

Impact of COVID-19 on women HBWs in Lahore and Karachi, Pakistan
Findings from the HNSA-IDRC study, February 2020 to August 2021

Location	Karachi	Lahore
HBW respondents	30. 5 new. 2 shifted out of home-based work	30
Product line	Mainly garment related	
Employment status	August 2021	August 2020
Piece-rate workers	74%	70%
Own-account workers	24%	27%
Key Informants	Zehra Khan, Saira Feroz	Ume Laila Azhar
Organisation	Home-based Women Workers' Federation	HomeNet Pakistan

Participating HBWs are all skilled in tailoring, stitching, and embroidering. They are vulnerable and totally bypassed by the existing weak and limited government social assistance set-up, at least till now. Notably, over the years, several movements in the country have been building the case that women HBWs should be identified for targeted assistance and that current social protection mechanisms should be extended to cover them. The crisis brought this need into clear prominence. Both the Sindh and Punjab provinces legislated for universalization of social protection during the period since COVID struck. This crisis thus, boosted longstanding efforts by organisations of HBWs in pushing the policy process forward to enable social protection provisions for women HBWs. Community leadership has been in the forefront of registering HBWs in government records, working closely with the Labour and other relevant departments. This is major progress towards recognition for HBWs in the region, an experience to stimulate other nations in this direction.

Respondent Profile

In both locations women HBWs are mainly engaged in garment work, functioning at the end of local and global supply chains. Lahore, Karachi and Faisalabad are the major garment and textile industrial centres in the country and attract workforce from all over. Typically, men work in factories and in many cases female members of their families contribute from home to these supply chains. In the absence of resumption of these some such respondents returned to their native places.

The Karachi respondents include a small percentage of some Bihari and Bengali community members whose identity status has been in a limbo since Bangladesh's separation from Pakistan. This group has no access to higher education or formal jobs and consequently finds itself at the bottom of the job market earning lowest wages. Though skilled in intricate embroidery work, its disadvantaged position in the society is

the main cause of the vulnerability it suffers from. Among the respondent HBWs, this section suffered more than the others.

While all Karachi respondents identified themselves as piece-rate workers in August 2020, 7 per cent were forced to look for work on their own in 2021 as no job orders through contractors materialised. Lahore respondents are a mix - 40 per cent piece-rate workers and 53 per cent own-account workers in August 2020 that changed to 57 percent and 40 percent respectively. Among these about 44 percent of respondents who identified themselves as own-account workers in August 2020, were forced to shift to low-earnings piece-rate work in the year 2021 as demand for their garment products from individual customers remained depressed. Overall, the percentage of piece-rate workers increased to 74 from 70 per cent and that of own-account workers reduced slightly from 27 to 24 per cent between August 2020 and August 2021.

Work and Earnings

Pakistan has struggled hard with the dilemma of imposing harsh lockdowns and containing the resulting economic distress. While, compared to the rest of the region, mobility seemed to have been less severely restricted in Pakistan, depressed demand led to limited work orders and reduced earnings for HBWs.

All 60 participating women HBWs—30 each in Lahore and Karachi— originally contributed to garment supply chains. In the year 2020, while over 85 percent of HBWs sampled in Karachi had no work during the lockdown of April-May, only 20 per cent faced this situation in Lahore (see table below). Still, earnings reduced to about 23 per cent in Lahore; in Karachi it crashed to less than 10 per cent. Interestingly, as earnings recovered in August that year, the number of those who had work didn't increase in either of the cities, indicating improving earnings for all those who were already working. In the ensuing period due to uncertainty created by repeated waves of infection, work orders remained subdued. Due to lack of work two respondents in Lahore shifted to food work during 2021. In Karachi two women HBWs joined small factories in desperation to make an income even as they complained of long work hours and harsh working conditions. Five women HBWs left Karachi for their native places.

Though they were hesitant before, HBWs have started to consider shifting to alternate supply chains as garment work is still scarce and work rates have reduced. As in August 2020, in Lahore almost all respondents had work in August 2021 too. In Karachi, however, about 37 percent of respondents still had no work (see table below). Average weekly earnings in Lahore bounced back to about 92 percent of the pre-crisis levels, one of the highest in the region. On the other hand in Karachi they remained the same and were a mere 27 percent of the pre-crisis level.

	Respondents with zero work	Change in earnings from pre-crisis (Feb. 2020) period
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	Pre-crisis	April-May 2020	Aug. 2020	July 2021	August 2020	July 2021
Karachi	1	26	26	11	27%	27%
Lahore	0	6	6	2	42%	92%

Health risks and Vaccination

Pakistan has been economically vulnerable and has been going through a structural adjustment program of the IMF that was initiated in 2019. In limiting the national deficit, economic growth was already under strain when COVID-19 hit. The nation's ability to absorb shocks resulting from lockdowns has been particularly low, and in imposing restrictions, it faced much internal resistance. The first wave of a wider and stricter lockdown was relaxed partly in April 2020 and fully in May in a bid to curb the economic decline in the month of Ramazan, as industry and retail clamoured to restart. This led to an explosion in cases. Even as restrictions were imposed in several hotspot locations to contain the rise, with pressure mounting from religious leaders, all restrictions were pulled down to pray and celebrate during Eid ul Azha at the end of July 2020. However, allegedly this time cases didn't spread wildly.

Whether Pakistan managed to flatten the curve remains hotly contested with contrarians pointing to limited testing facilities and weak monitoring of caseload and deaths associated with COVID-19. What is understandable is that with 74 per cent of the working population employed informally, the economic impact of lockdowns was expected to be considerable, especially on this section of society, which is not covered well through existing social assistance schemes targeted at the poorest. It would have been hard for the government to make a choice between health or economic distress.

Moreover, Pakistan had to deal with extreme vaccine hesitation and management, more than shortage. Initially, crowding at vaccine camps led to a rise in infections. Having resolved that, the government has been forced to put in place stringent measures to ensure compliance making it mandatory for access to employment, and entry to schools and public places. About 53 percent Lahore respondents and 43 percent Karachi respondents had been vaccinated by August 2021, the remaining were still hesitant.

Relief Response

In response to the crisis, the government expanded the existing cash transfers programme to cover more people. However, only 17 percent of the 60 women HBWs sampled in Lahore and Karachi received it in the year 2020. Over 93 per cent of respondents did not receive the government food aid, and it was their organisation—HomeNet Pakistan and HBWWF—that helped with food, medical supplies, raw materials, and COVID-19-related information. In August 2021, 73 percent of the Karachi respondents and 10 percent of Lahore respondents reported receiving

cash support from the government, 1 each from the two locations had received food support, and 4 respondents from Karachi and 1 from Lahore got some relief on payments like rent, utility bills, children's tuition fee, and loans.

In general, relief for HBWs from all quarters has been insufficient compared to their essential needs due to which they were forced to borrow heavily. For Lahore respondents unpaid debts are at 89 percent of estimated average annual earnings; for Karachi at a whopping 241 percent.

HBW Organisations

Women's organisations were the mainstay for their HBW members throughout the pandemic whether in connecting them to government and non-government relief efforts, arranging for food support – in August 2021 all HBBWF respondents reported receiving food aid through them, convincing them to take vaccination shots, or looking for work and work alternatives. Even though HomeNet Pakistan and HBBWF are not producer collectives, in an environment of continuing and extreme pessimism about work revival, they stretched themselves to explore work opportunities for members. HBWWF shared contact details of people who could help their members with work in Karachi. HomeNet Pakistan has been in touch with the private sector and local business houses dealing in garments to arrange for support for their members in Lahore.

Both HomeNet Pakistan and HBWWF reported other gains triggered by the crisis. Years of sustained work on enabling social protection provisions for HBWs received a fillip both through informal economy workers recognizing the value of collectivism – number of membership applications to both organisations increased unusually - and through government swiftness on moving the policy process on the subject. Both organisations are helping the governments in Punjab and Sindh, respectively, in facilitating the process of registering women HBWs under the new Sindh Home-Based Workers' Act 2018, which started in the year 2021. It is a major milestone for women HBWs in the region and a cause for cheer.