

Impact of COVID-19 on women HBWs in Male', Maldives
Findings from the HNSA-IDRC study, February 2020 to August 2021

Location	Malé and Greater Malé region
HBW respondents	31 in round 1, 30 in round 2. 5 new.
Product line	Little over 90% producing and selling food products and the rest in garments
Employment status	Aug. 2021 - All self-employed own account workers Aug. 2020 - Over 90% self-employed own account workers and the rest self-employed employers
Key Informants	Aminath Abdulla
Organisation	Unorganised (interviewed by HNSA member MACCS)

Per capita income of Maldivian citizens is the highest in the South-Asia region. Along with programs targeting disadvantaged groups, several existing schemes extend social welfare widely. Women HBWs in the Maldives are thus, generally, less dependent on government emergency relief compared to others in the region. The current social welfare schemes provide for free education and health for all citizens, along with subsidised housing. Several vulnerable groups such as the disabled, single parents, children, and the old are especially targeted. However, being informal workers, women HBWs are not recognized in government records and accessing relief becomes difficult for them. This was evident in a few cases in the year 2020, at least in the initial period after COVID struck.

In August 2020 the government ironed out the delivery challenges that enabled relief outreach to HBWs. In August 2021 all respondents reported getting government support on one or more items including rent, utility bills, tuition fee and loans. Only 4 respondents needed to borrow, of these 3 did so for work-related needs and 1 for children's education. In any case, identification for women HBWs would be necessary to support them during unexpected crises and improve their resilience in the longer term through provision of insurance and a general safety net.

Respondent Profile

HBWs residing in Malé were affected more than others in the Maldives, especially those that supply cooked and baked food products for locals and tourist resorts. This study connected with them and a few other HBWs who contribute to garment product lines through HNSA affiliate MACCS. The respondents are not connected to any HBW organisation. All participating HBWs are skillful and not poor. However, as was evident during this crisis, they are vulnerable to disaster shocks. Their dependence on tourism is high.

Work and Earnings

Along with the complete stop of tourism that led to wide-spread economic distress, the nation recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases by population in the region during the first wave in the year 2020¹. This worsened during the second wave in 2021 with an aggressive spread of infection and many fatalities. Stringent restrictions on movement were imposed over many months both in 2020 and in 2021 to curb the spread. Even with progressive relaxation it was difficult for HBWs to operate which slowed revival initially. Over 67 per cent of respondents had no work during April-May 2020. Since most of them work in the food sector, which is essential, as the lockdown eased and work and business establishments resumed slowly, their situation improved. By August 2020, less than 23 per cent were without any work at all. Earnings recovery—at 58 percent from pre-crisis period—was remarkable compared to that of other countries in the region (see table below).

The second, more rapacious wave of COVID in 2021 led to even more severe restrictions. Pessimism prevailed about income recovery. However, with quick progress on vaccination which started earlier than expected, HBWs have started working with more ease. Additionally, use of digital and online tools of communication and social media apps expanded greatly during the pandemic. Women HBWs have been using apps like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp to market and sell their products.

Only 1 respondent was not working in August 2021. The average weekly earnings that had made an impressive recovery in August 2020, increased further to 92 percent of the pre-crisis level in July 2021, the best in South-Asia.

Respondents with zero work				Earnings as percentage of pre-crisis period		
Pre-crisis	April-May 2020	Aug. 2020	Aug. 2021	April-May 2020	Aug. 2020	July 2021
0	21	7	1	11.6%	58%	92%

Women HBWs need capacity building on the technology and financial aspects to be able to use virtual tools for their businesses . The dependence on tourism also needs to be reduced through diversification.

Health Risks and Vaccination

Maldives recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases by population in the region during the first wave in the year 2020. This worsened during the second wave in 2021 with an aggressive spread of infection and many fatalities. The nation started its vaccination drive relatively early, moving very quickly to cover its people. Enforcement

¹ Maldives tested the highest percentage of its population in the region. It is also the most densely populated country. These are most likely the factors that explain a very high caseload by population. Figures available for all countries at <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

has been strict to get around hesitancy. All respondents were vaccinated by August 2021.

Relief Response

Maldives recorded the highest number of cases per population in the South Asia region. Though a high per capita income nation—the highest in the region—its heavy dependence on tourism hit the economy hard with work and incomes dropping sharply for all those people associated with the sector. Severe lockdowns put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 stalled all tourist traffic and made mobility within the country very difficult. As distress spread, the government rushed to respond, providing subsidies on fuel, food, and electricity and water bills. Loan schemes and unemployment allowance were announced for freelancers and self-employed people.

However, in the early period at least, many of these measures failed to reach the needy HBWs; they struggled to access the relief measures without prescribed documents, or, in some cases, without bank accounts. None of the Maldivian study respondents were able to access either the COVID-19-related cash or food support offered by the government. Though none needed food, some sought cash support but didn't succeed in obtaining it. Over time these issues were resolved and in August 2021 none of the respondents reported needing food support, and only a very few applied for cash support. Borrowings were low and mostly work related.

With stronger social welfare, Maldives, along with Bhutan, stood apart in the region in the level and spread of suffering experienced due to COVID-19. It was evident that national welfare systems covering education and health for all citizens; providing subsidies on selected essentials such as housing, food, and fuel; and targeting vulnerable groups for specialised assistance reduce general vulnerability. Not surprisingly, when hit by COVID-19, citizens in general were more resilient in coping with adversity. While the widespread scramble for survival witnessed across the region was relatively more moderate in Maldives, women HBWs, as they are not recorded in government registers and do not have prescribed documents, still had difficulty in accessing these sources of relief.