 has led to severe and acute losses in many economies around the world due to illness and government-mandated social distancing orders (Martti *et al.*, 2020; UNICEF 2020). COVID-19 pandemic created enormous disruptions to lives and livelihoods as well as social and economic systems worldwide (El Sadr and Justman, 2020).

Although the virus arrived late in Africa, it increased rapidly and has been predicted that more than 1.2 billion people were at high risk of COVID-19 (Tadesse *et al.*, 2020). In Ethiopia, the first COVID-19 case was reported on 13 March 2020. Based on WHO recommendations, Ethiopia implemented thermal screening at various institutions, social distancing, providing handwashing facilities, lockdown, quarantine, and encouraging the community to use clean homemade masks in areas where there are more people and traffic flow such as transportation services and other service providers. As of August 2021, there had been 281,811 confirmed cases, 4,403 deaths, and 264,008 recovered cases in Ethiopia (Yaya *et al.*, 2020).

Adolescent girls and women are among the most marginalized and at-risk populations when outbreaks and emergencies such as COVID-19 occur (Tadesse *et al.*, 2020). Evidence from similar crises has been shown to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities of girls and women, create new ones and deepen gender and social inequalities (Hussein, 2020). Such negative secondary impact could lead to a significant reversal effect in gains made over the last decades in women's and girls' human capital, economic empowerment, voice, and agency (Grown and Sánchez-Páramo, 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 is far reaching as it does not only affect certain group of people but also negatively affect the country's sustainable development goals (SDG) achievements. According to Sterling (2010), Sustainable development is a reconciliation of the economy and the environment on a new path of development that will enable the long-term sustainable development of humankind. It is this holistic approach which according to (Ulhoi and Madsen, 1999; Sharpley, 2000) observes sustainable development together with environmental protection and which is placed in a socio-economic, ecological, and political context that forces nations to give emphasis to each and every components to ensure sustainable development.

Several sources indicate that Covid-19 has significantly affected both sexes. However, women and girls are most likely to suffer from the impacts of the pandemic, mainly through increased caretaking responsibilities, risks of gender-based violence, limited access to health facilities, and loss of jobs. Covid-19 has brought substantial and systematic risk to women and girls in Ethiopia, ranging from health (including sexual reproductive health and mental health), nutrition, livelihood, and income, to security and protection. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that actors responding to the Covid19 outbreak adapt their responses and policies to the various implications this outbreak has specifically for women (Messay 2020; Pieh *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the increased reports of intimate partner violence cases during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Hunter *et al.*, 2020; Jarnecke and Flanagan, 2020; Taub, 2020; Van Gelder *et al.*, 2020), little has been done on the factors and magnitude of other violence during the pandemic. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls in Ethiopia and to improve the pandemic response with a gender focus. Moreover, the results of this study will offer vital information for policymakers, program planners, and other stakeholders who have the interest to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on women and girls.

METHODOLOGY

Study area

This research was conducted in four different regions of Ethiopia namely, Addis Ababa, Afar, Amhara, and Oromia regions. Asaita refugee camp from Afar region, Sekota zuriya District (also called Woreda) and Gazgibla woreda from Amhara region; Moyale and Miyo woredas from oromia region; and Lemi industrial park from Addis Ababa Administrative Region were selected for this study (Figure 1).

This study employed a mixed method approach as the study was conducted through both qualitative and quantitative research approaches circling one central question that was main impacts of Covid-19 facing women and girls in Ethiopia. The target populations of the study were women in selected districts of Oromia National Regional State, Amhara National Regional State, Afar National Regional State, and Addis Ababa City Administration during the year 2021. Data was collected through questionnaires, focus group discussion (FGD), key informant interviews (KII), and desk review.

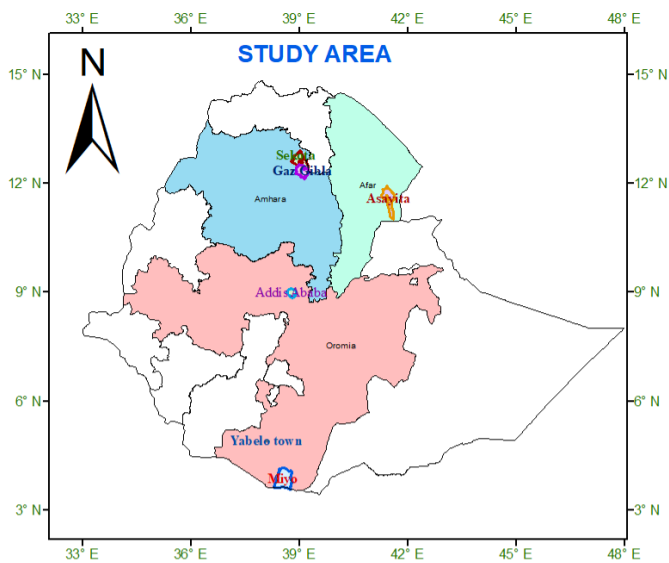


Figure 1: Map of the study area

Sample size

Based on the survey objectives and the intended degree of accuracy and representativeness the sample size was calculated according to (Israel, 2012):

$$N = Z^2 * (P) * (1 - P) / E^2$$

With: N = sample size; Z = value corresponding to a given confidence level (1.96 for a confidence level of 95%-value commonly used); p = percentage of the primary indicator, expressed as a decimal (default 0.5); e = standard error, expressed as a decimal (0.05 or 0.10 in general).

Accordingly, approximately 372 samples plus 5% women or girls with disabilities i.e., grand total of 392 samples) were taken from all the study areas. The sample size was equally distributed to the 4 study areas. A simple random sampling technique was used to select the households from the study sites.

Ethical Concerns

Oral consent from the respondents was obtained prior to the interviews and focus group discussions.

RESULT and DISCUSSION

Socioeconomic profile of the respondents

The average age of the respondents was 28.53 years. The total number of returnees were 76 (20%), host community members were 28.42% (n = 108), internally displaced persons (IDPs) were 17.89% (n = 68), refugees were 17.36% (n = 66) and those women/girls working in the formal sector (industrial sector) were 16.31% (n = 62). Of the surveyed respondents, only 3.42% (n = 13) were found employed in organizations. About 2.89% (n = 11) were temporarily employed and 52 (13.68%) of them were permanent employees. Self-employed and underemployed respondents were 21.84% (n = 83) and 29.21% (n = 73), respectively.

About 35.52% (n = 135) of the respondents were uneducated (cannot read and write). About 11.05% (n = 41) attended grades 1 to 4, while the education level of about 25.26% (n = 96) was grades 5 – 8. The education levels of about 18.68% (n = 71) of the respondents was 9 – 12 grades. Only about 8.42% (32) had diploma level education during the survey. BSc/BA holders were only about 1.05% (n = 4) respondents. All MSc/BA holders belonged to the women working in formal setups (industrial park) groups.

Socioeconomic impacts of the Pandemic

Quite several academic literatures and report show that COVID-19 has highly adversely impacted the lives and livelihoods of people globally. In the same way, the returnees, the host community, IDPs, refugees and workers in formal sectors haven been adversely impacted by the pandemic. The impacts are staying at home, loss of employment opportunities, quit the precarious self-employment, displacement, reduced income, increased house chore and school dropout. Of the total respondents, about 11.84% (n = 45) indicated they suffered staying at home. About 11.31% (n = 43) lost their jobs, while about 26.05% (n= 99) quitted their businesses. About 3.94% (n = 15) lost their usual living area or displaced owing to the

pandemic. About 26.31% (n = 100) faced significant income reduction because of the outbreak of the pandemic. Of the survey respondents, about 14.47% (n = 59) faced increased house chore along the pandemic tunnel. About 14.47% (n = 59) dropped out of school. Only 7.63% (n = 29) experienced no significant changes in their lives and livelihoods the pandemic.

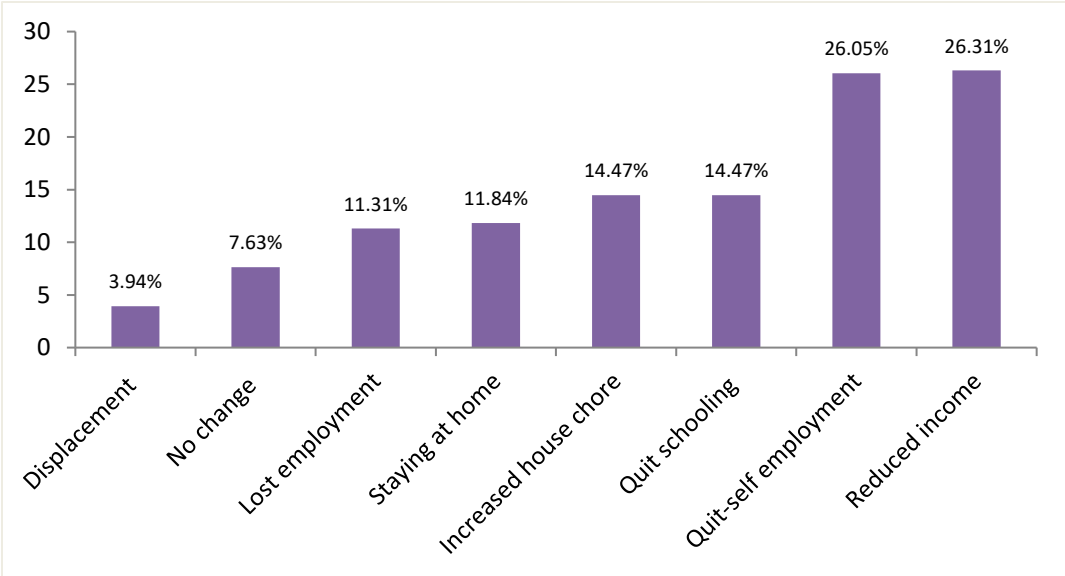


Figure 2:Socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic

As shown in Figure 2, the surveyed respondents reported to have faced several socioeconomic challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include, but not limited to, the right to standard of living, adequate food, proper shelter and clothing, the right to job, social protection rights, health services, education and gender based violence (GBV) protection rights. Among them 34.58% (n = 129) indicated that their standard of living has been adversely impacted by the pandemic; 32.17% (n = 120) were denied the right to education while 22.52% (n = 84) lacked access to adequate food. About 15.28% (n = 57) felt absence of social protection because of the pandemic.

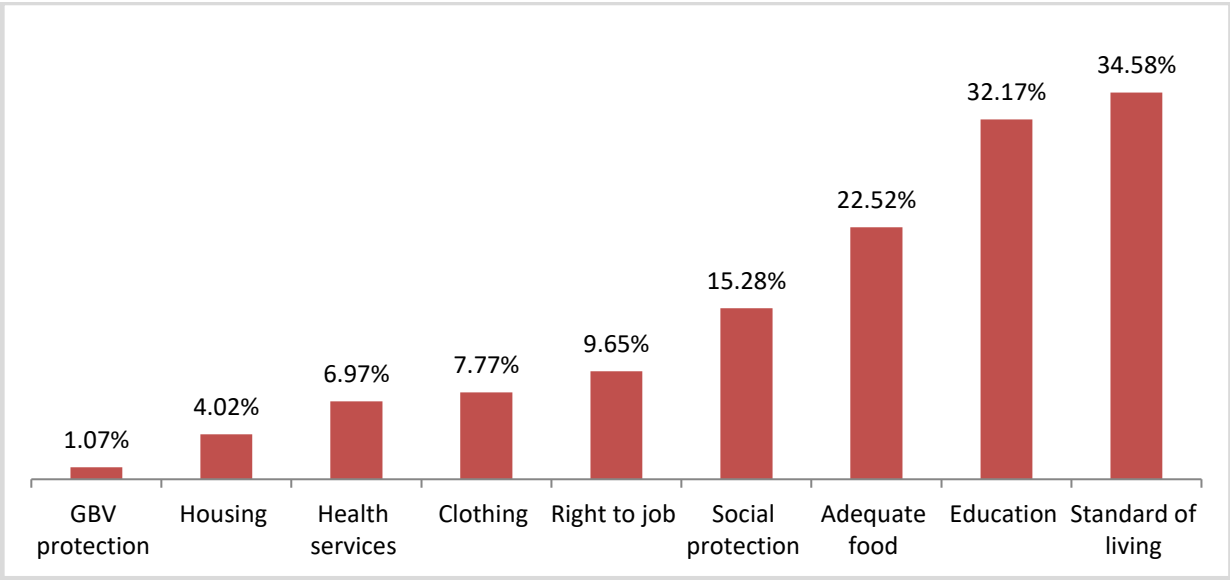


Figure 3:Socioeconomic challenges as a result of the pandemic

About 63.53% (n = 237) surveyed women (Figure 3) indicated that their income deteriorated due to COVID-19 outbreak in Ethiopia. The income of about 34.58% (n = 129) is not adversely impacted whereas only 1.87% (n =7) respondents indicated that their income increased during the pandemic as compared to their previous trends.

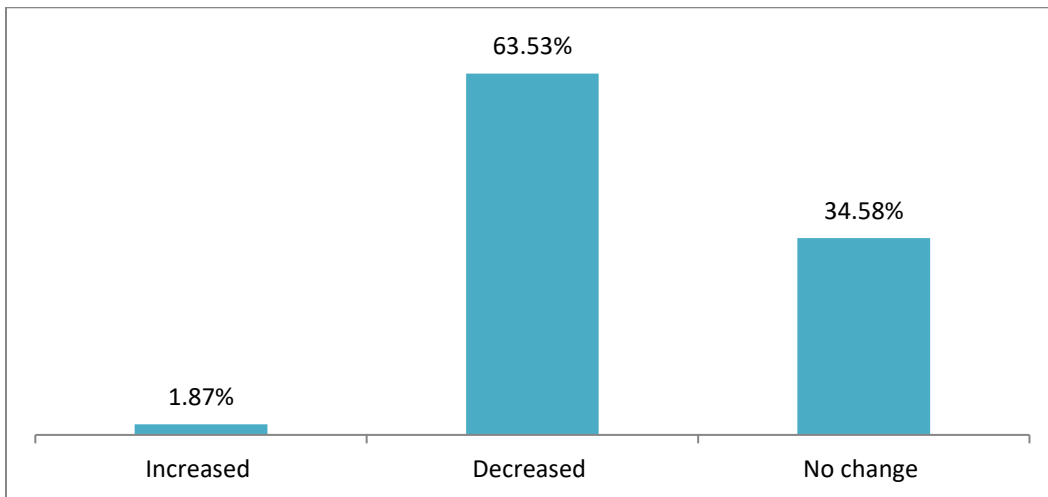


Figure 4: Respondents by status of income amid COVID-19 pandemic

As shown in Figure 4, the survey results indicated that the household asset of about 60.05% (n = 224) of the respondents has been depleted amid COVID-19 pandemic. About 41.55% (n = 155) of the respondents indicated that nothing happened to the asset of their households because of the pandemic. Only about 1.60% (n = 6) reported an increased asset status of their households during the pandemic.

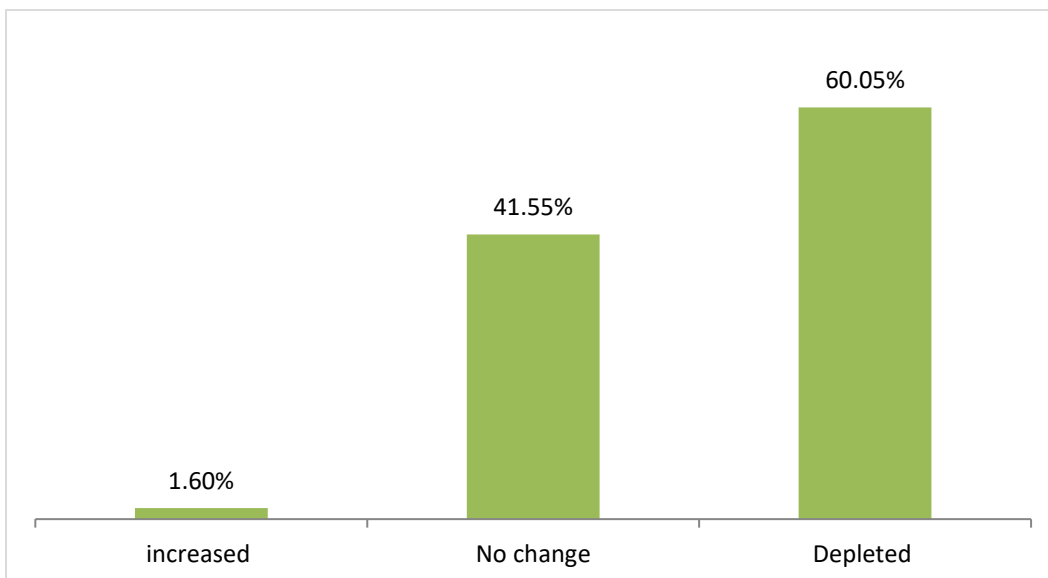


Figure 5: Respondents by status of household assets amid COVID-19 pandemic

Of the total married respondents (Figure 5), about 71.32% (n = 102) indicated that their spouse’s resource has been depleted owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 1.39% (n = 2) had the perception that their spouse’s resource has increased during the pandemic. About 26.57% (n= 38) witness an insignificant change in the assets of their spouses. No married refugees observed the depletion of assets in this regard.

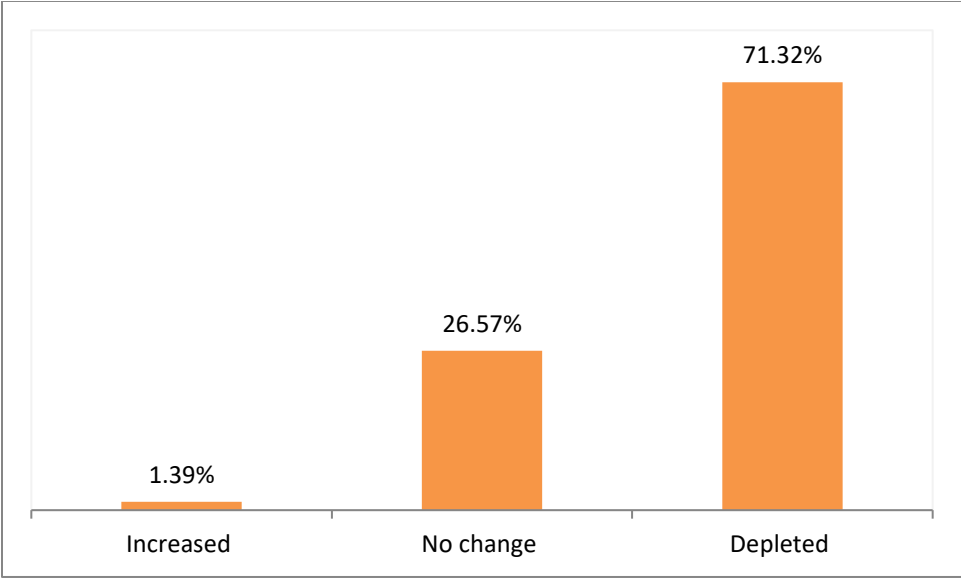


Figure 6: Married respondents by status of their spouses’ assets amid COVID-19 pandemic

A portion of the words of a key informant at Gazgbela district is indicated below:

“...The returnees here are severely underprivileged. To protect ourselves from COVID-19, we require face masks, hand sanitizers, and soap. We have trouble getting these crucial things. In reality, the majority of us have no resources. We lack the funds necessary to purchase both food and non-food products. Only men have dominated all home resources in male-headed households. We are unable to travel and work effectively due to the pandemic's nature. In addition to the region's economic difficulties, women and people with disabilities in particular have difficulty accessing healthcare facilities in this area. The ongoing armed confrontation in this region between the Government and armed forces has worsened the difficulties for the entire community, particularly for the less fortunate returnees.”

The impact of the pandemic was analyzed by group of respondents where multiple responses were allowed. The result (Figure 6) shows that about 82.35% (n = 56) of the IDPs, 81.15% (n = 58) of the returnees and 79.62% (n = 86) of the host community (suffered from depletion of household resources amid the pandemic. In total, 60.05% (n = 224) respondents suffered from depletion of household resources owing to the pandemic. Only about 7.77% (n = 29) replied that nothing had happened to their resources and the livelihoods due to COVID-19 outbreak. Significant number of surveyed respondents indicated suffering from staying at home, loss of employment opportunity, closure of self-employment, displacement, reduced income, increased house chore, and challenges coming from school closure and restriction of mobility. The FGD discussants in Moyale district indicated that the hospital was designated only for COVID-19, and women were particularly

challenged because of the lack of obstetric care, including sexual and reproductive health, and scarcity of space for delivery in the hospital.

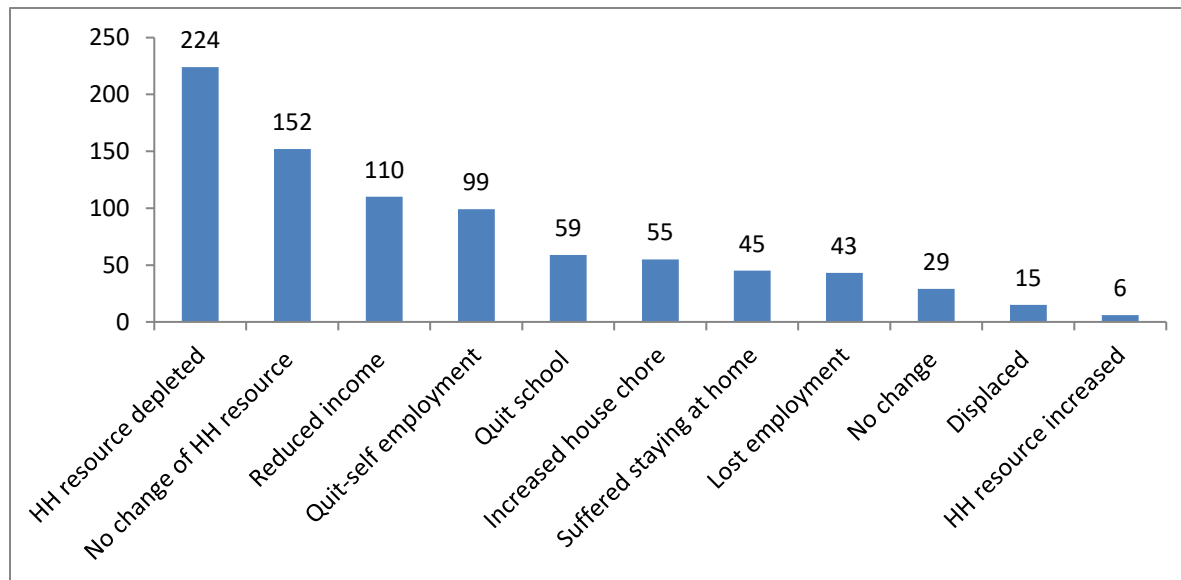


Figure 7: Impact of COVID-19 by group of respondents

Covid-19 vs. Civic Rights

The analysis of the survey result shows that several respondents lost their civic rights due to COVID-19 pandemic. The rights adversely affected due to the pandemic are equal employment rights, the rights to vote, property rights, freedom of movement, the rights to health services, the rights to education, reproductive rights, birth control rights, forced pregnancy, freedom from violence and the freedom of divorce. Of all the rights that have been violated, majority of the respondents (47.17%, n = 176) mentioned restriction of freedom of movement, followed by violation of rights to education (28.15%, n = 105). Violation of the rights to health was ranked 3rd in the number of respondents (18.50%, n = 69). Other violated rights were mentioned by a significant number of respondents.

The words of a key informant WWFS in Bole Lemi Industrial Park is worth mentioning: “Since the COVID-19 incident, a lot of things have changed for me. I had stopped doing my own small business like selling fruits in the village. I started working for a lower wage. I likewise got divorced and started raising my son alone. I was with my hubby prior to the crisis. He once provided for our family. My daughter was in my care. Due to his job loss, my husband has recently been more inebriated. Everything has grown beyond my capacity due to current inflation. Even for my daughter, I am unable to meet her needs. The majority of the time, I am compelled to deliver my daughter to my mother, who lives in a rural location without any facilities for children. Due to my low wage, I am unable to pay my rent. I currently reside in the factory's dormitory”.

Another young woman working in the factory indicated: “I held another position prior to the COVID-19 crisis. My monthly earnings amounted to 7500 Ethiopian birr (ETB). The COVID-19 outbreak destroyed my first job. I was missing my clients. In order to survive, I joined this factory. Payment is really meager. I am now working in this plant for only about 2,500 ETB

a month. Living on this money is challenging. My parents are both indigent. I was unable to aid them. I reside in the factory dormitories since I am unable to afford a home rent. If COVID-19 is no more a pandemic, I might consider going back to my previous position. But I require a seed money”.

Covid-19 and Gender-based Violence

Except refugees other groups who responded to this survey experienced gender based violence during the pandemic. More than 50% of the respondents indicated that they observed increased GBV during COVID-19 pandemic. About 48.79% (n = 182) have observed no changes in this regard. Surprisingly, those in Asaita Refugee Camp observed no changes in gender based violence cases in/around the camp amid the pandemic. Of the total women working in formal setting in the Industrial Park, about 32.25% (n = 20) indicated that they either faced or observed GBV directly owing to COVID-19 pandemic, either at the workplace or at their residential areas. Key informants representing governmental offices in all study areas also indicated the unprecedented increasing rate of gender based violence during the pandemic.

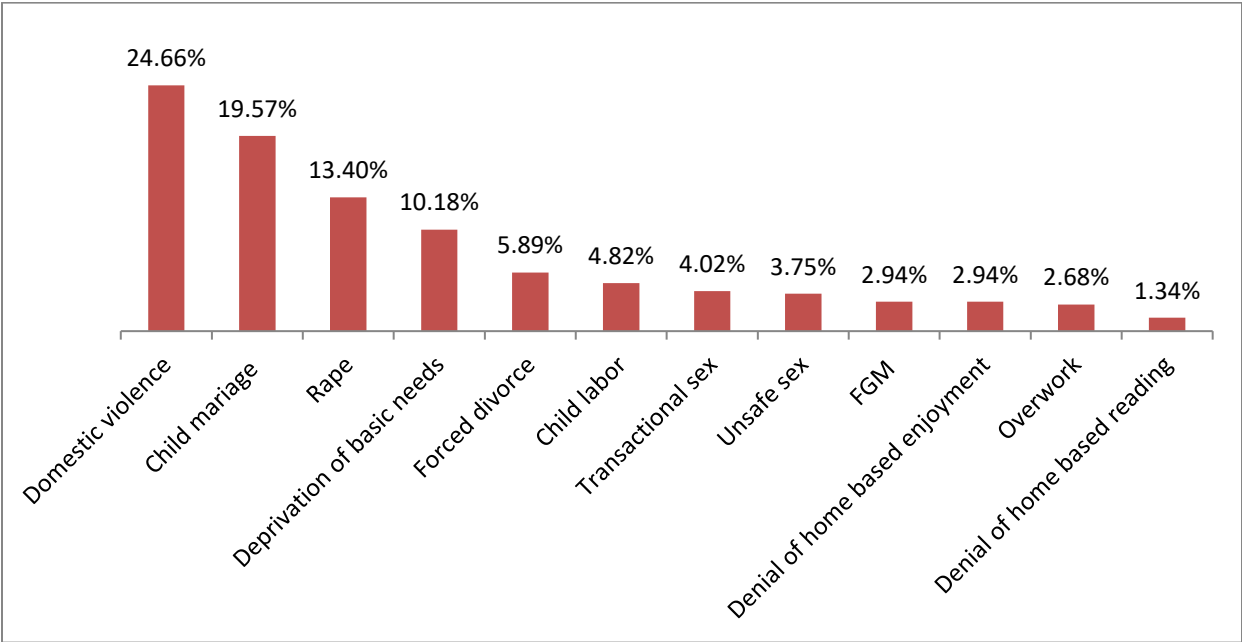


Figure 8: Risk of GBV amid COVID-19 pandemic where multiple responses were allowed

Based on observed type of intimidators amid the pandemic (Figure 8), 14.93% (n = 43) respondents indicated that they observed/heard that the rights of some of the victims during COVID- 19 pandemic was abused by close relatives (such as father, brother, and uncle). Housemates (but not relatives) are mentioned by about 6.94% (n = 20) respondents to have abused the rights of the victims in their areas. Other respondents (5.90%, n = 17) had the information that several persons (mainly women, girls and youth) were abused by their neighbors, while about 3.12% (n = 9) have heard that the father-in-laws to have abused their children. About 1.73% (n = 5) indicated that some spouses (mainly husbands) have intimidated their wives. About 67.36% (n = 194) indicated other persons (rather than close relatives, neighbors, housemates, father-in-law, and spouses) were more abusers of the rights of the victims amid the pandemic in their areas.

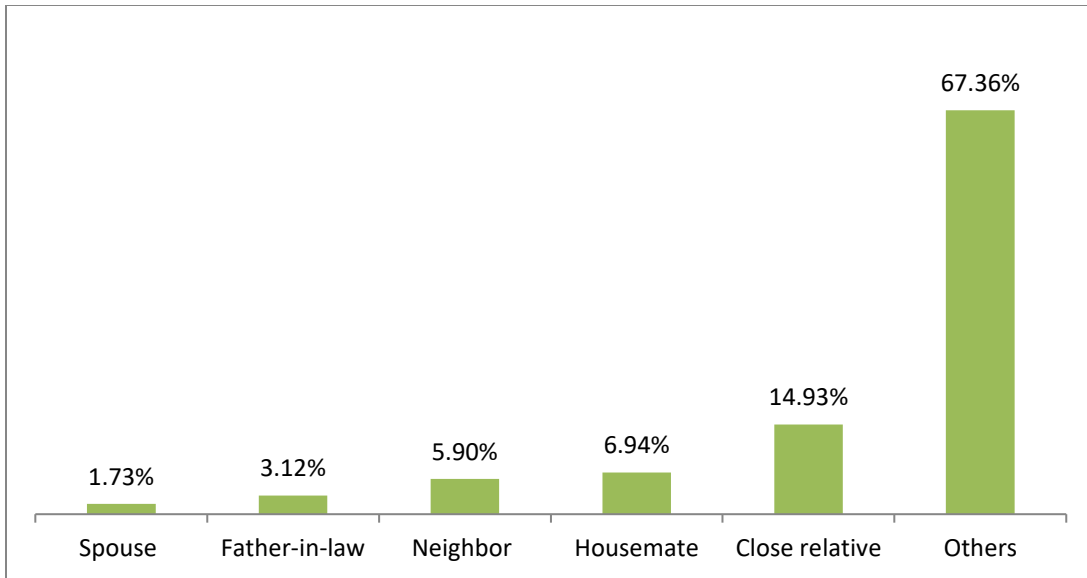


Figure 9: Respondents by their observation type of intimidators amid the pandemic

Of the total respondents (Figure 9), about 32.70% (n = 122) respondents noticed child abuse (girls) in their areas amid the pandemic. about 20.43% (n = 76) reported to have faced/noticed verbal abuses while 18.27% (n = 68) either faced or observed physical abuses during the pandemic. Others experienced or observed abuses include aspects like forced control (14.78%, n = 55), economic abuses (15.59%, n = 58), emotional abuse & intimidation (8.33%, n = 31), sexual abuse (2.68%, n = 10), and male privilege in expense of women (0.80%, n = 3). About 19.08% (n = 71) reported to have faced or noticed any form of abuses owing to the outbreak of the pandemic. Surprisingly, only about 6.45% (n = 4) of the respondents selected form Asaita Refugee Camp faced/noticed violence amid the pandemic.

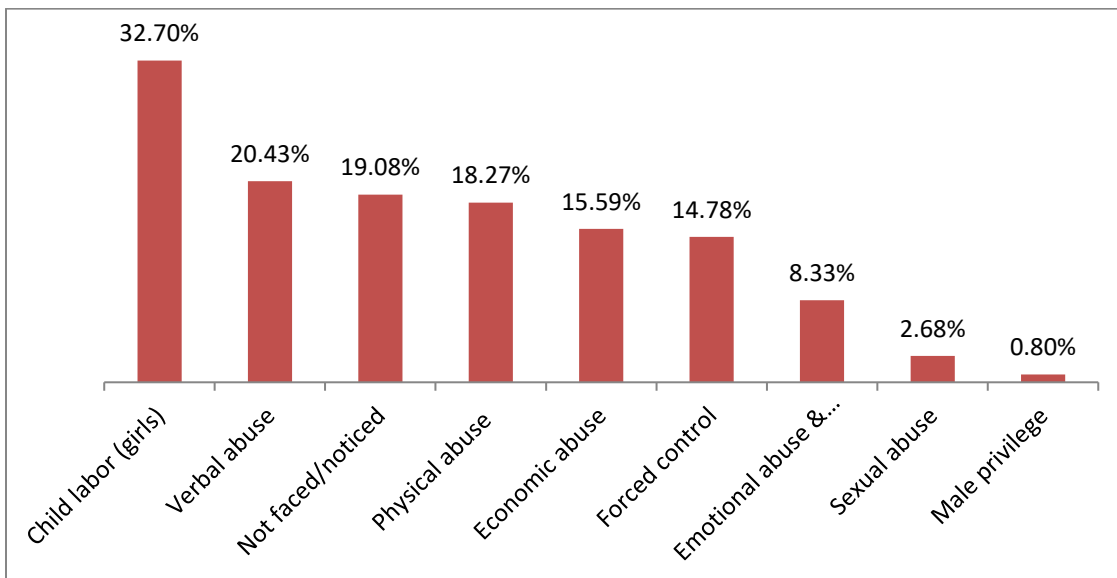


Figure 10: Respondents by specific violence they have faced/noticed in their areas where multiple responses were allowed

An interviewed government sector office expert/officer at Sekota district expressed the disproportionate (gender-biased) impact of the COVID-19 disease as follows:

“Poor women and girls are more negatively impacted by the pandemic than the general population. Many women in our district have lost their employment as a result of the illness. Poverty affected women notably who worked in small-scale markets. Women now live in abject poverty due to the pandemic. In our district, there are thousands of poor and unemployed women and girls. Women experience greater poverty than men do.

The problem of unemployment is getting worse, as more and more women are returning to their homes because of the pandemic. Many women are being recruited from Addis Ababa, Adama, Bahir Dar, and even abroad (mainly Arab countries). Since the pandemic began, many women have had to reduce their work hours or give up their jobs altogether. The customer has decided to avoid the disease by running away. Most of them have seen their income fall by at least half. As the economy continues to suffer, women are also experiencing sexual harassment. Many women have been raped and/or abused with schools closed and movement restrictions imposed, and although there have been many cases of violence against women, most of them do not want to talk about such cultural crimes or fear of further harassment. The number of victims may be greater than the number of cases reported to police. Women are being raped, including by members of their families. Some died from illegal and improper abortions. We also know that in addition to financial hardship and sexual abuse, many women suffer from mundane household chores that must be done regularly, such as cooking, collecting water and firewood, washing dishes and clothes, cleaning houses and feeding children. The teenagers are busy from dawn to dusk and extending to the night. The effects of the pandemic on women are more severe than on men.”

Covid-19 Pandemic on Health Service Access

Of the total surveyed respondents, about 9.11% (n = 34) have indicated to have postponed their marriage because of COVID-19 pandemic. The other 4.55% (n = 17) postponed their childbearing schedule. About 20.64% (n = 77) suffered from lack of reproductive health information. A few respondents of WWFS (Women Working in Formal Settings) in Bole Lemi Industrial Park and the refugees in Asiata (Afar) have reported to have adversely impacted in this regard. The vast majority (81.23%, n = 303) of the surveyed respondents indicated that they have not faced COVID-19-induced significant reproductive health impacts so far.

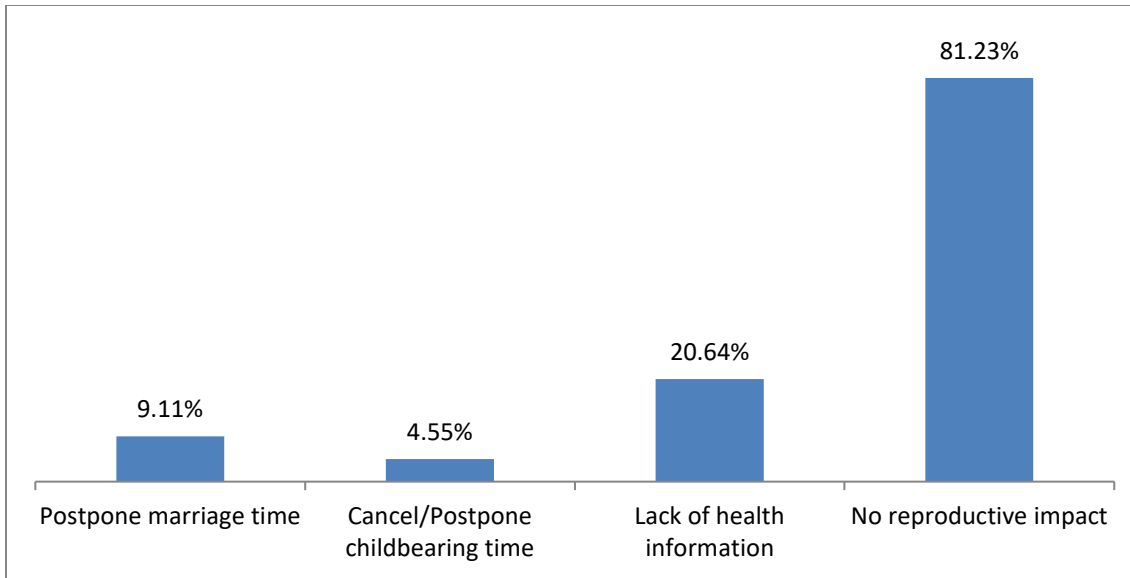


Figure 11: Respondents by reproductive health impact of COVID-19 where multiple responses were allowed

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The assessment of the effect of COVID-19 on women and girls is of great practical significance to both the protection of public health security and the sustainable development of the nation. Though the notion of sustainable development has undergone certain changes during the past, its fundamental principles and goals remain to contribute to a more conscious behaviour adapted to the limitations of the environment. Adopting this concept in different areas of human activities will lead to a more realistic and holistic gain in the overall endeavor of the development strategies of Ethiopia.

The findings of the study showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the lives and livelihoods of the surveyed community (returnees, host community, IDPs, women/girls working in formal settings and the refugees. In fact, the refugees were found to be least affected.

The surveyed groups of community were found to be impacted more in their socioeconomic situation than their health. Among other adverse impacts, the situation of the pandemic significantly reduced their income, forced them to change their business settings, reduced remittance, and resulted in scarcity of necessities such as food and clothes. It impacted their marriage, childbearing, and travel (migration) schedules in addition to the adverse impacts it has brought about on reproductive health. They faced reduced support from family members (both within Ethiopia and abroad). Some of them lost their supporters to COVID-19. Psychological impacts owing to closure of businesses and restrictions in mobility (both formally & informally) were among great challenges.

The host community, specifically, reported to have been suffering from scarcity and skyrocketing prices of essential goods amid the pandemic. The market linkage/access was disturbed mainly at the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic. School closure and restriction of mobility was a major cause of gender-based violence (GBV) in all the study areas, except the refugee camp. GBV increased in all areas. Moreover, children, particularly, girls were denied of their basic needs and human rights. By and large, the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls of different social groups (returnees, the host community and IDPs) was varied and severe.

The victims of the pandemic have tried to cope the impact of the pandemic through different mechanisms. Among these were seeking the support of family/relatives, NGOs, government organizations, changing of livelihoods mechanisms, involvement in more low paying jobs and sex work.

RECOMMENDATION

The attempts made to investigate the immediate needs of the respondents showed that above all, the respondents demanded peace and security at national, regional, and local levels. The respondents mentioned priority needs including cash support to enhance their livelihoods, clothes for themselves and their children, and seed money to re-start business. The host community required market linkage for their livestock products, re-opening of cross-border job and trade opportunity, livestock restocking, access to education and adult learning facilities, food aid, tailored life skill training, and improved access to health facilities (particularly reproductive health).

Mitigation of violence and abuses, food supply for adults and supplementary food for their children enhanced water and sanitation facilities, enhanced sustainable development programs such as soil and water protection; more job opportunities for the youth group to discourage cross-border human trafficking; and support of educational materials for their children are common needs for all group of respondents.

As sustainable development goals (SDGs) can not be achieved without the active involvement of women and girls, working on women empowerment is of a paramount importance for the realization any development initiative by the government and non-government development actors.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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About the Authors

Messay Mulugeta Tefera (PhD)- Associate Professor at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

Besufikad Enideg Getnet- Assistant Professor at Gambella University, PhD Candidate at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

Gedion G. Jalata (PhD)- Center of Excellence International Consult, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Teferee Makonnen Kassa (PhD)-Associate professor at College of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.