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Article

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Navigating hardships: socio-economic struggles of single mothers in informal trade amidst the Covid-19 pandemic: a Mabvuku community case study

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the lived experiences of single mothers involved in informal trading in the high density suburb of Mabvuku at the height of Covid-19 induced lockdowns. Using a mixed methodology with a slant towards qualitative enquiry, the study employed focus group discussions, document analysis as well as a questionnaire. Researchers studied the environment in its natural settings and interpreted phenomena in terms of the meaning single mothers expressed in the study. An interpretive philosophy was the main anchor to the study; hence purposive sampling was used to select single mothers involved in informal trade as participants. The main objectives of the study were to determine the resilience of single mother informal traders during the Covid-19 era; analyse the socio-economic challenges faced by the single mothers in informal trade during the Covid-19 era and to explore the intervention strategies available to address challenges faced by unemployed single mothers in the Covid-19 context. Findings were analysed qualitatively through data reduction and conclusion drawing where verification of irregularities, patterns, explanations and propositions were emphasised. Quantitative aspects elicited through a questionnaire distributed to hundred single mothers were presented in tables enriched by descriptive narratives. The questionnaire profiled the demographic characteristics of respondents and type of business operated by the single mothers in the study. Overall, the study foregrounds that the introduction of lockdown restrictive measures dealt a major blow to the single mothers trading enterprises leaving most of them out of business. Whilst there were some elements of resilience and recovery, the majority of single mothers failed to cope with the strenuous environment under Covid-19.

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Introduction and background of the study

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic has been studied across the world with findings suggesting that on one hand it created new opportunities whilst on the other hand, it shuttered other people's livelihoods (Abbass et al., 2022). It is a fact that families were made to spend a lot of time together, play indoor games possibly create some bond. However, there is a flip side of the story where commercial, industrial, and professional activities had to operate at less than half their previous rates due to restrictions on people's movements imposed governments. Other previous studies have also analysed social outcomes of the pandemic, revealing that most people had to go through loneliness, boredom, frustration, emotional instability and distress as fewer recreational and healthy activities were operational (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). It is in this light that the current study evaluates the socio-economic struggles of single mothers in Mabvuku high density suburb. Indeed, the study builds on previous studies that have looked at the impact of Covid-19 on various facets of life. According to United Nations Women (2020), globally, there

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are 101.3 million single mothers taking care of their welfare by themselves. Studies conducted showed that the level of single motherhood in Zimbabwe is 20% of its total population which stands at 15 229 773 (Zimbabwe Statistical Office Report, 2022). The report further reflects that the population of Mabvuku Community is approximately 30 000 people with 1 500 as single mothers. Mabvuku community is a high-density suburb in the Harare Metropolitan Province. It is grouped into Old Mabvuku, New Mabvuku, Old Tafara and New Tafara. The suburb is 17km east of Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Statistical Office Report, 2022).

While the world faced an unprecedented event of Covid-19 in 2020, its impact negatively affected the most vulnerable groups in the community such as single mothers in Mabvuku high density suburbs. Single mothers found it hard to manage the households by themselves, playing the role of the sole breadwinner for the family and providing support to their children's social development, including education during the pandemic era (Garcia et al., 2021). Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the negative economic and social circumstances worsening the health experiences and livelihood outcomes for women as compared to their male counterparts (Connecting Business Initiative Report, 2021). Even for the women category of the population, the impact was not uniform. Indeed, the impact was more severe for single mothers whose socio-economic status deteriorated in the obtaining circumstances (Clery et al., 2021). The pandemic also exacerbated existing inequalities between and among various groups in the population through a widening poverty gap, income deprivation and deteriorating work-life balance which heavily affected single mothers in a broader perspective (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). This perspective justifies an inquiry looking at the dimension of single mothers in a poverty-stricken community such as the one in Mabvuku.

It is noted that the Covid-19 pandemic brought misery in the sense that it further plunged the underprivileged into more poverty as they exposed to deep socio-economic and structural challenges. This veils the fact that single mothers in and around high density suburbs were at risk since they were among the vulnerable groups of society (Chamunogwa, 2021). Whilst there is abundant evidence of deprivation among low income groups during the pandemic, this study builds on the documented evidence to explore socio-economic challenges faced by single mothers involved in the informal trade during the Covid-19 era in high density suburbs. This is an area that has received little attention in the sense that many studies tend to generalise the position of women. Therefore, this study marks a paradigm shift arguing that there are classes within different categories of the population. Research conducted by Fisher et al. (2020) and Rahman (2021) reflected that some challenges that single mothers had to confront during the pandemic era were beyond their capacity. These challenges are believed to be in different forms, but manifested mainly in financial insecurity, inequity of children's education, entrepreneurship insecurity, accommodation challenges and lack of food supply resulting in food insecurity. In the case of Zimbabwe, these challenges are assumed to have worsened when the government enforced a series of lockdown measures nationwide (Chamunogwa, 2021). This study builds on the existing literature to analyse the implication of policy measures on the well-being of single-parent households. A specific analysis of single mother-led households is used to premise the argument that the policy measures were detrimental to the existence and livelihoods of these already deprived single parents. The research study provides an evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of the policies introduced and implemented during the pandemic. While there are some research studies on socio-economic challenges faced by people in general during the Covid-19 era, there is gap in literature specifically on how it affected single mothers as informal traders (Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe Report, 2020). This is the reason why this study is critical in evaluating the lived experiences of single-mothers who depended on petty trading as a source of livelihood.

Statement of the problem

The Covid-19 pandemic affected people in various communities across the globe including Zimbabwe. While the pandemic had some generic effects on all people across various demographic divides, it had compounding effects for single mothers whose livelihoods were hardened by the various calamities induced by the pandemic and worsened by the lockdowns in Mabvuku community. The most affected are those single mothers who largely rely on informal trade such as vending for their survival. Majority

of them faced financial challenges that incapacitated their means of production as they could hardly have adequate capital to buy products for sale (Stopping Abuse & Female Exploitation Zimbabwe Report, 2020). In this light, the epidemic had effects which were beyond physical death and indisposition, for the single mothers in Mabvuku (Wang et al., 2020). It also meant a huge impact on their livelihood outcomes as their survival means were constrained and became heavily compromise. This also had some social consequences for people who were already trapped in the hand to mouth type of survival. This study foregrounds the argument that single mothers in Mabvuku were marooned by the escalation of lockdown measures which were implemented to curtail the spread of Covid-19.

Literature review

The study explores various topics in an effort to explore socio-economic challenges faced by single mothers in informal trade during the Covid-19 era.

Effectiveness of informal trade by single mothers in the Covid-19 era

Whilst information and communication technologies cushioned many business enterprises which could buy and sell online, the predicament of poor and semi-literate single mothers in Mabvuku was different. The digital divide in the country as well as the high costs of data made digital marketing almost impossible as the single mothers continue to pursue traditional approaches in executing their businesses. It is in this context that the majority of informal trade ventures in Zimbabwe have not been successful and they also face various challenges such as occupational health, safety risks, pandemic restrictions (International Labour Organisation, 2020). Informal traders who include single mothers have also historically faced specific vulnerabilities due to the effects of not only Covid-19 pandemic but also others such as Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) Aids (World Health Organization, 2020). Single mothers in informal trade like street hawkers or cross-border traders have had to come to terms with irregular enforcements of travel bans and in the end they could hardly make a profit from their businesses (Resnick et al., 2020). Thus, their entrepreneurship activities became less effective due to the unexpected lockdown measures coupled with restrictions in travelling, vending and public gatherings. As a result of the heavy restrictions on movements and trade that were introduced, most of the informal trades or entrepreneurship ventures collapsed in the Covid-19 era (Azzopardi et al., 2020; Diaz-Serrano & Flamand, 2020). A typical example is the closure of informal economy businesses, market-places and vending sites which deprived single mothers in informal trade of their sources of livelihoods and incomes (Chamunogwa, 2021; Diaz-Serrano & Flamand, 2020). Vendors such as those in small-scale food production reported disruptions in the supply chains, recorded low sales, faced customer apathy, witnessed high rates of produce leftovers and spoilages (for those selling perishable goods) which threatened profit margins (Hertz et al., 2021).

While informal trade or entrepreneurship is believed to bring a lot of survival dynamics to people during a stable environment, for example, amongst the unemployed, uneducated and marginalised people such as single mothers, the situation has been totally the opposite during the Covid-19 era, (United Nations Women, 2020 & Bargerion, 2021). More people including single mothers got unemployed, lost their entrepreneurship ventures while some got sick and their informal trade ended up less productive during the pandemic era (Clery et al., 2021; Rahman, 2021). In addition, due to Covid-19 pandemic there was a huge influx of people including single mothers in self-help businesses as they failed to get financial back-up from the government (Chamunogwa, 2021). Some socio-economic challenges amongst single mothers began to mount to an extent that some could hardly pay medical bills as well as school fees for their children (Rahman, 2021). In other words, informal trade ventures by single mothers faced a serious socio-economic onslaught and unintended effects were faced by the group. This resultantly worsened their predicament as disparities widened and income poverty deepened for the single mothers (Singh et al., 2021).

Socio- economic challenges during the Covid-19 era

Various research studies conducted revealed that single-parent families especially those headed by women (i.e. single mothers) were hard hit by socio-economic challenges during the Covid-19 era (Clery et al., 2021). The authors further posited that one such typical socio-economic challenge faced was

family disorientation and disintegration. Yarber and Sharp (2010) applaud family as the primary agent of socialization but in the wake of Covid-19, most of them disintegrated from the systems and structures in fear of getting infected or affecting others. The authors through their research studies further asserted that some of the family breakups were triggered by Covid-19 regulations which gave birth to unnecessary conflicts and disputes, for example, domestic violence, physical abuse and emotional abuse encounters. The regulations called for people to observe social distancing, a condition that advocated staying or living in less-crowded environments so as to minimise the risks of further spreading the virus (Rahman, 2021). The authors further posited that whilst families and friends do come in handy in times of need for financial assistance, this was destroyed by the new regulations. Indeed, a family member or a relative could be a shoulder to lean on in times of emergencies but this notion was rendered inapplicable in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic as family individualism became very common (WHO, 2020). This became one of the socio-economic challenges witnessed by single mothers and other people during the Covid-19 era.

In addition to the foregoing socio-economic challenges highlighted above, health crisis also became more pronounced among single mothers during the Covid-19 era (Andrade, 2020). Single mothers like other vulnerable social groups, including the poor, the elderly, persons with disabilities, adolescents, aboriginal peoples, refugees and migrants failed to get medical attention due some travel bans which were pronounced by the government. Without adequate social capital, single mothers were also faced with a challenge of being looked down upon and bereft of material and psychosocial support. This doubled their misery as they had to individually deal and confront with the socio-economic challenges in the lockdown environment.

During the pandemic era, single mothers lacked moral and spiritual support especially those who got sick at the same time staying alone without a spouse to share issues with (Rahman, 2021). They suffered a lot of depression, anxiety and blood pressure related sickness (Fisher et al., 2020). The challenges were in different forms, mainly in financial loss, children's education, loss of business capital, evictions from rented houses and lack of nutritious food. Living without a partner amongst single mothers in Mabvuku has created a complicated life without the presence and support of a spouse or adult partner sharing the responsibility of parenting (Chamunogwa, 2021; Nieuwenhuis, 2020 & Clery et al., 2021).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognizes socio-economic rights as being central to an adequate standard of living (article. 25). According to Chamunogwa (2021) the UDHR states that:

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, and housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Zimbabwe is signatory, provides global citizens with an entitlement to a decent standard of living and guarantees the right to self-determination through the freedom to pursue political, economic, social and cultural developments. The preamble of the covenant states that 'the ideal of free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his economic, social and cultural rights, as well as his civil and political rights'.

During the Covid-19 induced lockdowns, informal traders also faced market place challenges for them to carry out their business freely. A survey carried in Harare communities including Mabvuku indicated that the markets had fewer vending stalls (Chamunogwa, 2021). The renovation of these markets should result in 8 500 spaces but the demand for such regulated places is still unmet and therefore, many single mothers resort to irregular selling points including in Mabvuku (Institute for Development Studies Report, 2020). Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the city fathers instituted some demolitions of the so called illegal vending structures leaving many vendors acutely vulnerable to income poverty. Elsewhere, some single mothers who depended on cross border trading were affected by the closure of borders and a moratorium on inter-city travelling. Without this rich source of goods, there was a huge slide in the

profits amongst such entrepreneurs who were forced to stay indoors or risk persecution and prosecution by the state. Resultantly, the single-mothers had to sacrifice profits losing their livelihoods sources and many failed to recover from this loss even after the pandemic is long gone.

Intervention strategies to resuscitate the informal trade by single mothers

The government as the duty bearer ought to take some measures to cushion the single mothers whose depressed livelihoods were under severe stress. These interventions are seen as critical in improving the livelihood outcomes of the single mothers engaged in informal trading:

Policy pronouncements have been pointing to the fact that even before the emergence of Covid-19, the status of women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe was deplorable. For example, their businesses were judged to be going down in studies carried out in 2018. In order to address the issue of single mothers' collapsing informal business entities due to lack of capital, the government introduced Women's Bank called Zimbabwe Women's Microfinance (Zimbabwe Women's Microfinance Bank, 2018). This was meant to ensure that the intended mission and vision of financial inclusion of the un-banked and under-banked woman is realised. It is in this vain that the banks provides capital for informal traders in any sphere thereby enabling the underprivileged to access loans and bank their money. Single mothers and other women have since benefited from these micro-credit grants as part of financial business support (Chamunogwa, 2021). Rahman (2021) also concurs with the intervention strategy as he posits that single mothers are eligible to apply for other types of support from the government, such as welfare assistance (called Household Living Aid), healthcare support and financial business support (such as launching grants).

It is noted that the government of Zimbabwe also realised the need to cushion entrepreneurs who needed to travel during the lockdown period. Against this background, single mothers who faced the travelling ban due to the fact that they were classified as non-essential service or workers had to be screened. After such screening, the successful were given a green light to operate and this saw them coming back on to the streets. In essence, the government resolved to carry out vetting process to identify the real informal traders from the general populace and this was a progressive measure to save the collapsing industry.

Another positive intervention from the government came through medical insurance for the single mothers. This was meant to ensure that no-one was left behind with respect to accessing medical care in Zimbabwe. Inequalities in the high density areas in Zimbabwe have been very clear and were worsened by the pandemic which had devastating effects on the weak and vulnerable in society. The effectiveness of this strategy is however debatable in the sense that the free medical guarantees made by the government were not accompanied by supply of drugs in government and local authority clinics. In this light, the policy pronouncement can be dismissed as cheap politicking which failed to transform the livelihoods of the single mothers in high density places such as Mabvuku.

Elsewhere, the government of Zimbabwe also intervened on the aspect of single mothers who were being evicted by landlords based on the grounds of failing to pay rentals. In this regard, there were some exemptions to evict those lodging from paying rents, a move that gave a relief to most single mothers. Whilst the implementation of such directives was problematic, there was a temporary relief especially on paying water and electricity bills to the urban councils. In the same vein, special social grants i.e. special Covid-19relief grant was introduced to cater for all those single mothers and other individuals who would have suffered from the pandemic. These measures were intended, in part, to compensate for the loss of earnings that the lockdown restrictions inflicted on the Zimbabwe informal economy.

Theoretical framework

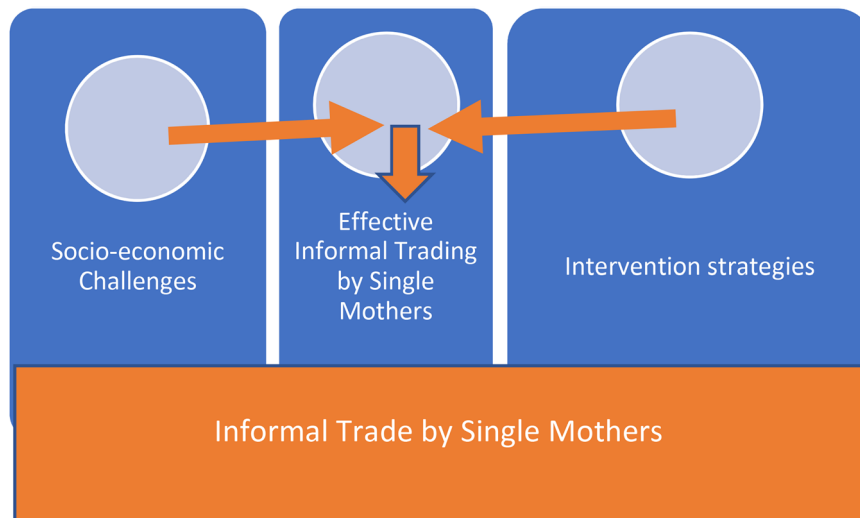
The Theoretical Framework for this research study is the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Model (EEM). While the world went through a global crisis due to the outbreak of coronavirus (Covid-19) in 2020 which affected nearly all countries, some of the business ventures survived and remained viable through entrepreneurial ventures. Generally, businesses particularly smaller ones do not work in isolation, but instead are embedded in the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Model propounded by Mason and Brown (2014). The model underscores that businesses are dependent on environmental conditions. The framework acknowledges that disruptive changes from Covid-19 have caused serious damage to the global economy, hence

the need for entrepreneurs to bring equilibrium by introducing change, being innovative and dynamic (Kang'ethe & Mafa, 2014). This research adopts the lens of dynamic capabilities to study how small business entrepreneurs by different players including single mothers are trying to survive and grow in an entrepreneurial ecosystem affected by coronavirus (Mason & Brown, 2013).

Various studies have been conducted using an Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Model (EEM) and it was observed that the model has its strength and weaknesses (Aljarwan et al., 2019). Its strengths are that the model brings in a pool of talent, promotes innovativeness and networking. Its weaknesses are that it requires a lot of training, it lacks entrepreneurship culture and it involves high costs that are incurred in setting up. Another study was conducted by Mason and Brown (2013) concurs that EEM relies much on the experience of its entrepreneurs for its success. Furthermore, the model at times faces some challenges of raising start-up capital, a situation which limit entrepreneurial growth. This scenario is in sync with what obtained for single mothers in Mabvuku, because raising capital after the pandemic was problematic. It is noted that most of the members were surviving on a hand to mouth basis and could not bounce back in business after Covid.

Research study conceptual framework

The research study is guided by the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Model (IEM) by Vicens and Grullón (2011).



Analysis of the conceptual framework

The research study is motivated by this Conceptual Framework as it holistically addressed socio-economic challenges amongst single mothers in informal trade or entrepreneurship through intervention strategies. The framework guarantees effective business proliferation in constrained environments such as the one under which single mothers in Mabvuku operated. In a nutshell, key drivers towards effective informal trade by single mothers are through quick win solutions on the bedevilling socio-economic challenges through intervention strategies. In this regard single mothers should always be innovative and adjust to the dynamics of entrepreneurship so that they remain viable and competitive.

Research materials and methods

The study utilised triangulation design type of mixed method which accommodates both the qualitative and quantitative data collection tools. The research study used focus group discussions to elicit qualitative data from the respondents and questionnaires as well for quantitative data. Qualitative research allows the use of several data collection methods. The study also elicited data using a questionnaire whereby 100 questionnaires were distributed and completed from a sample size of 600

single mothers in Mabvuku high density suburb. The researchers visited the two wards in Mabvuku community and conducted 4 focus group discussions. The discussions from the focus groups were audio recorded and notes were also taken during the said discussions. The transcripts from the discussions were transcribed using the Microsoft word 2016. The data obtained from the study was analysed using thematic analysis and all the emerging themes are indicated in the findings and discussion sections of the paper. The research study selected respondents using judgemental sampling. This sampling method gave the researcher direct control over elements included in the study as posited by Etikan and Bala (2017).

The study was positioned within the interpretivist paradigm, adopting a qualitative approach and an exploratory case study design. The interpretative approach gives the researcher an opportunity to study the environment in its natural settings and it endeavours to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Purposive sampling was used to select participants while document analysis and focus group discussions were employed as data generation instruments for the qualitative dimension of the study. Thematic analysis enabled researchers to focus on socio-economic challenges faced by single mothers as they battled the Covid-19 induced lockdown and general economic misfortunes experienced in the country.

Findings and discussions of the study

This section of the study presents the research findings from the fieldwork where out of 100 respondents interviewed the following information was gathered:

Breakdown of information on single mothers in informal trade.

Type of project	Number of single mothers involved	Age in years						Highest qualification		
		15–20	21–25	26–30	31–35	35–40	+41	Nil	Ordinary level	Degree level plus
Flea Market	33	5	8	9	6	2	3	9	23	1
Cross Border Trading	24	1	3	6	8	5	1	13	11	0
Vegetable Vending	39	18	10	5	4	1	1	22	17	0
Other	4	1	1	0	0	0	1	02	1	1
Total	100	25	22	20	18	8	6	46	52	2

The table above shows that 39% of the total respondents interviewed constitute the large number of single mothers undertaking vegetable vending informal trade as their source of living. A total of 33% of the single mothers are involved in operating informal flea markets. Cross Border trading constitutes 24% of the single mothers in informal trade. Only 4% of the single mothers are in unspecified informal trade activities. In addition, the highest age group of single mothers in informal trade are those between 18–20 and 21–25 years with the least who are aged between 36–40 years and 41 years. A total of 52% single mothers are ordinary level certificate holders while 46% constitute those without ordinary level certificates. Only 2% of the respondents are holders of a degree level qualification.

Results also demonstrate that highest number of informal traders is fairly educated as evidenced by 52% ordinary levels holders and 46% and non-certificate holders. Rahman (2021) concurs with the research conducted in that; single mothers tend to have a low level of education, which makes them unable to compete in the labour market that is always characterised by gender inequality. The author further agrees that single mothers usually act as bread winners which make them and their families fragile and vulnerable during shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the assorted disadvantages, issues and problems experienced by single parents (or specifically, single mothers), it is hard for the government to formulate effective social protection policies.

The level of unemployment has driven most of the single mothers to engage in informal trade. According to Rogan and Skinner (2020) single mothers' workforce in informal self-employment suffered more financial decadence due to Covid-19 pandemic as their capital was overwhelmed with socio-economic demands. Highest percentage of age group in informal trade is those between 15–40 years and these appear to have

more family demands, for example, sending their children to school. In this regard, single mothers aged between 15–40 years suffered more as a result of Covid-19 pandemic induced lockdown restrictions.

Effectiveness of informal trade by single mothers

The issue of effectiveness of informal trade by single mothers during the Covid 19 era is a debatable issue. Whilst some single mothers managed to turn around some profits, some were forced to close down. In their informal trade activities, single mothers get overwhelmed by activities which they are expected to handle alone. One respondent from Ward 1 in Mabvuku community had this to say:

As we do our informal trade activities here in Mabvuku, people especially other married women portray myopic views over us. They misconstrue us as prostitutes or ladies of loose morale who hook around men or their husbands on the pretext of informal trading. This mentality is actually derailing our informal trade initiatives since we are ending up losing customers.

Vegetable selling- informal trader: Mabvuku community



Picture above shows one of the single mothers engaged in vending at Mabvuku shopping Centre.

The foregoing sentiments by a respondent in this research study confirms that single mothers engaged in informal trade activities during the Covid 19 pandemic faced societal discrimination, financial challenges, lockdown restrictions and health related challenges. This evidence is also corroborated by Amarsanaa et al. (2021) who asserted that the factors underpinning the suffering and collapse of informal trade or entrepreneurship amongst single mothers in Zimbabwe comprise: lack of financial back-up, limited customers, health related challenges to mention a few. Single mothers were also found to enjoy limited support from the international/donor organisations, government, family and communities; and from faith based organisations (Rahman, 2021). This evidence reinforces the fact that their social capital is very low and affects their propensity to prosper.

Socio - economic challenges faced in the Covid 19 era

Feedback from the respondents in the research study revealed that Covid 19 pandemic has brought a mirage of socio-economic challenges to the communities. One single mother, who chose to remain anonymous and is based at Kamunhu business centre in Mabvuku said;

As we depend on vending, the pandemic has affected our means of survival since we are now faced with limited customers these days. Imagine I can spend the whole day without any customer here at my market place. It's so pathetic.

A huge proportion (83%) of single mothers in informal trading of perishable goods such as vegetables had to dispose their stock, while about 77% of them reported that they had to put their stock in storage rooms due to a lack of customers. These challenges were a result of the Covid-19 pandemic induced lockdowns.

Due to the Covid-19 travel bans, Ms Rumbidzai (*not her real name*) highlighted that she had resorted to prostitution as a survival means to feed her two children aged 10 and 13 years. In addition, the same respondent lamented that there is need to improve local communities' quality of life at work places. The respondent said that most of the single mothers had no protective equipment for them to use in their operations, such as safety masks, hand sanitisers and regular water supply especially in open markets (WHO, 2021). Lack of personal protective equipment exposed single mothers operating their businesses, and whenever inspectors moved around, they would be forced to close. These challenges have greatly affected most of the informal traders especially single mothers (Rahman, 2021). Single mothers also lamented that majority of them did not have own houses and encountered some financial challenges for paying rentals, water and electricity bills among others. Single mothers revealed that they faced some health challenges due to lack of nutritious food and lack of finance for medical check-ups.

Besides the themes explored in this discussion, the study also unearthed that Covid-19 had a debilitating effect on the general welfare of people in Mabvuku. The psycho-social effects of Covid-19 need to be explored further as they present a huge thematic area which can be studied separately. Some of the most common expressions from the respondents interviewed include the following excerpts:

- 'The extension of the lockdown increased my stress level, I wish if I had a spouse'
- 'Thinking of my next meal always caused a lot of anxiety, headaches and at times I become very agitated'
- 'The thought of my children's education gives me a lot of stress because other schools have got e-learning facilities after all can't afford it...'
- 'Confinement is causing me to think a lot and sometimes it leads to sadness'

Intervention strategies

The study also sought to explore what could be done by the government to cushion the single mothers who were disturbed by the pandemic. This study acknowledges that the Covid-19 pandemic brought in socio-economic challenges to the single mothers involved in informal trade. Therefore, various intervention strategies meant to address such challenges have been identified. These intervention strategies were meant to circumvent the challenges posed by the pandemic such as decline in the size of their micro-business entities, limited clientele, high competition on sales etc. In addition, single mothers faced depression, anxiety and high blood pressure among other illnesses as a result of the pandemic. As previously highlighted, the establishment and operationalisation of the Zimbabwe Women's Bank came as a breakthrough to single mothers in financial distress. The financial assistance created a stop-gap measure that sustained them through the pandemic era. Another intervention strategy which went beyond the single mothers was the decentralisation of medical health centres to bring medical attention to the disadvantaged or vulnerable groups closer. This development was in-keeping with the expectations from the World Health Organization which indicated that there is need to prioritise health care facilities to people at a low cost and closer to them (Rahman, 2021).

With respect to psycho-social support, a total of 75% of the respondents confirmed that there was little or no attention given to those suffering from psychological problems during the Covid 19 era. One respondent, a single mother with two children with albinism condition had this to say;

Stakeholders such as Non-Governmental Organisations, civic organisations, corporate world, individuals, churches and the government itself have not been of much help to us during this Covid 19 era in as far as

helping is issues of stress, anxieties, depression etc. We did not get much attention for our moral, spiritual and material assistance. Food support remained inadequate, medical help was limited. In our community, Pachedu Community Trust, Mavambo Orphan Care Trust and Kubatana - Women Floor Water Barons here in Mabvuku tried their level best to assist us although they seem to have been overwhelmed. Our survival as single mothers here in Mabvuku Community is now from hand to mouth since our entrepreneurial activities are low.

A total of 73% respondents confirmed that while the government's initiatives towards empowering single mothers in their activities were in place, the capacity was low. In addition, 66% confirmed that the government's effort to empower single mothers in Mabvuku community is affected by some politicians who force them to join their political parties in return of assistance. In this light, the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as having brought some formidable challenges which the duty bearer could not solve head on.

Conclusion

This study shows that during the Covid-19 pandemic, single mothers in informal trade faced quite a number of challenges to an extent that some had to close their entrepreneurial ventures. Key among these socio-economic challenges includes reduced incomes, business collapse, increased debt, hunger and starvation. This study concluded that those single mothers without accommodation in suburbs were forced to migrate to rural communities as they could hardly pay rentals, water and electricity bills in town. Single mothers revealed that they faced some health challenges due to lack of nutritious food and lack of finance for medical check-ups. Some single mothers confirmed that they faced societal discrimination where they were labelled as commercial sex workers poised to snatch married men from their wives. This study foregrounds that in the Covid-19 pandemic era, assessing the lived experiences of single mothers who are in dire need of help is critical so as to provide them with various support mechanisms as a way of cushioning their livelihoods. Financial support for single mothers in informal trade is required to boost their business, also recouping collapsed enterprises and building back better those who would have lost hope.

The Covid-19 era has exposed people to a lot of challenges in their endeavor to seek means for survival (New Zimbabwe Report, 2020; Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe Report, 2020). The law-enforcement agents have always been on high alert monitoring the lockdown measures' implementations (Jennings & Perez, 2020). These lockdown measures prevented people from accessing helplines and services due to movement restrictions; hence their socio-economic expectations were affected. Families especially those with sick relatives faced increased care burdens during the Covid-19 era and some could not afford medication. In addition, families without any source of income hardly managed to get food for the members (World Health Organization, 2020).

Recommendations

The study recommends that single mothers involved in entrepreneurial projects need to be supported by various stakeholders. The government should formulate policies that cater for single mothers' well-being such as providing upskilling or reskilling programs, providing platforms or collaborating with existing providers for online business platforms to train parents in online businesses or expand job opportunities in the markets. The government should also work closely with the single-parent associations to identify the current needs of the majority of single parents, and the attention should be spread across the nation. Meanwhile, for mental health issues, it is important for the government to raise awareness about mental health, not only for single parents but also for the entire society. For single parents, it is important to provide programs on mental health, and several members from each single-parent association could be trained to deal with mental health issues. It is also recommended that single mothers should be empowered through various programmes for them to survive in the Covid-19 pandemic era. Such empowerment programmes should include enrolling them in vocational training centres so that acquire some professional certificates and competencies. This will help them to get formal jobs or start their own self-help projects and get sustainable income. Practical skills obtained

in technical and vocational training centres also enable them to start viable and lucrative projects that can be sustainable in the event of another unprecedented calamity such as Covid-19. Besides, single mothers may also form cooperatives for their business entities to grow and become sustainable. This recommendation is in sync with the idea of pooling resources together to fight challenges associated with one man-band enterprises.

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