



## COVID-19 IMPACT ON WOMEN IN INFORMAL CROSS BORDER TRADE IN ZIMBABWE

Dr. Levious Chiukira

Email: lchiukira@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article seeks to unpack the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Women in Informal Cross Border Trade (WICBT) in Zimbabwe while acknowledging the ripple effects on apparent disparate unrelated norms and realities. The research methodology utilised in this treatise unpacks the far-reaching impact of COVID-19 by providing a basis for the formulation of future theories on the interaction of COVID-19, WICBT and society in Zimbabwe as well as provide recommendations to remedy COVID-19's ill effects. The systematic review of secondary data sources (journals, policy reports, humanitarian reports as well as newspaper articles and online media reports) formed the main basis for the positions articulated in this article. Broadly speaking, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every facet of life including (formal and informal) trade. With a largely disputed unemployment rate, it is largely accepted that the informal sector has sheltered a significant proportion of Zimbabwe's employable population. This demographic, traditionally dominated by WICBT, has increased exponentially as a result of COVID-19.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, WICBT, cross-border trade, border, regional policy,



## INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, informal cross-border trading (ICBT) intensified at the turn of the millennium when the country entered the persisting political and economic downturn that pushed the majority of the employable population into the informal sector. This resulted in a sharp increase in out-migration into neighbouring countries, particularly South Africa and Botswana (Ndlela, 2006; Kiwanuka and Monson, 2009; Ndiaye, 2008). Women are the main actors in small-scale cross-border trade (Kiwanuka and Monson, 2009). Rugube and Matshe (2011) argue that informal cross-border trading (ICBT) has become an attractive sector for people who fail to meet the pre-requisites for formal employment in those countries traditionally recognised as offering apparently more lucrative economic opportunities. Women, who make up the majority of cross-border trade, have taken it upon themselves to take a leading role in sustaining their families and protecting them from poverty. This informal cross-border trade was growing exponentially with an increasing number of Zimbabwe's labour force turning to the trade as a source of income. Women made up 30-40% of the estimated SADC cross-border traders despite a lack of formal recognition (Ama et al 2014). Despite the fact that WICBT addresses vital issues of livelihood such as food and income security, they are neglected by mainstream trade policies and institutions, thus undermining the profitability of their activities (ibid). This exponential growth in the trade, though less than ideal, was necessary as it sustained a proportion of the population that progressively became difficult to ignore.

Almost at the peak of informal cross-border trade (December 2019), the first COVID-19 case was recorded in China's city of Wuhan. First labelled a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) COVID-19 quickly evolved into a global pandemic infecting 1 million people worldwide within four months of detection (Timeline: WHO's COVID-19 response, 2022). Countries all over the globe were quick to follow the World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 guidelines and Zimbabwe duly followed suit entering its first lockdown on 30 March 2020, two weeks after the detection of its first COVID-19 infection. The lockdown and accompanying measures wrought havoc on trade and economies, and continue to do so to date. Informal trade suffered the most from the enforcement of COVID-19 lockdown measures and restrictions (Dudzai and Wamara 2021). Consequently, women, who comprise most of the participants in informal cross-border trade, have suffered from lockdown measures and restrictions. The bulk of these measures and restrictions focused on (social distancing) movement and gatherings, critical ingredients of the informal trade.

### Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant responses of national governments and other stakeholders are likely to negatively affect small-scale informal cross-border traders who lack adequate resources and safety nets to catch them in the event of such catastrophic and unprecedented disruptions. The degree to which informal cross-border traders are affected depends on country-specific viral burdens, pandemic duration, the measures adopted by the government, the intervention of international stakeholders in addressing not only the pandemic but the measures prescribed in response but most importantly, the resilience of cross border traders (including WICBT). The absurdity of the situation is that WICBT, which has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and its response measures, have not been consulted in policy/response formulation.



## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology utilised in this treatise seeks to unpack the far-reaching impact of COVID-19 by providing a basis for the formulation of future theories on the interaction of COVID-19, WICBT and society in Zimbabwe as well as provide recommendations to remedy COVID-19's ill-effects. The systematic review of secondary data sources (journals, policy reports, humanitarian reports as well as newspaper articles and online media reports) formed the main basis for the positions articulated in this article. The study will also utilise a qualitative approach (key informant interviews with 20 selected WICBT). An inductive research methodology is a thread that ties this article together with key themes arising from existing literature and documentation.

## RESULTS

### Economic Stimulus Package

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2020, the Government of Zimbabwe unveiled a ZWL\$18 billion Economic Recovery and Stimulus Package aimed at reinvigorating the economy and providing relief to individuals, families, small businesses and industries impacted by the economic slowdown caused by the Coronavirus pandemic and the attendant response measures to control the health crisis ("Zimbabwe" 2020). Governments around the world announced COVID 19 economic stimulus packages to mitigate the pandemic's impact (Siddik 2020) on economies, trade; livelihoods and job security. These stimulus packages, however well-intentioned, miss the mark. This is especially true in the developing south where echoes of the colonial and largely patriarchal past persist in the form of structural marginalisation of vulnerable groups (women, children and the youth) from the formal economy. Pandemics, natural disasters and other catastrophes traditionally affect vulnerable groups more severely than others. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, vulnerable groups are in the uniquely unfortunate position of being worse hit by the pandemic as well as seeing Economic Stimulus Packages that exclude the informal trade sector (where these groups, especially women, are the main actors). The COVID-19 stimulus packages fail dismally in addressing gender equality and women empowerment which would alleviate the "disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 crisis on women and girls" (Carpentier et al. 2020). Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) benefit from Zimbabwe's COVID-19 stimulus package while informal (cross-border) traders are excluded. The exclusion of the informal sector is baseless as it accounts for an average of 61% of the country's GDP and absorbs 76% of the country's labour force (Mambondiyani 2020). Succinctly, Zimbabwe is one of the world's largest informal economies (Medina & Schneider 2018), and the stimulus package, in its structure and implementation, fails to provide any relief (or indeed acknowledgement) to the country's economic backbone, namely the informal sector.

### Social Grants

The COVID-19 pandemic virtually brought the whole world to a standstill. The abrupt halt to "non-essential" economic activities had the undesired effect of pushing vulnerable households and groups who traditionally live from hand to mouth into extreme poverty and food insecurity. Reports estimate that close to half a million Zimbabwean households have at least one member who lost their job, pushing many households into poverty as well as exacerbating



the plight of the vulnerable. This necessitated the roll-out of food relief and cash transfer programs as part of Zimbabwe's Covid-19 social policy response, with beneficiaries were recruited through means-testing and targeting. However, with the pandemic pushing over a million Zimbabweans into extreme poverty, the capacity and reach of social relief grants and programs would inevitably fail to adequately address (even temporarily) the plight of all the poor and vulnerable. Chipenda and Tom succinctly state "While the breadth and timing of Zimbabwe's social policy response are noteworthy, it remained largely inadequate and temporary" (Chipenda and Tom 2021). The sentiments are echoed on the World Bank's website: "Food insecurity was also exacerbated by inadequate reach/coverage of relevant social protection programs—less than a quarter of the increased number of extremely poor households received food aid in June 2020, and this share dropped to 3% of rural households in September 2020."<sup>1</sup> These inadequacies are attributable to inherent and systemic corruption on the part of social workers as well as the unprecedented exponential increase in the number of vulnerable and extremely poor households. The consequence of this cocktail of factors is the exclusion of large segments of the very marginalised and vulnerable groups that social response packages seek to serve. WICBT (and their families), women and children find themselves in a pressure cooker of increasing desperation that only leaves them more susceptible to exploitation than ever before.

### **Quarantine and Vaccination**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries and regions, imposed quarantines, entry bans, or other travel restrictions for citizens of or recent travellers to the most affected areas (Travel during the COVID-19 pandemic - Wikipedia, 2022). These quarantine measures sought to stem the transmission of COVID-19 and have a historical precedent that has seen "governments intuitively turn to travel-related measures and restrictions, which potentially help build public trust, particularly for new emerging threats to health" (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and European Union Aviation Safety Agency., 2022). To date, the world is in a pandemic cycle (lockdown-infection containment/plateauing-restriction easing-variant emergence-lockdown) since the first case was reported in 2019. Zimbabwe, like many countries around the world, introduced mandatory traveller quarantine when the first case was reported in March 2020, and following the pandemic cycle has removed and reinstated these and other measures at a turn two or three times between 2020 and 2022. The stop-start to business necessitated by the pandemic has drained Zimbabwe's coffers as the "government has reduced the mandatory quarantine period for possible coronavirus cases by one-half. The government says it lacks the resources to take care of patients in isolation for the two-week period recommended by the World Health Organization" (Mavhunga, 2020). Barely 12 months later the Zimbabwean government reinstated "a 14-day mandatory quarantine of all travellers entering the country including returning residents, in a bid to halt the spread of the Omicron variant" (Zimbabwe imposes 14-day quarantine for all travellers and limits venues to vaccinated, 2021). Interestingly, the government has opted to transfer the financial burden of quarantine to individual travellers upon entry into the country as the pandemic continues to affect the country's purse. A more permanent solution to end the pandemic became necessary. This potentially came in the form of a mooted vaccine program. It was rolled out globally at the beginning of 2021, starting in the developed north and gradually reaching the developing south. "On 22 February 2021, Zimbabwe launched their

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/zimbabwe/publication/zimbabwe-economic-update-covid-19-further-complicates-zimbabwe-s-economic-and-social-conditions-2021>



national COVID-19 vaccination program using the Sinopharm BIBP vaccine” (COVID-19 vaccination in Zimbabwe - Wikipedia, 2022). The rhetoric of world leaders and stakeholders in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic paints a very simple picture, vaccines are the key to opening up economies (and trade) as well as getting back to a sense of normalcy. “COVID-19 vaccination will allow countries to open their economic activities...” (UNICEF, 2021). The unambiguity of the motives of world leaders and COVID-19 stakeholders has led many critics and sceptics to question the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines that have been rolled out in record time. In addition to this, traditionally vulnerable groups were priced out of accessing the vaccines, especially at the outset of the program.

### **Livelihoods and Food Security**

According to the World Bank, “nearly 500,000 Zimbabwean households have at least one member who lost her or his job, causing many households to fall into poverty, and worsening the plight of the existing poor. Food insecurity was also exacerbated by inadequate reach/coverage of relevant social protection programs” (World Bank, 2021). This is a significant number under any circumstances but more so in the Zimbabwean context where the majority of people are informally employed. The loss of jobs is directly related to an increase in food security. Adding the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the informal sector, which houses a significant proportion of Zimbabwe’s labour force, paints a really gloomy outlook for the country’s livelihoods and food security. Household income in developing nations is solely derived from Informal Cross Border Trade (ICBT) proceeds used to eradicate poverty and food insecurity. This is corroborated by Rukasha et al who assert that the “informally employed represent a significant breadwinner constituency, whose dependents comprise vulnerable sections of the populace. The restrictions on mobility and the closure of borders meant the immediate loss of employment and income” (Rukasha, Nyagadza, Pashapa and Muposhi, 2021). Consequently, a growing segment of the population is driven to contravene COVID-19-related measures and restrictions to escape the looming threat of hunger-induced mortality at home. “The choice between staying home and starving is not a choice” (Mamombe, 2020). The COVID-19 measures, restrictions, lay-offs and the threat of looming hunger have pushed more people into informal trade this is despite the fact that the same measures and restrictions have also curtailed the trade. The lure of circumnavigating COVID-19 measures and restrictions and ultimately putting food on the table in the obtaining dispensation makes informal trade an extremely attractive recourse for many Zimbabweans.

### **GDP & Growth Rates**

The drawback of travel-related measures is clearly seen in the drastic contraction of economies the world over as trade ground to a halt. Global GDP has fallen by 4.2% since the pandemic began (Rooney, 2021). The economic slowdown on the back of the COVID-19 pandemic has been constant in its ubiquity but relative in its severity. In Zimbabwe’s case, the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying measures have disproportionately affected the informal sector which accounts for 61% of the country’s GDP (Mambondiyani 2020). As a result, Zimbabwe’s economy will shrink in proportion to the economic contribution of the informal sector that has been nullified by COVID-19 measures and restrictions. “The IMF projects Zimbabwe’s economy will contract by 10.3 per cent in 2020 and will not recover to 2019 levels until 2024” (Mambondiyani, 2020). COVID-19 measures and restrictions are a double-edged sword for low-income countries like Zimbabwe, where informal trading is



arguably the main economic activity. Restrictions on movement, especially on ICBT have had an economic impact whose severity manifests in the growth projections and realities announced by economic experts. According to the projections of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Africa's GDP growth is set to shrink from 3.2% to 1.8%, while global economic growth will shrink from 2.9% to 2.4% in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rukasha, Nyagadza, Pashapa and Muposhi, 2021). It is safe to assert that what we are living in is a world that typifies and embodies the drawbacks of a truly connected global village in which the economic fortunes of one country account for the fortunes of nearly all if not all countries in a region or continent. The COVID-19 pandemic-related measures and restrictions, while meant to preserve life, will inadvertently drive mortality as job losses and the global economic slowdown continues to push more and more people into extreme poverty and hunger (food insecurity), especially in countries like Zimbabwe where social welfare is not only threadbare it is also shrouded in mystery, bureaucracy and ostensible corruption. These economic projections also serve as a stark reminder of the important role that women (the main driving force behind ICBT) play in the local, regional, continental and global economy.

### **Increased Competition**

The Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce (ZNCC)'s Sustainable and Flexible Economic Interventions to Address Covid-19 report asserts that 25% and 75% of the country's formal and informal workforce is at risk of losing their jobs (Ntali 2020). This is substantiated by the assertion that "nearly 500,000 Zimbabwean households have at least one member who lost her or his job" (World Bank, 2021). These unprecedented job losses have the consequence of increasing competition for existing WICBT, as the casualties of COVID-19-induced job losses will most likely turn to ICBT for sustenance. "In Zimbabwe, where unemployment is estimated at up to 90% when considering only the formal economy, [ICBT] has created significant employment opportunities, with an estimated 5.7 million people currently employed in the informal economy" (FAO 2017). This has the effect of potentially increasing competition among ICBTs in an increasingly saturated market, with the effect of forcing ICBTs to lower prices (reduce profit margins) in order to capture a greater market share. While this is not a new phenomenon in business, it has the potential to become an existential threat if left unchecked, threatening the very existence and viability of the ICBT. This existential crisis or threat looms imminently over ICBT when one views it from the COVID-19 pandemic lens, focusing on the economic upheaval that the pandemic has wrought.

### **Social Impact – Gender-Based Violence & Prostitution**

The informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is synonymous with women as they make up the majority (by a fair stretch) of participants in the trade. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of related measures and restrictions have led to unforeseen negative social behaviours that mainly affect WICBT. This is corroborated by Plan International Zimbabwe which asserts that history research and experience "show that girls and women are particularly hard-hit during emergencies, when existing inequalities are exacerbated" (Plan International 2020). This notion rings true for Zimbabwe as the country witnessed an exponential increase in reported gender-based violence (GBV) and intimate partner violence (IPV) cases since the implementation of COVID-19 measures and restrictions in the first "hard" lockdown of March 2020. Indeed, this is substantiated by the fact that the Musasa Project (which is a CCSO that handles GBV cases) recorded over 600 GBV cases in the first



11 days of the lockdown, which is more than its normal monthly average of between 500 and 600 GBV cases (UNFPA Zimbabwe 2020). This is substantiated by the succinct summation “Zimbabwe has witnessed a spike in Gender Based Violence cases following Corona Virus Disease (Covid-19) stay-at-home- lockdown measures announced by the Zimbabwe government” (Nkwe 2020). In trying to account for the sharp rise in GBV cases, some researchers contend that women breadwinners were suddenly unable to purchase basic household items and this led to tensions with their partners and eventually GBV (Plan International 2020). Another consequence of the pandemic’s measures and restrictions is the rise in prostitution or transactional sex. Women, previously economically engaged in ICBT, unable to meet their financial obligations due to COVID-19 lockdown measures and restrictions resorted to transactional sex to put food on the table. Despite the illegality of commercial sex work in Zimbabwe “COVID-19 has turned the sector into a necessity for many women who were made redundant by lockdown measures imposed by the government because of public health concerns” (Banda 2021). The fact that women would turn to commercial sex work to provide for their families is an indicator of the desperation levels of WICBT as well as the lack of viable alternative recourses because of the pandemic’s lockdown measures and restrictions (UNFPA Zimbabwe 2020). There are, of course, other inherent risks that come with commercial sex work such as abuse and sexually transmitted diseases whose proliferation is aided by the fact that the trade is illegal.

### **Corruption**

The precedent of the willingness to dabble in the illegal being set accounts for why ICBT participants (WICBT) readily resorted to corrupt (illegal) activities in a bid to circumnavigate COVID-19 measures and restrictions. This is substantiated by the plethora of media stories on the prevalence of counterfeit vaccine certificates. This is exemplified in the following: “Police in Zimbabwe have arrested two men for selling fake negative COVID-19 test results to travellers at the country’s northern Chirundu border post, which is the gateway to neighbouring Zambia” (Anadolu Agency 2020). The Chirundu Border Post is a major through-fare for ICBT (especially in recent times) which validates the assumption that participants of the ICBT (and WICBT) are the core market for peddlers of these counterfeit vaccination certificates. The acquisition of these documents is another example of a population seeking to circumnavigate lockdown measures and restrictions that have plunged their families into poverty and food insecurity. “The reason for the fake certificates is the exorbitant prices for a real one. Fake certificates cost around US\$10 while real ones cost around US\$60, so obviously, people would prefer to go for cheaper certificates despite the consequences” (Mambondiyani 2020). The inference from this is that financial considerations inform the decision to opt for counterfeit COVID-19 vaccination certificates. Consequently, arresting those selling counterfeit vaccination certificates does not address the root problem, which is the high unattainable costs associated with COVID-19 tests and vaccinations for the general population and ICBT (WICBT) in particular. Criminal tendencies persist and are part of humanity, however the scale, scope and ubiquity of this particular crime points to a deep-seated problem that simple arrests and accompanying punitive measures cannot address.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Women run and own small informal businesses as a source of daily livelihood, which needs to be recognised and taken to scale. Instead, their businesses have been severely affected by COVID-19 lockdown measures and restrictions, in some cases irreparably so. The informal sector is synonymous with a lack of savings, an absence of health insurance and seasonal fluctuations in sales and profitability. All of these factors coupled with the pandemic's lockdown measures and restrictions combine to create an untenable situation for the population segment that operates in the informal sector. The pandemic has altered the business environment for the informal and significantly reduced market demand for their products and services as well as crippling the sector's ability to meet what little demands remain in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are, however, ways in which the global pandemic could be turned into an opportunity for the most vulnerable. These ways must be predicated on the acknowledgement and recognition of the informal sector's enormous contributions to national, regional and international productivity (GDP), poverty alleviation and food security among its many benefits. When it comes to informal cross-border trade, efforts should be directed toward providing new incentives for formalisation and helping informal traders thrive.

**Reduce financial exclusion.** The starting point for this recommendation is to recognise the economic contributions of the informal sector (especially ICBT and WICBT) at the community, national, regional and international levels. The pandemic has made access to finance/credit critical in the survival of any business and this is especially true for businesses operating in the informal sector who are otherwise bereft of credit lines. Fiscal relief measures during the crisis (tax payments deferrals for formal businesses, tax burden reductions or the suspension of interests on late payments) are effective in the short-term support measure, however, it is imperative that modalities are created for extending financial services to sectors that traditionally have no access to formal lending schemes (especially in times of unrest – health, social etc.). This is a prerequisite to ensuring a more inclusive, sustainable and broad-based solution that will enable all sectors (formal and informal) to absorb and bounce back from shocks associated with upheavals and unrest (health, social etc.). This may include introducing preferential options for small-scale and informal traders, such as flexible repayment terms or interest-free loans. This can be effectively achieved through extensive use of digital tools (mobile money) to save and transact without the need for a bank account, an aspect that will no doubt appeal to authorities as it is in keeping with COVID-19 lockdown measures and restrictions. This will ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups (especially the informal sector and participants in ICBT/WICBT) in future stimulus packages similar to the availed in 2020.

**Reconfigure and Expand Social Relief Grants.** In times of upheaval and unrest, social relief grants (food or cash transfers) are critical in cushioning a population and ensuring survival, especially for the most vulnerable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Zimbabwe recognised this need and rightly rolled out food relief and cash transfer programs. Key lessons learnt from the rollout of this initiative are mainly to do with a lack of transparency (and allegations of corruption) in the identification of beneficiaries which resulted in large sections of the vulnerable being excluded from the program. A key recommendation, therefore, is the urgent need to transform the distribution systems of social grants as well as reconfigure the identification and recruitment of beneficiaries to ensure that the most vulnerable group (including WICBT) benefit, especially in this unprecedented obtaining dispensation. (These





could take the form of social cash transfers, temporary living allowance subsidies, emergency minimum wages, food vouchers, or energy and housing subsidies). This is meant to root out the ostensible corruption that has plagued the social grant and instil transparency and confidence. The envisioned reconfiguration should allow for the social relief response measures to have a greater reach and theoretically reach greater segments if not all of the vulnerable populations.

**Create an enabling environment for Informal Trade.** It is of vital importance that the government and other responsible authorities and stakeholders create an enabling environment for informal trade. This could include schemes such as improving Simplified Trade Regimes (STR). The scheme, introduced in some regional economic communities to facilitate small-scale cross-border trade, could be adapted to better respond to the specific needs of informal traders. This may include waiving the certificate of origins, relaxing requirements for export/import permits and sanitary and phytosanitary certification – for instance on the trade of essential goods – or expanding the lists of goods eligible for STR treatment. Improving STR would encourage the uptake of the scheme and illustrate the benefits of formalisation to informal traders and ultimately draw the sector towards formalisation. Recommendations like the preceding are built on the sustained contribution of the informal sector to economic growth, GDP, employment creation poverty alleviation and food security. Succinctly, it is in the best interests of the leaders and stakeholders at national and regional levels to create an environment that stimulates and encourages informal trade because of its tangible, real-world benefits that include accounting for an average of 61% of the country's GDP and absorbing 76% of the country's labour force (Mambondiyani 2020) since the mid-90s. Such a mammoth contribution can no longer be ignored nor does the sector responsible for it continue to be peripheralized. Some of the downstream benefits that stand to accrue to governments and other stakeholders and incentivize the creation of an informal trade-friendly environment include poverty reduction, food security and improved household resilience which translates to a smaller vulnerable population and less burden on the fiscus.

**Investigate slow vaccine uptake.** To date, statistics show that less than 25% of the country is vaccinated. This represents sluggish uptake of vaccines, which are meant to ensure herd immunity and pave way for a return to normalcy. In this COVID-19 pandemic era vaccination and the accompanying certificate have become immeasurably salient in any economic activity, especially one that includes traversing national borders. Understanding the reasons behind slow vaccine uptake is central to improving the national vaccination rate but also arresting the proliferation of crime syndicates offering counterfeit vaccination certificates. A related recommendation is to waive quarantine for authentically fully vaccinated ICBT (and WICBT) as well as subsidising COVID-19 tests to ensure their affordability and providing subsidised quarantine facilities at border posts for ICBTs that test positive for COVID-19. Subsidising COVID tests, vaccinations and quarantine facilities will make the aforementioned more affordable and eliminate the main consideration driving the decision to opt for counterfeit vaccination certificates.

**GBV & Transactional Sex Advocacy.** Restrictions on movement have seen an upsurge in both GBV and transactional sex. Both are related to rising tensions as a result of diminished incomes. The pandemic has revealed a clear need for advocacy against GBV as well as the decriminalisation of transactional sex. The latter is necessary as it will give women and girls (previously engaged in ICBT) a legal basis for recourse against transactional sex partners that abuse them.



**Safeguard progress on gender equality.** Lastly, as productive activities and consumption are scaled back globally, countries cannot afford to also scale back the progress achieved so far in advancing gender equality. Response and recovery efforts must put gender equality and women's empowerment at the centre of any intervention.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen countries employing different measures to try to contain the spread of the virus. However, it is important for countries to formulate measures that are tailor-made to suit their individual countries and realities. A copy and paste strategy of simply transferring COVID-19 measures and restrictions from one country to the other will prove ineffectual. Zimbabwe's adoption of the copy and paste strategy has resulted in the dismal failure of financial and social relief programs as well as drained national coffers. What is needed is an honest introspection into the nature of Zimbabwean society and the formulation of policies informed by exhaustive and inclusive consultation. Women, children and other vulnerable groups should be at the centre of any policy formulation endeavours that seek redress for their plight.

Similarly, WICBT should be consulted in the country's policy formulation endeavours, especially in areas that have a bearing on their livelihoods and economic activities. This consultation should be premised on a formal acknowledgement of the economic and social contributions of the informal sector as a whole, and WICBT in particular, to the country. Resultant policies should reflect the ratio of economic and social contributions but more importantly will include lessons learnt from previous policy iterations which were riddled with errors that handicapped the attainment of intended outcomes. These measures, in addition to the recommendations contained herewith, should be adopted to ensure future policies mitigate the suffering of the population equitably and protect the most vulnerable groups from exploitation, especially in times of strife. The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on economic activities (including those of WICBT) stand as the most powerful, though unwittingly so, advocacy tool for WICBT and informal trade as it shows the world the effects that come from a world bereft of informal trade.

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