



COronavirus Vulnerabilities and INFOrmation
dynamics Research and Modelling

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Migrant women during the pandemic: multiple and intertwined vulnerabilities

Bi-Monthly Report: 17

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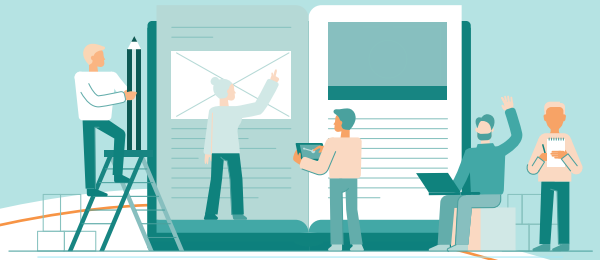
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INTRODUCTION



This bi-monthly report is directly linked to the citizen interviews conducted for Work Packages 4 to 7 of COVINFORM, which focuses on analysing citizen and community responses and the impact of COVID-19. In particular, the focus of qualitative fieldwork implemented within the project was to understand the gendered impacts of the pandemic by interviewing a sample of women with low socioeconomic status (SES). This group was chosen because low socioeconomic status consistently emerged as a risk factor across different countries, allowing for meaningful cross-country comparisons. The primary focus of the fieldwork was to investigate how women with low SES obtained information and formal/informal support during the pandemic.

The fieldwork on women with low SES is based on COVINFORM's intersectional theoretical framework and employs social network analysis to examine patterns of relationships and resource exchange among individuals, organizations, or institutions. These resources can be tangible (like money, services, or goods) or intangible (such as friendships, social support, and information). Social networks play a crucial role in determining access to influence and power, as they facilitate the flow of resources and information at various levels (household, community, or institutional), leading to diverse experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of the transcripts of these interviews contributes to improving the understanding of how people can mitigate disadvantages and highlights that groups with shared characteristics (e.g., gender, socioeconomic status, migrant status) are not homogeneous.

In the fieldwork implementation, each project partner compiled a list of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) operating within their designated sub-national research area, usually cities, with women with low socioeconomic status. Consequently, several partners aimed to engage with at least one CSO that assists this population group. Furthermore, it was established that a minimum of 12 interviews should be conducted per research site.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by a framework developed by COVINFORM's Consortium researchers. This interview approach centers on the broad theme of experiences during the period from the start of the pandemic in 2020 to July 2022 when the interviews were conducted. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allows for flexibility as the conversation unfolds, and it is organized in seven main topic areas.

1. A warm-up question;
2. Key memories of pandemic: the most important memories of the pandemic;
3. Social networks: how face-to-face contacts changed;
4. Support networks: any kind of support received during that time;
5. Information seeking and sense-making: how and where the respondent inquired about the virus, measures, testing, vaccines...;
6. Living Environment: how the place where the respondent lives played a role in the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic;
7. Closing question.

The resident interview guide developed within the WP4-7 highlights the novelty of this questionnaire, which aims to gather innovative data on topics not previously well-documented. Traditionally, vulnerability has been linked to ascribed status rather than a genuine lived experience. By focusing on a group often categorized as vulnerable, this study explores the disparities between assigned vulnerability and the actual experiences people undergo.

This analysis is particularly pertinent for gaining insights into the lives of women with low socioeconomic status (SES). Poverty frequently results in social exclusion and isolation, especially when considering women who also belong to another disadvantaged category, such as migrants. Socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals tend to have limited social networks and support systems, which restricts their access to information and practical assistance.

During the pandemic, lockdowns and social distancing measures exacerbated the isolation experienced by some individuals, even though there was a greater need for social support due to added stress factors related to finances, health, and well-being. The research outcomes could be valuable for policymakers in improving the quality of support networks and enhancing information access for more marginalized groups.

This bi-monthly report is based on the above-mentioned qualitative research conducted in several research sites: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Sweden. We gathered data from 76 women who were interviewed in these countries, 52 of them being migrants.

MAIN FINDINGS



The interviews conducted explore the lived experiences of migrant women during the pandemic. Within those interviews, the topics covered include the composition of their households, their occupational status, their social and support network, and their information-seeking habits.

The icebreaker used to start these interviews asked interviewees to recall three significant memories of the pandemic. Responses mostly evoke the lockdown period: their whereabouts when it was enacted in the different countries, how they spent lockdowns... Narratives also recall many negative feelings experienced during this period: the fear of contagion, uncertainty regarding the duration of the pandemic or the anxiety of job loss and food insecurity. However, there were also spaces for more positive feelings and some respondents recall bonding with their families and looking for ways to cheer up those around them.

The effects of the pandemic have exacerbated social inequalities. In line with recent literature, data collected on this study show that migrants' occupational status was marked by a paradox. They were more likely to occupy positions included in the list of essential workers, and at the same time, they experienced more precarity than other social groups. Their occupational profiles often include low-skilled work like domestic workers, cleaners, cashiers, etc. In countries with a high prevalence of the informal economy, job insecurity was further aggravated because these respondents were often not eligible for income substitution schemes. Or if they were, only for a partial substitution, as their work in the informal economy was not declared and, therefore, not computed in the income loss of the family. The combination of these factors not only created food insecurity amongst many of

the migrants interviewed, but it also impacted the economies of the countries of origin, as they could not send the remittances their families rely on.

In terms of their living conditions, the migrants that we interview did not complain much about their living conditions. Nonetheless, amongst the interviewees there is a wide variety in terms of housing arrangements. Some live in shared flats, while others have their own apartments. However, one complaint we heard multiple times was the lack of outdoor spaces within the house or the impossibility of going outside, specially amongst respondents with young children. A particular case is found in Rome, where more than 60 families shared outdoor spaces where they could step out during the lockdown and stay in touch with neighbors. These women felt lucky as they could take advantage of the closeness of others, despite the risk of contagion.

In the countries where they currently live, migrants have worked hard to build new social networks. The density of these networks varies across respondents, as some have engaged in more active social activities and others have focused on working and maximizing income to be able to send remittances to their families in their countries of origin. Amongst those who are more active, they have built those networks over friendship, local associations, and religious communities. When the COVID pandemic struck, these networks suffered a blow, and many respondents describe the loss of these relationships.

Despite the disruption that these associations and religious communities suffered, they proved to be crucial to many of the people interviewed. Governments across countries passed different measures directed to provide income support and

buffer the sudden breaking of economic activity caused by the lockdowns. Migrants were often excluded from these measures or insufficiently covered. Irregularities in their administrative status or the reliance in the informal economy hindered their applications to furlough schemes or equivalent programs. Thus, families that had been able to make ends meet found themselves suddenly applying for social aid. This sudden increase of the demand for social services combined with the lack of protective protocols, created significant difficulties for institutions across many of the countries where the interviews were conducted. The interviewees recall turning to CSOs and religious communities for help. These organizations were crucial as they attracted additional funding to respond these new demands. They also connected individuals, which allowed them to redistribute social aid and maximize the coverage of the help provided.

In terms of information seeking and sense-making, institutional sources broadcast on television were one of the favorite communication channels. Migrants combined this information with Internet

searches, information circulating in private social networks (i.e.: WhatsApp groups) and YouTube channels that provided information in their mother tongue, helped them understand what they did not understand in the national language of their host country and gather information about the situation in their countries of origin. Religious beliefs also played a role in sense-making and religious communities developed different strategies to maintain the connection with members (broadcasting religious services, Zoom groups, etc.).

Respondents did not feel they believed any piece of information that was false, they did acknowledge that they received questionable information through social media or YouTube. Many of the interviewees underline that, although they were overall happy with the quality of the information provided, they find it would have been useful to tailor the information to specific target groups and to provide it in a wider variety of languages. In Austria, mailing informative letters was positively perceived.

CONCLUSION



- The theoretical framework combined intersectionality with a complex systems approach. Although this report focuses on citizens' interviews, the outputs of the project contextualize these interviews with the institutional practices and the interventions promoted by CSOs. Regarding the interviews, the main implication is that the interviews step out of a logic where migrants are a vulnerable community, instead what the interviews suggest is that migrants faced multiple and intertwined vulnerabilities.
- Migrant women found themselves in complex situations characterized by the fear of contagion, high risk of job loss and food insecurity, anxiety due to the uncertainty of the duration of this crisis and solitude.
- Higher contagion risks were linked to their socioeconomic status rather than to the prevalence of pre-existing co-morbidities. Overall, these interviewees were healthy and declared few pre-existing ailments. However, they often worked in essential but poorly valued occupations like care-providers or cashiers. These occupations experienced higher risks of contagion as they could not work from home and had to commute.
- Future crises should encourage strategies to enhance social interconnectedness, as it proved very effective in the redistribution and maximization of social aid.
- The interviews suggest that solitude was linked to the inability to visit and stay in close contact with family and friends. However, in this regard there is quite some heterogeneity, as those with more dense social networks quickly turned to videocalls and social networks to make up, at least partially, for the inability to meet others.
- Regarding information patterns, migrants consumed information from official channels and informal channels was positively evaluated. However, there seems to be room for improvement in terms of clarity and dealing with uncertainty, targeting of information, languages in which it was made available, and the channels used to spread information.
- Finally, the recommendations presented in this report have presented an opportunity for strengthened communication practices, which ought to be acted on should another pandemic breakout in the future. Common recommendation trends across all the WPs include strengthened collaboration between appropriate bodies, careful policy planning, consistent and clear messaging, and understanding the needs of all vulnerable groups.

The COVINFORM project

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