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## 2. COVID-19, micro-smart lockdowns and gendered impacts in Karachi

Nausheen H. Anwar , Noman Ahmed  and Duaa Sohail 

**Keywords:** COVID-19; micro-smart lockdowns; gendered impacts in Karachi



### Key messages

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an extraordinary disruption in the lives of people across Pakistan, including Karachi. Information about managing the pandemic and preventing its spread led to various types of restrictions for extended periods of time in the city. Different cross-sections of the society, including women, daily wage labourers, street vendors and domestic workers, were approached for feedback. This study explored the various types of social, economic and logistic challenges that were experienced by the vulnerable groups in Karachi. It also examined the various support programmes launched by the government to deal with the pandemic impacts. The study also reviewed the initiatives by various welfare organisations in providing relief to the poor and vulnerable people in different locations in the metropolis.

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

As Pakistan's largest metropolis, port city and financial centre, Karachi contributes 25% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and 54% to the federal government's tax revenue. Karachi's unofficial population is 25 million, with over 50% living in informal settlements and approximately 75% working in the informal economy.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, COVID-19 brought Karachi's teeming economic activities to a halt, and the prolonged nature of lockdowns significantly impacted informal economy workers. Akin to many countries across Asia, the Pakistan government implemented restrictive lockdowns in its urban centres. But these actions generated devastating effects on people's livelihoods, especially in the informal economy. To mitigate the effects, the government implemented a "micro-smart lockdown" strategy that targeted "hotspots" or specific areas of the city (Figure 2.3) where high rates of infections were detected through the identification and tracking of infected populations, and the area was sealed to contain the virus.<sup>2</sup> Pakistan was among the first countries to move toward a smart lockdown policy by taking steps to protect lives and avoid an economic meltdown. In the fiscal year 2020–21, the Government of Pakistan reported a GDP growth rate of 3.94%, which was somewhat higher than the previous year.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the continued imposition of lockdowns had significant and disruptive consequences for poor, marginalised groups based on their gender, class and ethnicity (Figure 2.1).

This chapter presents some findings about the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown measures on informal workers in Karachi. It uses a gender and intersectional lens to discuss the complex and nuanced consequences of the pandemic, as these overlapped with other kinds of crises, such as evictions, climate risks and gender violence. The discussion also focuses on the role non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and welfare organisations played in providing food and rations. In what follows, the first section presents the conceptual framework that anchors the discussion; the subsequent section presents the multiple methodologies deployed to support the key argument. The next section focuses on the model of governance and the

**Figure 2.1 Case study location**



Source: Map developed by Audrey Lopez.

lockdown strategy adopted during COVID-19 to provide formal social protection. This is followed by a section that highlights the layers of compounding risks that have exacerbated the impacts of the pandemic. The final section discusses the neighbourhood-scale interventions of community-based and welfare organisations and concludes by offering policy recommendations.

## **2.2 COMPOUNDING URBAN CRISES, GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY**

In using the term “compounding urban crisis”, the authors take a cue from Westman et al.<sup>4</sup> who argue that cities are complex sites where multiple crises manifest. Urban areas have long been viewed as recipients of different forms of shocks,<sup>5</sup> ranging from violence to pandemics.<sup>6</sup> Karachi is no exception as it too faces a global biodiversity crisis, climate-induced and forced migrations, and economic shocks exacerbated by eroding labour protections, low-paid

work and poverty. The pandemic and lockdown policies brought these enduring crises to the forefront as provincial governors, chief ministers and city managers tried to respond to these issues with unequal consequences for poor, marginalised communities and informal workers.

The *Sixth Assessment Report* of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)<sup>7</sup> underscores that a single extreme event or overlapping of multiple events can increase hazard risks and expose urban systems to a multitude of risks. In Karachi, COVID-19 has magnified existing uncertainties as it has intersected with the devastating effects of unprecedented urban flooding<sup>8</sup> and heatwaves as well as chronic heat.<sup>9</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has also overlapped with state-led eviction drives in different parts of the city. These events have further compounded risks and threatened the livelihoods of people living in low-income and informal settlements and working in the informal economy.

In emphasising compounding urban crises, this chapter underscores the unequal and disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and lockdowns on poor, low-income communities, and especially on poor women in the informal economy, such as home-based and domestic workers. Hence, it uses a gendered, intersectional<sup>10</sup> lens to highlight the complex and differentiated ways in which the pandemic and lockdowns affected men and women in different occupations and locations in the city. The term “intersectionality” was first coined by the social theorist Kimberle Crenshaw and enables critical insight to analyse inequality in any given form.<sup>11</sup> Through the gendered lens of intersectionality, this chapter shows how poor, marginalised men and women in Karachi have been impacted by COVID-19, and how its effects have overlapped with longstanding discriminations and disadvantages contingent upon overlapping identities of class and gender.

## 2.3 MULTIPLE METHODS

This chapter draws on multiple methods to gather secondary and primary data through literature review, focus group discussion, pilot study of informal workers, key informant interviews with four welfare organisations, as well as two interviews with the Karachi Commissioner’s office supported by the information gleaned from two workshops that were organised with diverse stakeholders in 2022. The literature review covered 20 articles to gain a comprehensive understanding of COVID-19’s impacts in Pakistan. This included reports published by multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The reports were informative for providing information on the implications for poor women and daily wagers.

Furthermore, the authors reviewed 50 policy documents to understand the full scale of city-level and micro-smart lockdowns, including the COVID-19 public guidelines issued by the National Command and Operation Center (NCOC) and official notifications released by the

Office of the Commissioner, Karachi Division. The authors also looked at social media, outlets such as news websites, to gather perception-based information and real-time data on COVID-19 statistics. This information was corroborated with the latest COVID-19 figures from both international databases and the Sindh Health Department website and sources.

The review of secondary sources is supplemented with a pilot study carried out from January to July 2022. The pilot study relied on an interview guide through which daily wagers, residents of informal settlements, rickshaw drivers and female domestic workers were interviewed in specific areas of Karachi. The interview guide also shed light on the formal and informal welfare networks that supported workers and residents through the different stages of the pandemic. The total sample size of the pilot study was 80, with 20 respondents in each category. Following this, four interviews were held with key welfare organisations in March and April 2022. These organisations included the Saylani Welfare Trust, Khana Ghar, the Technical Training Resource Centre (TTRC) and the Alamgir Welfare Trust, which are well-established NGOs and community-based organisations. They have played a key role in supporting poor communities by distributing rations, supplementing livelihoods and healthcare facilities, and providing cash assistance. The heads of these organisations elaborated on the role they played in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 in the informal settlements and the informal economy. Alongside this, two interviews were held with the Karachi Commissioner's Office to gain an understanding of the city's lockdown timeline from 2020 to 2022.

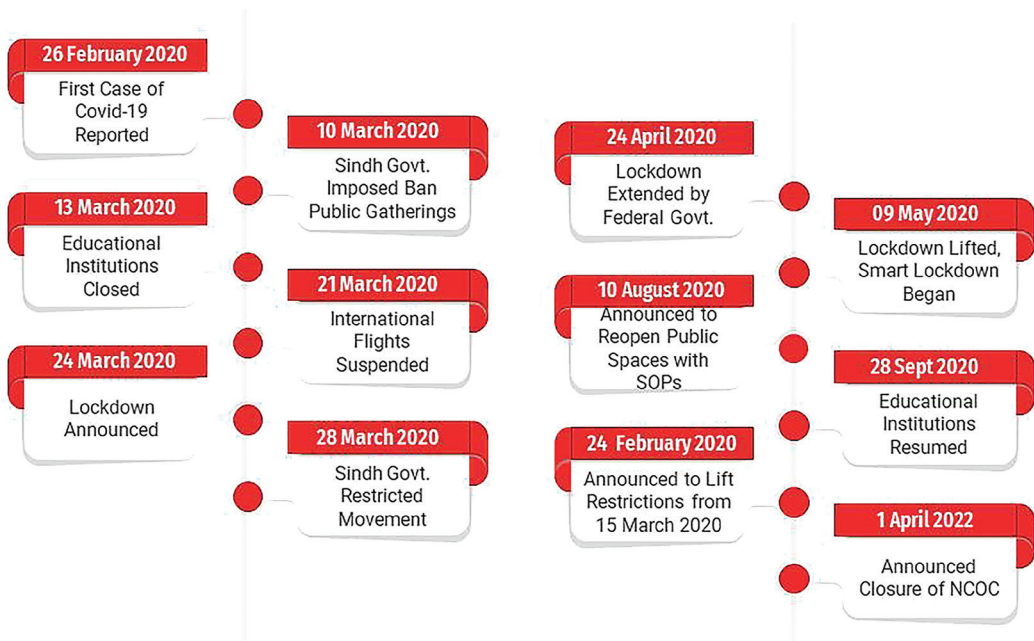
Finally, from July to August 2022, two stakeholder workshops and policy dialogues were held at the NED University, Karachi, and included 18 representatives from key government agencies as well as NGOs, grassroots organisations and the media. The objective was to critically examine their roles, and the effectiveness, impact, and gaps in policy measures and pandemic recovery plans for addressing the needs of the urban poor. This was followed by a focus group discussion of the most vulnerable demographic cross-section impacted by COVID-19, which included 12 participants working in the informal sector enterprises.

## **2.4 COVID-19 GOVERNANCE AND LOCKDOWNS**

Pakistan's first COVID-19 case was reported in Karachi on 26 February 2020. While the federal government was criticised for its delayed response, the Sindh provincial government immediately imposed a complete provincial lockdown on 22 March 2020. In April 2020, the federal government established the NCOC, which was responsible for issuing daily COVID-19 updates. A national helpline was established to deliver standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the safety and management of coronavirus guidelines and to prevent the spread of the virus.<sup>12</sup>

In Karachi, multiple lockdown periods (Figure 2.2) generated devastating impacts on informal workers, such as daily wagers, street hawkers and rickshaw drivers. A significant proportion

**Figure 2.2 COVID-19 timeline**



Sources: Federal and provincial government notifications and records; courtesy Mohammad Toheed, Karachi Urban Lab

of informal workers consists of female domestic workers: during the lockdowns, they either lost their jobs or faced severe mobility issues because public transport was suspended. In the pilot study, all the respondents reported mobility to be the biggest hurdle during lockdowns. Many informal workers are also migrant refugees, for instance, from Myanmar, who are not registered with the National Database Registration Authority (NADRA). Due to their undocumented status, they were excluded from the state's social safety net and its immunisation programme.<sup>13</sup>

In late March 2020, the prime minister approved a PKR1.2 trillion (US\$6.08 billion) economic relief package: the Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme. This was based on the large-scale, multi-sectoral Ehsaas programme initiated in 2019 by the Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division and consisted of over 130 policies and programmes, including cash disbursement and ration distribution. From the onset of the pandemic, the Ehsaas programme has benefited over 4 million households and its ration programme has delivered meals to millions of people. Ehsaas operates through a digital portal that connects donors and those in need of meals. Even though the Sindh provincial government had limited outreach on the ground for the ration programme, it collaborated with welfare organisations and NGOs for adequate distribution in Karachi. But the Ehsaas cash disbursement programme has been criticised for lacking sustainability because one-time cash outflows were insufficient for most low-income families to survive for the duration of the pandemic and lockdowns.

In the pilot study, a key objective was to understand the extent of the outreach of the Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme. A 52-year-old female, home-based worker elaborated:

I was receiving consistent aid through the Benazir Income Support Program but ever since the Ehsaas program was launched, even that has stopped. When I went to apply for the Ehsaas program, I was told to wait for the official confirmation; it has been 4 months and I haven't received anything.

Even though these findings are not representative of the different kinds of informal occupations, they do provide diverse insights and perspectives of informality as experienced by different kinds of informal workers in Karachi. The findings suggest there were limitations in the social protection policy measures implemented by the federal government despite the accolades it has received from international organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) for its efforts in handling the pandemic. Still, on the ground, food distribution schemes were initiated relatively successfully by the Sindh provincial government and in collaboration with NGOs, welfare agencies and civil society groups that had extensive outreach in low-income, poor communities. We elaborate on this point below.

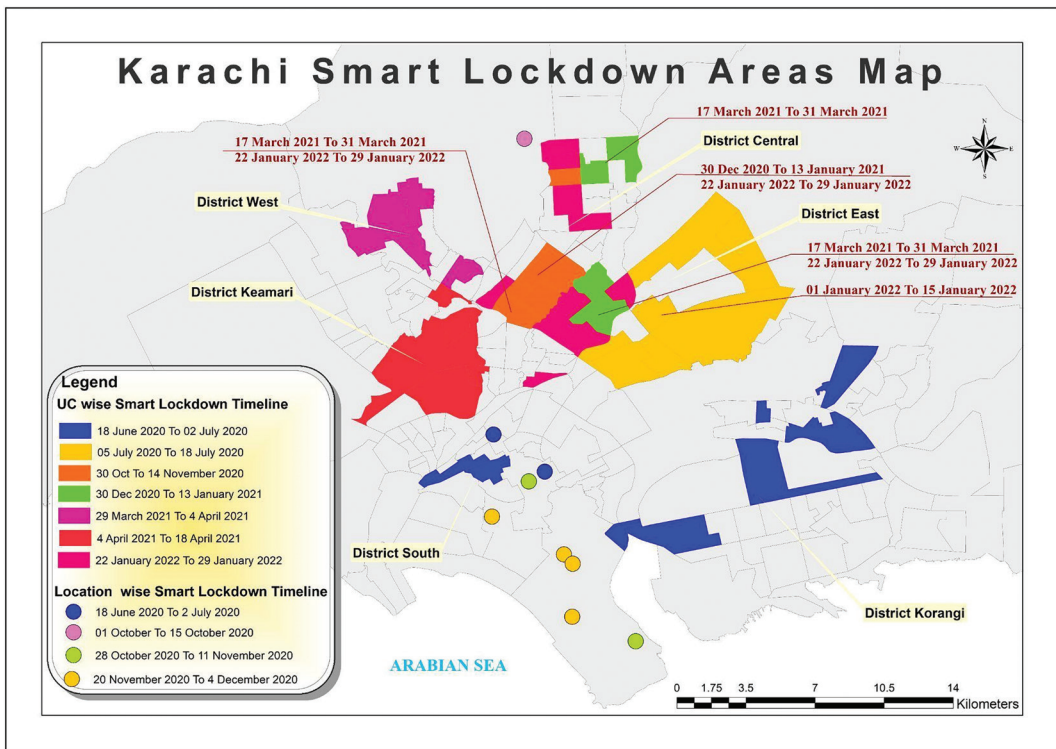
Despite Pakistan's stringency index being lower than its neighbouring countries,<sup>14</sup> the COVID-19 curve remained flattened. This was surprising as Pakistan's economic and financial constraints deemed it to be one of the least prepared countries to tackle the pandemic. A major factor may have been the measures taken by the federal and provincial governments to adopt a policy of "smart lockdowns" instead of a complete lockdown. However, in Karachi, smart lockdowns were criticised for being too restrictive in that their coverage extended to a radius larger than the spaces showing high positivity rates. This led to the idea of imposing "micro-smart lockdowns" based on more accurate data and disaggregated at a higher resolution: specific streets rather than whole neighbourhoods or union councils were cordoned off (Figure 2.3).

The government's reasoning behind the micro-smart lockdowns was not always clear-cut and the spatial and temporal implications were uneven. For instance, districts Central and East comprise mostly affluent neighbourhoods and some low-income and informal settlements — especially those experiencing evictions — were frequently marked as hotspots. However, the Sindh Health Department's district-wise statistics on COVID-19 show that Karachi's District West, which is the most populated area and houses most of the informal settlements and workers, had the lowest COVID-19 positivity ratio. This could be due to the gaps that exist in testing and contact tracing. Disaggregated data at the settlement level on social indicators such as health are rarely collected. Thus, urban authorities cannot plan response in catchment areas during emergencies.<sup>15</sup>

Informal workers negotiated the micro-smart lockdowns in various ways. A common response was to temporarily relocate to the house of a clan member, friend or acquaintance. This was done after examining the locational advantages such as being close to their work or space of operation. Another response was to seek help from employers. Some domestic help workers requested their employers to allow them to reside in their houses for short periods of time. Usually, these



**Figure 2.3 Smart lockdown timeline district-wise**



Sources: Federal and provincial government notifications and records; courtesy Mohammad Toheed, Karachi Urban Lab

arrangements lasted for two to four weeks. Yet another response was to sleep at the workplace where circumstances permitted. Many rickshaw drivers would sleep in the back seat of their rickshaws close to fuel stations where they had social networks. In other cases, the escape from micro-smart lockdowns was only possible with “on-the-spot” arrangements struck with local policemen who would then allow workers to leave after receiving some gratification money.

## 2.5 DEEPENING GENDER INEQUALITIES

The unprecedented nature of COVID-19 had spillover effects in many social dimensions, and even though the government took measures to support vulnerable populations, it often overlooked gender as an important constituent of inequality. Pakistan’s National Action Plan on COVID-19 serves as a handbook for containment and preventive guidelines, but it barely considers the gender perspective.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, even though the Sindh provincial government took some action against domestic violence cases that had peaked during COVID-19,<sup>17</sup> vulnerable women still had no access to essential affordable health services. In collaboration

with the United Nations' women programme, the Ministry of Human Rights has identified key thematic areas where multidimensional gender inequalities worsened during COVID-19, for instance, in areas of education, health, labour force participation, time use and mobility.<sup>18</sup> Poor, low-income women had trouble accessing healthcare for reproductive and sexual health due to financial limitations and mobility restrictions. Moreover, the availability of reproductive health services, including access to contraception and obstetric care, in Sindh declined.<sup>19</sup> As women's access to services and safety nets was constricted during lockdowns, they were more vulnerable to domestic violence.<sup>20</sup>

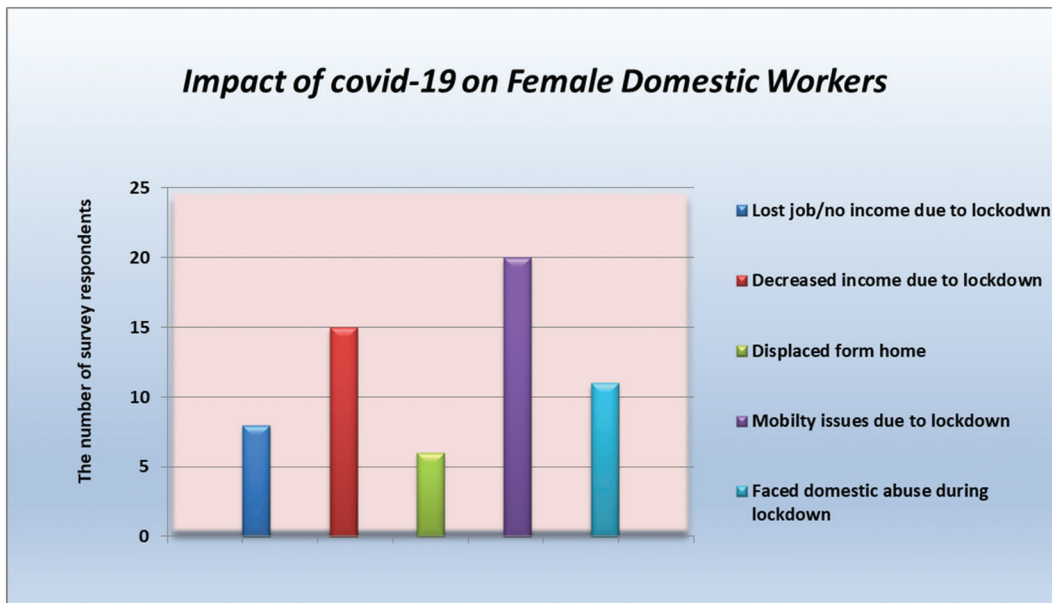
## 2.6 COMPOUNDING RISKS

COVID-19 compounded enduring socio-economic and institutional inequalities. For a coastal city such as Karachi, existing uncertainties of extreme rainfall, flooding and extreme heat threaten the well-being and livelihoods of poor, marginalised people, especially those living in flood-prone areas of the city. In August 2020, Karachi was hardest hit by sudden heavy monsoon rainfall that led to severe urban flooding. With the federal and provincial governments already at odds about when to impose lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) struggled to respond to urban flooding. The pandemic relief measures were put on hold due to the lack of emergency planning for mitigating urban flooding.<sup>21</sup>

The flooding caused severe destruction, especially for residents living in informal settlements along Karachi's drainage channels that overflowed and damaged property and livelihoods. During this time, COVID-19 was at its peak and micro-smart lockdowns were being imposed on different districts and neighbourhoods. The combined effects of restricted mobility and urban flooding impacts meant that men were unable to fulfil their roles as breadwinners for their families, and the frustration over financial losses led to a reported increase in the incidence of domestic violence.<sup>22</sup> This resonated with the pilot study findings where respondents indicated hardships, especially female domestic workers (Figure 2.4) who not only faced economic losses but also domestic violence. Intersecting with their gender and class, the pandemic placed an additional physical and psychological strain on these women, thus leaving them more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. A 20-year-old female domestic worker living in Karachi's District West, Ghazi Goth, described her experience:

Hardships have always been a part of my life. I have a one-year-old child and have faced abuse from my in-laws and husband, but things got worse during COVID because both of us lost our jobs. My husband thinks I am hiding money from him; he kicked me out of the house. Now I can't go back to my family in the village due to the lockdown, so I have moved here recently, and I am trying to survive and keep myself and my baby alive.

**Figure 2.4 Impact of COVID-19 on female domestic workers**



Source: Karachi Urban Lab Pilot Study, 2022

Another climate risk in Karachi is heatwave that overlaps with the urban heat island (UHI) effect to generate complex heat-health risks. Depending upon the infrastructure and access to resources, the effects of UHIs and heatwaves vary in intensity for different localities and social groups.<sup>23</sup> The spatial vulnerability of extreme heat was evident when it coincided with COVID-19. Under lockdowns, women not only faced increased domestic responsibilities but also the double burden of managing water provision resources,<sup>24</sup> especially given that water is a critical cooling agent in heat-related events and an essential component of following SOPs guidelines for COVID-19. Water scarcity in poor households increased the physical workload for women as well as the emotional burden to provide for their families.

While the federal government was issuing safety guidelines, numerous low-income neighbourhoods in Karachi were facing security threats due to evictions<sup>25</sup> and health risks associated with indoor chronic heat exposure during lockdowns.<sup>26</sup> More to the point, even as the pandemic and its containment forged ahead in Karachi, evictions continued within the poor, working-class and informal settlements. In fact, as the Delta variant hit Karachi in mid-2021 and the positivity rate surged to 23%,<sup>27</sup> where cases in Karachi represented 76% of the total cases reported in Sindh, the demolitions of the working class and informal settlements along the city's drainage channels also intensified. Human rights organisations and activists

**Figure 2.5** Gujjar Nullah, Karachi: District Central



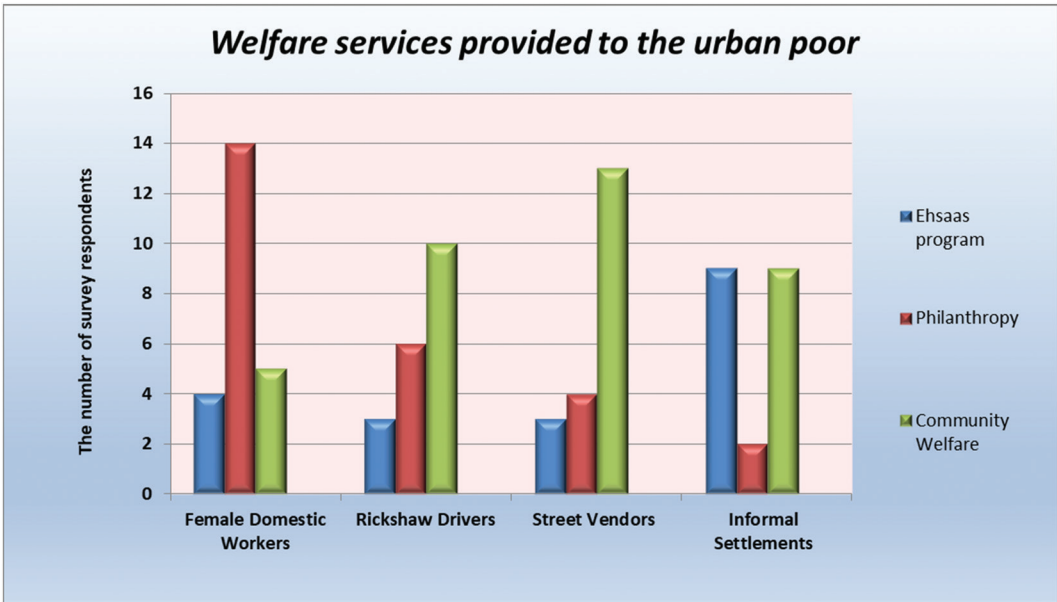
Source: Pilot Study Gujjar Nullah, Karachi, District Central

estimate that nearly 66,500 people were impacted by the evictions and demolitions in 2020, and that too at the height of COVID-19 (Figure 2.5).

With evictions and the COVID-19 timeline overlapping, the vulnerability factor was amplified for the residents of low-income and informal settlements, making the discrepancies in the system even more clear. This paints an alarming scenario for Karachi as it is Pakistan's principal centre of commerce and industry and caters to a significant portion of the informal economy. While the government took steps to boost economic growth, it failed to consider the vast numbers of small and medium-sized businesses that operate outside the formal economy. Moreover, the programmes launched under the Ehsaas programme do not cater to most of the urban population. The Ehsaas programme's main target has been rural women and it has relied on previous data that have not accounted for the income loss experienced by urban informal workers, especially due to the district-wise lockdowns.<sup>28</sup>

The limits of the Ehsaas programme and the gaps in governance left vulnerable segments of society with limited forms of social protection. Figure 2.6 situates the nature of welfare services provided to the urban poor with respect to their locality, gender and occupation. As indicated, welfare provision measures differed across different demographic scales. Where female domestic workers received minimum community welfare support, they were the highest recipients of philanthropy provided by their employers. For street vendors and rickshaw drivers, welfare came through community organisations in the form of food drives and ration distribution. While people residing in informal settlements — such as rickshaw drivers — received social security through the Ehsaas programme, the degree of variation found in these groups not only expresses the intersecting nature of compounding risks but also highlights the dynamic outcome of risk management practices (Figure 2.7).

**Figure 2.6 Welfare services for the urban poor**



Source: Authors with data based on the results of the Karachi Urban Lab Pilot Study, 2022

## 2.7 COMMUNITY WELFARE PROVISIONS

Community welfare organisations, NGOs, local charities and individual philanthropy played a critical role in addressing poor and marginalised people’s concerns. At the neighbourhood scale, welfare organisations organised and carried out food drives. Community leaders relied on their positions in their respective communities to address food insecurity, which was a major challenge during COVID-19. In Orangi Town, District West, a well-established

**Figure 2.7 Urban informal workers in Karachi**



Source: Karachi Urban Lab

community-based organisation, the TTRC, was active in relief support. When the first phase of the lockdown was imposed in Orangi Town, the working-class population lost jobs in factories. Mr Siraj Uddin, founder and director of the TTRC, shared his view of the situation:

This period was extremely hard on everyone; many people committed suicide out of desperation. Mothers couldn't feed their kids. We saw cases like this in our area; it was so intense: I haven't seen anything of this magnitude in my life.

Prioritising the needs of widows, the disabled and the unemployed, the TTRC operated on a need-basis model. Community outreach deepened through dialogue between local volunteers and members of the community by developing an inclusionary network that identified the vulnerable groups and also brought forward their grievances by addressing their concerns and disseminating useful information to build community resilience.

In Karachi's District West where the majority of the population consists of daily earners and labourers living on limited salaries, the food insecurity challenge was tackled by organisations such as Khana Ghar which is a pioneer of soup kitchens in Pakistan and provides heavily subsidised meals to the poor. During COVID-19, Khana Ghar revamped its model, and instead of serving people on the spot, it gave them meals in parcels; Khana Ghar served at least 6000 people daily.

Notably, welfare organisations and NGOs were working both in their capacities and with state-level actors to provide COVID-19 relief efforts. These organisations jointly worked with the government to spread the outreach for the Ehsaas programme. Another key channel was established between NGOs and the private sector in providing logistics and infrastructure facilities to carry out pandemic recovery operations. Among these, the Saylani Welfare Trust is the biggest welfare organisation in Pakistan; it played a substantial role during COVID-19. Saylani's outreach is spread throughout Pakistan, but most of its operation is focused on Karachi. Initially starting its COVID-19 response with food drives, in a later phase Saylani started giving people laptops and loans in easy instalments, for instance to rickshaw drivers and street vendors to make them self-sustainable and tackle the post-pandemic impacts.

Saylani also worked to meet the gaps in healthcare: a critical challenge during COVID-19 was the unavailability of oxygen cylinders, machines and first-aid equipment. Saylani started providing people with oxygen cylinders in large numbers. Working with the government, Saylani also operationalised its vaccination centres and launched vaccination mobile services in remote areas of the city.<sup>29</sup> A senior official of Saylani explained that:

We wanted people to become self-sustainable because at that time the economy needed money to turn around. So just providing food was no longer an option. The real challenge was not the ration distribution but tackling the post-pandemic impact.

**Figure 2.8 Karachi Urban Lab stakeholder meeting**



Source: Authors

On a similar scale, the Alamgir Welfare Trust International (AWT) is a welfare organisation based in Karachi. During COVID-19, it supported low-income communities through an extensive network of volunteers by providing rations and cash support to widows. The AWT also extends livelihood assistance to poor, low-income women possessing basic skills in sewing work, handicrafts, stitching and other related vocations. During COVID-19, women's mobility was deeply constrained, and they could not access the AWT. The AWT volunteers used the address database of listed women and delivered food rations to their doorsteps on a regular basis. The AWT also obtained special permission from relevant government authorities to allow its vehicles and volunteers to navigate through lockdown periods. In situations when lockdown conditions were relaxed, women were able to visit the AWT offices to receive their food rations. Additionally, the AWT arranged to deliver sewing machines and other tools/supplies that enabled some of the women to continue with sewing and handicraft work.<sup>30</sup>

The nature of the urban scale brings forward an interlinking challenge of compounding crises<sup>31</sup> and overlapping risks across multiple axes of inequalities. The level of welfare provision provided by the NGOs and welfare organisations varied in scale across different demographics and played a significant role in helping vulnerable communities tackle the uncertainties wrought on by COVID-19 and related lockdowns (Figure 2.8).

## 2.8 CONCLUSIONS

The smart lockdown strategy adopted by Pakistan to avoid devastating consequences for the economy generated different outcomes for Karachi's residents; the severity of the outcomes depending upon the socio-economic contexts of neighbourhoods, social groups and gender. An intersectional analysis of gendered differences for the most vulnerable groups suggests

that, apart from restricting mobility, lockdowns further exacerbated the underlying structural inequalities in the institutional and governance framework. The impact of the pandemic combined with lockdown restrictions resulted in social and economic hardships that were compounded by climate risks and uneven governance, and this pushed people's vulnerabilities to an unprecedented scale. Even though civil society organisations were active agents to mitigate the impacts through networks of solidarity, further research is needed on the policy level not only to explore but also to present a legislative framework that incorporates gender at the centre of risk and disaster management practices.

Several policy lessons can be recommended. The district administration responsible for enforcing such restrictions in every district could prepare a database of informal workers. Based on this record, vaccination, mobility passes during restrictions and relief distribution benefits can be facilitated. The Ehsaas programme database, which only maps poor households, could be expanded to include information on informal workers. Health schemes, workers' insurance schemes and other benefits could be extended to this otherwise deprived category of the workforce. There is a sizable female workforce that is informally employed. In unprecedented circumstances such as a pandemic, they are unable to access public health and social security programmes. By using the registration database, an effective support system could be created to benefit especially female informal workers in pandemic situations, as well as financial and security crises.

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- 30 Interview with an AWT official, 4 April 2022.
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