



THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON INEQUALITY IN ASIAN CITIES

Focus on Working Mothers in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

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COVER IMAGE: A woman cooking in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (Source: Javier Gallego, Flickr)

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SUMMARY

The Covid-19 pandemic and government measures to control the spread of the disease impacted the economic and social lives of Mongolians in multiple ways, especially mothers who normally work outside the home. Mongolia's State Emergency Commission (SEC) closed all of Mongolia's preschool, primary, and secondary educational institutions and implemented multiple movement-restriction and quarantine measures in January 2020. During this lockdown, children at all education levels participated in television and e-learning programs from inside their homes. Some higher education institutions reopened in May 2020, but schools for children younger than 16 remained closed for many months.

This report investigates the ripple effects of school closures and other pandemic-related measures on Mongolians with young children, especially the issue of combining home-based childcare and work. In order to mitigate the strain school closures placed on families with young children, Mongolia's central and local governments implemented multiple decrees and resolutions. In February 2020, in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, a government decree reduced work hours by one hour for all guardians employed in local administrations and organizations if their children were under the age of 12. The Government of Mongolia also mandated that government agencies provide five days of paid leave to guardians of any child under five who experienced respiratory infections or other Covid-19 symptoms. Additionally, governments stimulated the economy and supported people's livelihoods by increasing child allowances for every child up to age 18, issued food vouchers to families in need, and increased monthly social welfare allowances.

Despite these efforts, Mongolian guardians of young children – the majority of whom are women – were significantly affected by pandemic containment measures, suffering personal and economic impacts, such as stress from overwork and the loss of income or jobs. More than 40 percent of Mongolian households experienced difficulties due to the closure of kindergartens and schools, including a rise in childcare costs for 34 percent of households. By the end of January 2020, 73 percent of Mongolian households, including 85 percent of poor households, faced difficulties because of the pandemic and restrictions, including higher food prices, job losses, and business closures. Additionally, 27 percent of households had less food because of decreased incomes and increased food prices.

In terms of other economic effects, more than 50 percent of female-dominated small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) and service providers had to close because of Covid-19. Certain economic sectors were especially affected, notably the hospitality and tourism industries, which disproportionately impacts women workers because of female-dominated labor forces in these fields. In Mongolia, these setbacks may result in lasting financial scars on working mothers and women who own SMEs. Many women who experienced a sudden decrease or total loss of income found themselves financially dependent on their husbands. Some women were forced to change or postpone their career plans, and some feared inability to return to the workforce in

the same capacity or advance in their careers because of the pandemic's economic ramifications.

Around 40 percent of households experienced an increase in childcare responsibilities due to school closers. Despite, government measures to reduce work responsibilities, working mothers reported an increase in workload while also managing the risk of potentially losing their job if they negotiated time off.

Working mothers experienced mixed impacts in terms of personal and familial wellbeing. Some women's relationships with family and friends improved because of reduced or more flexible workloads or because of access to outside support for childcare and household responsibilities. Other women described an overall negative impact on their emotional wellbeing and relationships with family and friends because of a dramatic reduction in free time due to heavier wage-earning workloads and added household responsibilities, including home schooling. Many working mothers cited a lack of support and understanding from employers who refused to provide suitable support.

The experiences of Mongolian working women and other guardians during the pandemic reveals an intense need for bolstered familial and public support systems during the pandemic and post-pandemic. The research findings highlight the need for a wider support network that will enable working mothers to continue to work outside the home without having to worry about childcare duties during work hours; such support could include affordable daycare centers and community-based childcare services. The government should focus on providing economic and social support to women with children, tailored to women's specific circumstances, including whether they work in the public or private sector, their age, socioeconomic status, type of job, and income levels. Women who work online and in digital formats would also benefit from increased job-skilling and capacity-building opportunities, especially self-employed women and those in the informal sector who are at the highest risk of unemployment. Capacity-building opportunities could include new information technology provision and remote learning, communication, and social-media marketing skills.

INTRODUCTION

This report explores the Covid-19 pandemic experience of Mongolian women who work outside the home and who have young children. It is based on an extensive literature review and personal interviews. It examines the effectiveness of different social support mechanisms in Mongolia that allow women to juggle work-life and home-life during the pandemic; the extent working conditions have impacted women's employment, wellbeing, and future careers; and government measures in response to the pandemic. The interviews with working mothers revealed that the pandemic has had an enormous impact on their employment and finances because of the increase of workloads, the lack of options for flexible work hours, and the lack of necessary resources to work from home, including limited access to Internet and technology.

Overarching research questions

The main objective of this research was to identify the socioeconomic impact of Covid-19 on working mothers. The research examines (1) the effectiveness of different social support mechanisms, (2) the extent and effectiveness of flexible working conditions, and (3) government measures in response to the pandemic. Based on an initial literature review, the researchers developed three overarching research questions:

1. To what extent have social support mechanisms, flexible working conditions, and government measures influenced women's ability to work during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. To what extent has the pandemic's impact on women's employment affected their wellbeing and careers?
3. To what extent has the pandemic affected women's roles in household decision-making?

The research team conducted desk research in October and November 2020. The research team conducted 16 qualitative semi-structured online and telephone interviews with women working in the public and private sectors in Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, between January and February 2021. The original research

findings are presented in the following report. The Annex contains an expanded research methodology.

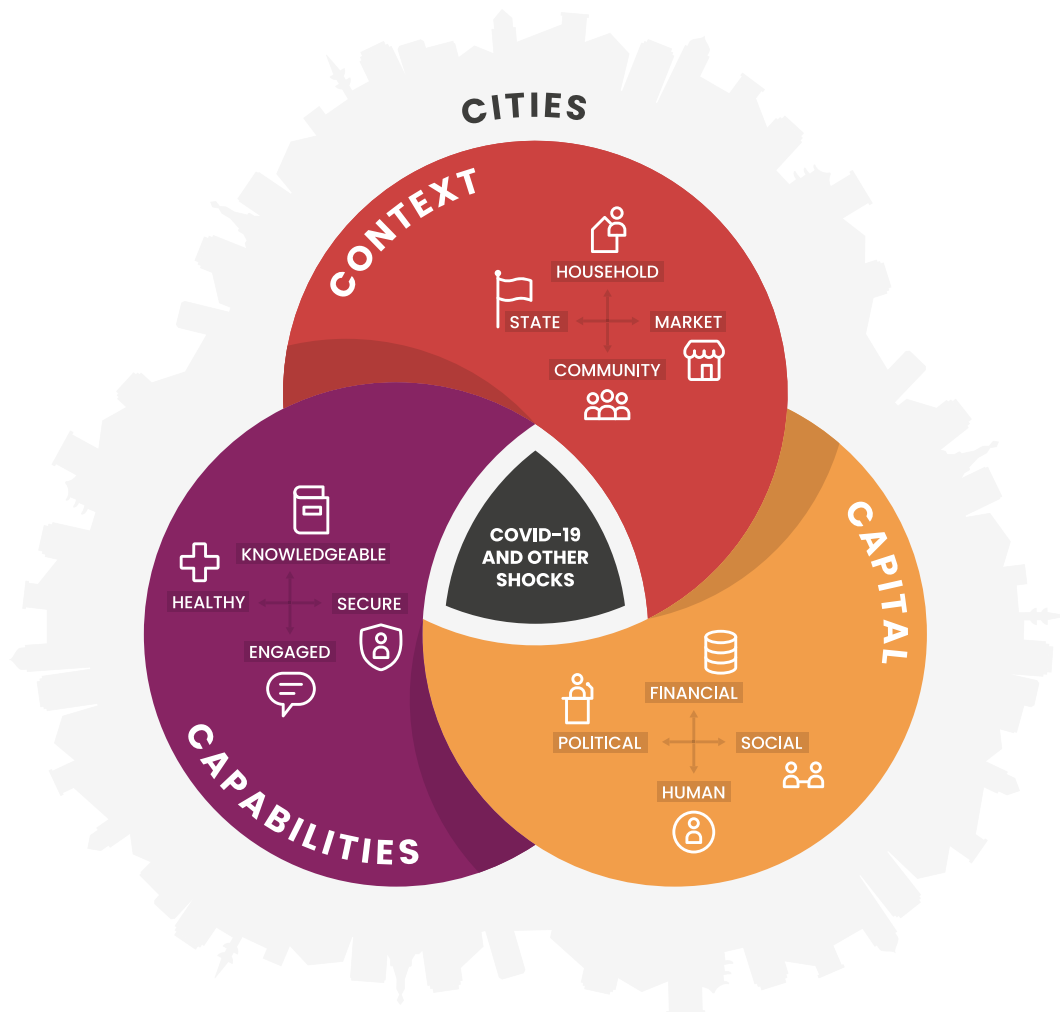
The 5 Cs: Context, Capital and Capabilities in Cities during Covid-19

The conceptual framework underpinning this research was developed by The Asia Foundation and Kore Global.¹ This 5Cs conceptual framework enables analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on Contexts, Capital, and Capabilities in Cities and focused on three areas: First, we analyzed the **context** of Covid-19 impacts in terms of the non-health implications of the pandemic and the repercussions of government-implemented containment measures. Second, we examined how people's **capital** (their tangible and intangible resources), particularly their financial, social, and educational (human) capitals, had been impacted by the pandemic and containment measures. Third, the depletion of people's resources influenced their short- and long-term coping abilities, which may further impact people's future **capabilities**, particularly their ability to secure employment, pursue careers, and achieve independence outside the home. The causal relationship between these three levels of analysis – context, capital, and capabilities – is neither simple nor linear: the context tends to impact capital and capabilities,

while both capital and capabilities impact how changes in the context are experienced by different individuals and groups.

The structure of this report first covers the non-health related impacts of the pandemic in Mongolia. Section two highlights the impact pandemic containment measures had on the finances of our research subjects and their families. Section three highlights the harms

to the human and social capital caused by lockdowns and inadequate public social support services. Section four traces these immediate effects to illustrate the long-term impacts on women’s capabilities that will affect their future opportunities and recovery. The final section draws policy implications from the research findings and presents a set of recommendations for policymakers and development partners.



1. CONTEXT: STEPS TO CONTAIN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Mongolia has experienced multiple effects from the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. In response to the pandemic, in early 2020, Mongolia implemented a “state of heightened readiness,” which included multiple containment measures.² For example, at the end of January, the State Emergency Commission (SEC) closed Mongolia’s border with China.³ Mongolia also closed all education and training institutions on January 27, with a plan to reopen on April 30th.⁴ These closures included online school for preschool, primary, and secondary educational programs. The government later extended this closure in Resolution No. 139, which suspended classroom activities until September 1, 2020, and extended TV and e-learning to June 1, 2020.⁵ Further, Resolution No. 30 was issued and mandated government agencies to “provide up to five days of paid leave to mothers, fathers and guardians of children under the age of five suffering from acute respiratory infections, influenza and influenza-like illnesses.” The Mayor of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia’s capital issued multiple decrees to reduce the spread of Covid-19, including Decree No. A/268 of February 28, 2020, which closed all city schools and kindergartens. Some of these restrictions later relaxed to allow for the reopening of certain higher education institutions in May 2020 but schools for children younger than 16 years remained closed.

In order to mitigate the risk of school closures forcing working parents and guardians to leave young children unattended at home, the Mayor of Ulaanbaatar issued Decree No. A/268 on February 28, 2020, which stated, “working hours of [all] mothers ([and] single fathers) with children under 12 years serving in local administrations and related organizations of the capital city will be reduced by 1 hour” without a reduction in salary. Additionally, the Capital City Governor’s Decree No. A/436 of March 30, 2020, monitored school closures to ensure children were not left at home without supervision. On February 19, 2020, Mongolia’s government extended the country’s state of heightened readiness until July 15, 2020.

On April 29, 2020, Mongolia’s unicameral parliament issued the State Great Khural Government Resolution No. 167, which aimed to reduce the economic and social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The resolution increased child allowances from [Mongolian Tugrits] MNT 70,000 to MNT 100,000 (approx. USD 23.2 to USD

33.2) from April 1 to October 1 for every child aged 0–18 years; issued food vouchers to family members in need of food from May 1 to October 1; and increased the monthly Social Welfare Fund pension from MNT 188,000 to MNT 288,000 (approx. USD 62.4 to USD 95.6) from May 1 to October 1.

COVID-19 RESPONSE MEASURES STRONGLY AFFECTED WORKING WOMEN WITH CHILDREN

The pandemic containment measures, school closures, and other policies especially impacted working women with young children. Most Mongolians easily followed nondisruptive government recommendations by avoiding public events, and practicing social distancing.⁶ However, kindergarten, primary, and secondary school closures proved particularly disruptive to those with school-age children, and more than 40 percent of households experienced issues related to school closures.⁷ A UNDP survey of Mongolian households found that 41.6 percent

looked after children at home due to school closures, and 34 percent of households reported additional childcare costs.

School closures increased⁸ childcare responsibilities, such as supervision of home schooling and food preparation. Despite the government's intention to lower workforce pressures on women by allowing them to return home an hour earlier, this was outweighed by additional childcare responsibilities. Many women lost income when they had to further reduce their working hours in order to take care of their children.⁹

Because Mongolian culture is heavily reliant on familial support, smaller families received less support within family units. The childcare burdens of single mothers, in particular, were further exacerbated by the pandemic.¹⁰ Some women who continued to work outside the home during Covid-19 had childcare and household support from their parents and other relatives. However, many did not: since young children were often cared for by their grandparents – primarily grandmothers – Covid-19 decreased this support when elderly populations had to be particularly cautious because of increased risk. As a result, 12.7 percent of households had to either leave children at home alone or with underage siblings, putting children at a high risk for domestic accidents.¹¹ Older, at-risk family members, such as elderly parents and family members with disabilities, were also often left home without assistance.

The pandemic and lockdowns had significant financial repercussions. Men and women lost their jobs entirely when businesses ceased operations. Economic stagnation and travel restrictions affected both the manufacturing and service sectors.¹² In 2020, 75 percent of enterprises had lost up to 50 percent of their customers and sales. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic posed the risk of sudden cost

increases, loss of investment opportunities, inability to repay loans, layoffs, inability to import goods and materials, and contract losses.¹³

By the end of January 2020, 73 percent of Mongolian households, including 85 percent of poor households, experienced economic difficulties in some form because of the pandemic and restrictions, including rising food prices, job losses, and business closures.¹⁴ Nineteen percent of full-time workers lost their jobs by the end of May 2020 due to lockdowns, layoffs, business closures, and other impacts. In addition, 16 percent of self-employed workers did not earn any income, while 73 percent saw their incomes decline.¹⁵ A recent study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shows that 27 percent of households had less food to eat due to decreased household income and increased prices for foods, such as meat, flour, and dairy products. Only 22 percent of households stockpiled food in case of a major outbreak. Of these households, the majority had less than three weeks' worth of food stocks.¹⁶ Kindergarten and school closures resulted in households with pre- or primary-school aged children spending more on food; compared to pre-Covid averages, food consumption of these households increased by 8.6 percent, or MNT 5.4 thousand, as children had their meals at home instead of at school. The additional costs particularly affected low-income families because of insufficient or declining government support.¹⁷

Mongolian government policies to reduce the economic and social impacts from Covid-19 were successful for many citizens. 120,000 self-employed workers received social insurance benefits, and 1,250,000 children received a monthly allowance of MNT 100,000 (approx. USD 35).¹⁸ However, there were two notable shortcomings in the government's support: (1) inconsistencies in the measures taken and information provided by local and national

decision-makers and law enforcement agencies, and (2) a lack of support policies for the informal sector.¹⁹ Additionally, women were largely neglected in terms of employment

opportunities and economic vulnerability, especially women who work in small businesses.²⁰



*Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
(Source: Flickr)*

2. WOMEN'S DECREASED ABILITY TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES DRAINED FINANCIAL CAPITAL

The Covid-19 pandemic's economic effects predominantly affected self-employed women or women who worked in small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs).²¹ Women-owned SMEs were already structurally fragile in Mongolia prior to the pandemic. A report by UNDP, the Asian Development Bank, and the National Committee on Gender states that “there is a strong lack of technical assistance for women-owned SMEs and consultancy services related to viable business planning and modeling.”²² Unsurprisingly, therefore, more than 50 percent of female-owned SMEs and service providers stopped operating because of pandemic restrictions. SMEs and other public and private enterprises that remained open struggled with cleaning and social distancing mandates that added to employee workloads and increased overtime expenses.

Furthermore, the UNDP et alia report found that pandemic restrictions had a disproportionately high impact on economic sectors that primarily employ female workers, including education, where 80.2 percent of workers are women. Teachers had to pay for telephones, internet access, and other equipment to teach remotely.²³ Many women work in low-paid, high-risk conditions. During the pandemic, workers were given additional responsibilities, such as conducting online Covid-19 trainings, which largely took place after working hours. This only increased their already-high workloads.²⁴ Between January and December 2020, two out of three people who had lost their jobs had worked in the sectors most affected by the pandemic, including the tourism sector, which was particularly affected by long-term restrictions on foreign and domestic travel.²⁵ The decision to cut jobs in light industry, hotels, catering, and tourism affected more women than men, which reduced women's labor force

participation and will slow the process of job creation and recovery.²⁶

For virtually all women and guardians, the increase in unpaid workloads (i.e., household chores) negatively affected both their incomes and mental health. Women with low incomes and large families living in the same household were particularly at risk.²⁷

Some relief could be found when companies offered flexible working conditions or shorter hours. During the lockdown, about 50 percent of companies reduced their eight-hour workday, and one-third of the companies allowed their employees to work remotely. Those companies also offered flexible conditions, and one in four female workers were able to work shorter hours from home.²⁸ Shorter hours were a double-edged sword, however, because working mothers' time gained at home resulted in lost wages and increased domestic work.

INSUFFICIENT GOVERNMENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT MEASURES

Although the Mongolian government offered tax incentives and exemptions in response to the pandemic's economic impacts, most government employees were not eligible for these support measures.

“We are not exempt from social insurance fees and taxes. We are not exempt from anything as we receive a salary from the state. Our social insurance and health insurance are covered by the state, so we didn't have changes at all.”
(Female state registration officer)

Due to the type of organization they worked in,²⁹ two research participants who worked in government organizations received tax exemption benefits, which were helpful during the lockdown period. Some interviewees who work in the private sector reported that tax benefits and exemptions had a positive effect on their household finances.

Child allowances provided financial support to all women and their families. The vast majority of public and private sector workers who continued to work put their children's money in savings for their future. For women who lost their jobs and incomes, child allowances helped them keep their households running; these allowances went toward food and paying for children's activities and hobbies.

“We used to get 100,000 because we had 5 children, but now we get 500,000 every month. When I lost my job, I bought food with my child allowance”. (Female former hotel employee)

“I thought the increase of the children's money was a good

decision. For parents who don't spend the children's money for their basic living needs, they started thinking how to develop their children using this money. For instance, I spent this money for my child's chess lesson.”
(Female former chief executive officer in private sector company)

SEVERE FINANCIAL IMPACTS AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC

Most of the women interviewed experienced some degree of negative financial impact because of the pandemic. However, the extent and severity of this impact varied enormously among interviewees. There was not a complete split between public and private sector workers but those in the public sector tended to talk about the additional costs incurred and reductions to additional work benefits. In contrast, women who worked in the private sector talked about dramatic or complete loss of income through job losses or the inability to operate businesses normally.

Interviewees often described cutting back on non-essential purchases. In some cases, they were forced to do so because of decreased income, but even those who retained their salary said they had become more aware of the importance of reducing spending.

“We stopped buying fine vegetables every month. We buy only basic necessities such as flour and rice. We stopped spending on extras such as clothes and hobbies completely. In the past, we used to go to bookstores and buy books, but now we sell our old books to buy new ones or barter them... Before, we used to buy shoes and clothes we liked and give them to our children, now we say, ‘you have such and such things, wear them’.”
(Female public sector worker)

Some interviewees who worked in the public sector explained that, although they maintained their salaries during the pandemic, they did not receive additional payments they normally would, such as overtime payments and travel and food allowances.

“There have been financial difficulties. Before, I used to teach extra classes on top of my schedule and would be paid overtime on top of my net salary. But overtime work isn’t considered when working online and I only got my net salary which is low.”
(Female secondary school teacher)

Some women also explained that they incurred additional costs, largely through sharp increases in the use of work-related telephone and internet charges, for which they were not reimbursed. In particular, interviewees working in the education sector explained that their use of mobile data for work increased significantly because of online teaching.

“My phone’s monthly limit was 30,000 tugriks. But it increased because I’m working on my phone constantly and contacting parents during Covid”
(Female kindergarten teacher)

Other interviewees, largely those who worked in the private sector, provided more extreme examples of financial pressure. Many owners and employees of businesses whose operations had to close completely or significantly reduce their hours of operation experienced decreased income or job loss. Some of these women found themselves in dire financial straits. Self-employed women who had recently started their own businesses were among the hardest hit, having been made even more vulnerable due to their lack of experience in the industry and lack of liquidity.

“If I had money to support my family to overcome the first Covid lockdown, I might have had a stable business and continued paying salaries for my colleagues and repaid all loans... Because I had a loan to repay, but I didn’t have any income, I had no money to spend on food and grocery. So instead my mother paid for the expenses. Basically my mother feeds me and my kid...”
(Female entrepreneur)

Some interviewees whose partners had lost their jobs described the financial strain of coping with a drastically reduced household income and the pressure this put on them to keep their own jobs, no matter how much their employers demanded from them.

“My husband was self-employed, and his business shut due to the pandemic. I was working at the pharmacy at that time, so it was okay, but it was a change in my life. In other words, all the responsibility (to make a living) has come down to me. So I was struggling financially, and I was worried about my daughter’s future.”
(Female pharmacy employee)

Conversely, some women who lost their jobs in the private sector spoke about becoming financially dependent on their husbands. This included women who had been employed in sectors hard-hit by the pandemic, such as tourism and service sectors, where alternative employment options would continue to be scarce. Some of these women talked about the need to dramatically reduce their spending. Additionally, since becoming financially dependent on their husbands’ income, some women described how they now had to consult with their husbands on household decisions they would normally make on their own.

“When I had a job, I was very determined to take the initiative to do this or to go there, but now there is no such thing. So, I am only proposing what to do. In the past, I used to make my own plans to take my children there in summer or there in the fall, but now we do something depending on whether my husband wants to do it or not.”

(Female former air-ticketing agency employee)



A woman cutting lumber on a circular saw in a wood market in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (Source: FAO Forestry, Flickr)

3. WOMEN'S DISPROPORTIONATE CHILDCARE CHALLENGES

Interviews with women who worked in both the public and private sector indicated that the pandemic, in many cases, led to a heavy increase in women's workloads. Interviewees in the public sector described how government efforts to prevent the spread of Covid-19, such as raising public awareness, research, online adaptation for service delivery, and patrolling activities to enforce lockdowns, masking, and other such measures increased the amount of work they had to do.

“Recently, after Covid-19 has emerged, we would work every day. We worked around the clock. We were always ready to work at a moment's notice. After working 24 hours, I would get a bit of rest the next day, but we had to patrol the road all day. We used to patrol the streets during the day, and the next day I would go out again for another 24 hours.”

(Female civil servant)

A university lecturer emphasized the pressure she felt to achieve high performance for herself and her students despite working online. She and other teachers described many difficulties related to online teaching, such as connectivity issues and juggling multiple communication channels.

“I used to be very punctual and would finish work on time. That changed. For example, I couldn't turn off my phone during emergency situations because our kindergarten was used as a PCR testing center for Covid-19 and I am a civil servant and they can call at any time. So I became anxious all the time...I used to relax and not work at home, but now that's not possible.” *(Female kindergarten teacher)*

For women working in the private sector, workload pressures were sometimes linked to companies downsizing as a result of the pandemic, which increased the workload for employees who kept their jobs. Some interviewees were afraid they would also lose their jobs if they did not rise to the additional workload expectations.

“When Covid-19 broke out and our guests stopped coming, our company started downsizing... For those who were left to work, the workload increased and there were times, when we couldn't finish our work, even though we did everything from morning till night... As soon as the number of people decreased, the workload increased. There was a lot of pressure from the management of the organization, our management kept saying: ‘If you don't do this, you will be fired.’”

(Female hotel worker)

For many public and private sector interviewees, the need to take on heavier workloads coincided with the need to adjust to different modes of working, including working remotely. Some interviewees also referred to the additional pressure of taking on colleagues'

workloads if they became ill and needed to take time off work. Interviewees explained that these added duties were redistributed through all levels of the organizations, often without regard for hierarchy.

“There were so many issues I needed to worry about, such as how to sign the contracts, how to make stamps from home, how to reduce the office rent cost, how to deal with long-term loans etc., so I would say my workload was increased even though I’m the CEO.”

(Female former chief executive officer of private sector company)

INFLEXIBLE WORK CONDITIONS PENALIZED WAGE-EARNING WOMEN

Only one of the interviewees who worked in the public sector was offered the availability to work from home. None of the other public sector interviewees were given this option or felt like they could ask for more flexible working conditions.

“They [other teachers] were all scared of the school administration. Other teachers who had young children would say: “Don’t bother. Since I live close, I will make do one or two days”. I had to be brave and say it’s because I live far away and I spend at least one hour commuting each way.”

(Female secondary school teacher)

Some interviewees were aware of the option to work from home, but were unconvinced their additional responsibilities would allow them that flexibility.

“There is no such support, there is no choice but to do the work. In December, it was decided that 70 percent of the workers would work from home and 30 percent would work at the office, so as not to create congestion in the workplace. We cannot follow this regulation due to the heavy workload. I have a lot of work to do, so there is no room for such a possibility to decrease work hours during the pandemic.”

(Female public sector worker)

One of the interviewees who worked at a senior level in the private sector shed some light on the specific challenges management faced. Although she tried to support flexible conditions for women working under her, she was unable to take advantage of such opportunities herself because of the increased management workload and the pressure to ensure effective operation while allowing some flexibility for employees.

“We offered some employees the chance to work from home, and we provided several opportunities to our employees such as, to work once a week, adjust their working hours, work in a shift etc. I tried to make the situation as flexible as possible. Only problem was I myself can’t use such opportunities as I was the executive management.”

(Female former chief executive officer in private sector company)

For women who were offered the chance to work from home, some said their employers did not provide them with necessary equipment to do so.

“It’s impossible to work from home, as sometimes if you don’t have internet or money to buy mobile data, you

have no choice but to go to the office.”

(Female university professor).

It would have been very difficult without her grandmother”.

(Female police officer)

More broadly, interviewees working in both private and public organizations described their home environments as non-conducive. They explained that having other family members at home, especially younger children, had an adverse impact on their work performance and productivity.

Some women who worked in the private sector also relied on family support, but this was less prevalent than in the public sector. Many women either lost their private sector jobs due to business closures or were able to modify their working arrangements to care for their children.

“It’s hard for me to concentrate and write when I’m at home, I don’t concentrate. After my family goes to sleep, I work until the morning and then go to sleep. Thus, while working online, for me afternoons are almost like mornings, and 11 pm is like the afternoon”.

(Female researcher)

“There was no other support...[other than grandparents] that’s how I got through.”

(Female former beauty salon owner)

SUPPORT FROM IMMEDIATE FAMILY REQUIRED

Women who worked in the public sector tended to rely on family for childcare. This involved complete dependence on someone else – commonly an older relative – to cover all aspects of care for their children, including home schooling. One example included a woman who sent her young daughter to temporarily live with relatives. Other children were watched by a grandparent from morning until evening every day. In some cases, older relatives also took on domestic work, including cooking and cleaning. Support from immediate family has been absolutely critical in enabling women to continue working during the pandemic, whether outside or inside the home.

Many interviewees relied on the social support of only one or two relatives. Only one woman described support from multiple people: her mother, mother-in-law, and nephew. This suggests a limited social network. In fact, interviewees described few – or no – alternative options for childcare support. For example, one interviewee said she would have to beg someone else for help if her elderly parents could no longer help with childcare.

One interviewee expressed a concern that their normal social support mechanisms had narrowed during the pandemic. This was especially the case for a female doctor, whose social network avoided her because she was at a high-risk of transmitting Covid-19.

Many women relied on older relatives for childcare prior to the pandemic; the pandemic merely highlighted existing problems with limited childcare options. It was unclear how working mothers could cope if their relatives were suddenly unable to look after their children.

“As for me, I have no choice but to leave my family behind. My child is with her grandmother, so I am working like a childless person.

4. CAPABILITIES: WOMEN'S RESILIENCE MASKS NEED FOR LONGER-TERM SUPPORT

The impact on women's relationships with their families and friends and their emotional wellbeing varied enormously depending on their specific situations. In many cases, negative or positive experiences were not clearly split between public and private sector workers. Instead, personal impact related to multiple aspects, including increased workloads, flexible work hours, and social support.

Some women who were able to work from home explained that lockdown allowed them to spend more quality time with their family. One woman who ran her own business described being able to spend more time with her children and being able to pay more attention to their health and education. However, this interviewee pointed out that she was luckier than many other mothers, including other women entrepreneurs. She had purchased the materials her business needed just before the border closure, so her business could continue running. She also had well-trained employees, knew how to market on social media, experienced a boom in sales during the pandemic, and could work flexible hours.

Other interviewees described similar positive experiences at home. In some cases, they felt their immediate families had grown closer during the pandemic. Some women also had partners who were able to spend more time with their families during lockdown.

“My family is getting closer, spending more time together which is such a positive feeling because we were often too busy with work to see each other before.”

(Female university lecturer)

“I had an opportunity to teach for my 1st grader. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, we never spend much time together to get to know each other. Now, I understand the situation of my child better and I prefer to spend one hour playing with them. I have the advantage of understanding my children better.”

(Female public sector worker)

Other interviewees described how the pandemic resulted in less time with their families and greater levels of stress and exhaustion. Interviewees whose work increased tended to lack childcare arrangements, which decreased work productivity; this was particularly the case for public sector workers. The extreme pressure these women experienced came from juggling paid and unpaid work, childcare, home schooling, and guilt from asking for help from relatives.

One public sector interviewee described the stress of balancing work and home schooling her daughter. Another interviewee who worked as a doctor described the stress of working longer hours and her inability to be at home with her daughter, who she felt was negatively emotionally impacted by the experience. Interviewees who were unable to spend much time with their children were concerned

about the lack of online schooling for their children, their children's poor grades, and the social impact of closed clubs and after school activities.

STRESS, GUILT, ISOLATION, JUDGEMENT, AND EMPLOYERS' LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

In some cases, the stress and guilt that women felt was compounded by social judgment. This was particularly the case for women working in the public sector. One woman described how others questioned whether it was right for her to continue to work during a pandemic, despite her low income, when no one questioned why her husband continued to work. Women in the private sector tended to face less criticism – either due to their ability to juggle the demands of work inside and outside the home because of greater flexibility or because they had no choice but to leave work to take care of their families.

Interviewees from both the private and public sector described a lack of support or understanding from their employers. One public sector interviewee explained the negative impact of having an employer who did not understand the pressure on her as a working parent. She explained the realities of living under the constant threat of disciplinary action if she 'failed' to show that she was completely dedicated to her job. She explained that demonstrating 'dedication' to her public sector job during the pandemic effectively meant being available around the clock. As a result, she was now entirely dependent on her mother's support for childcare and spent far less time with her child. An interviewee who worked as a teacher explained the conflict she felt needing to prioritize her students' online learning over supporting her own child who struggled with home schooling.

Interviewees explained that they felt distanced from their friends and family during the

pandemic due to containment measures and because some women who continued to work outside the home were seen as possible Covid-19 transmitters.

"I'm almost isolated in my room. When I come home my father sprays the door and the wall with alcohol, in case I am infected".
(Female doctor)

For other women, time with their friends and relatives dramatically reduced because they didn't have enough time. This was especially true for those who coped with much heavier workloads and responsibilities at home – most strongly articulated by public sector workers.

"I can't visit my mother and father; I only visit them to bring groceries sometimes. We are not doing family outings. We don't really have time for it either. Relationships between friends and family have become distant."
(Female university lecturer)

FURTHERING SKILLS OR DISRUPTING CAREERS

Some interviewees described positive aspects of working during the pandemic. This included women who had knowledge and skills, such as IT skills, which became more valuable with a greater reliance on technology during remote working. For those who had the time to do so, some women also planned to learn new skills and disciplines, such as sewing, psychology, or IT skills, during time away from work.

However, interviews also highlighted altered or postponed career plans because of the pandemic. Two women in the public sector planned career changes before the pandemic but had to put these plans on hold in order to maximize their job security. Two other

interviewees had to postpone education plans because of financial difficulties. Another two women had enrolled in doctoral (PhD) programs, but they also put their studies on hold because of their increased workload and limited resources for academic research during the

pandemic. Another woman's employer offered to fund her studies before the pandemic but was now currently unable to do so.



Women drinking team
(Source: Fabio Marcato, Flickr)

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The gendered impacts of lockdowns and other measures, particularly school closures, disproportionately affected mothers and guardians with young children. For many, caring for children while working full-time was not a viable option. Prior to the pandemic, women spent roughly twice the amount of time as men on household and care duties. This estimate did not decline even when women were engaged in “paid productive work”.³⁰ The pandemic and related responses intensified women’s workloads, especially for those working in the public sector, and underscored their reliance on childcare support.

Policy Gaps:

Covid-19 relief measures largely focused on financial impacts of the pandemic. This meant that the government provided a child allowance for families as children in school could no longer avail of schemes such as the school lunch program but did not factor in the rise in care burden within households due to school closures. There is a need for better and constant gender analysis in policy design and implementation

Most public and private sector organizations tried to follow government guidance and attempted to provide staff with a variety of options, including paid leave, reduced working hours, and the possibility of working remotely during lockdown, especially for mothers with children under 12 years old. However, every organization depending on the type and leadership, implemented these options differently, resulting in different outcomes. Therefore, the implementation was not effective in practice.

Employers often did not take into account the specific conditions of women employees, including their children’s age, number of children, family environment, family size, and family living conditions. Public sector data shows that, although government organizations implemented the government’s decision to

offer flexible working conditions to women with children below 12 years old, this decision did not ease women’s workloads because (1) workload of public servant significantly increased during Covid-19; (2) government decisions were implemented differently depending on the type of organization; and (3) government organizations did not have capacity to support women public servants during the pandemic and did not provide them with the necessary resources to work from home.

Policy Gaps:

Flexible working options were not tailored to the reality of different sectors such as the public or service sector. Interpretation and uptake of working from home or paid leave policies varied across businesses and sectors. Women who could work from home lacked equipment and affordable internet access to be able to do so. This raises questions on how such policies can be adapted to be more responsive to those working on public and private sectors, taking into account the specific circumstances of women, such as their age, social, economic status, the specifics and status of employment, income level, the needs and requirements of different groups of women, etc. Measures such as making daycare or kindergartens available for workers in essential industries during a pandemic might be considered.

Many women had to rely on their immediate family for childcare. Social support mechanisms often comprised of just one or two family members – usually elderly parents – rather than wider social networks. Women who did not have family support were forced to leave their jobs, resulting in precarious financial situations. The Government of Mongolia increased their monthly stipend to vulnerable children under 18 years by five-fold during the time of this research to compensate for the closure of schools and school lunch programs. However, despite these efforts, food security remained a challenge.³¹

Policy Gaps:

There is an absence of mechanisms to access/facilitate wider social support networks or provide alternative childcare support for working mothers during school closures, such as affordable childcare.

There is also an absence of support mechanisms for women who had to stop working due to lack of alternative childcare. Moreover, it is evident that women continue to carry the burden of domestic and care responsibilities. There are opportunities for government to consider gender equality policy measures that might encourage men to take on a more equal share of domestic labor and childcare. Measures that promote the sharing of domestic responsibilities between men and women; that create more wage jobs in the care economy or that ensure commensurate and fair pay and working conditions for domestic and care work might be considered.

The government also took social protection measures to stimulate the economy and support people's livelihoods during the outbreak of Covid-19. Some measures taken included an increase in the child allowance for every

child aged 0–18, issuance of food vouchers to family members in need of food, increase in the monthly social welfare pension, and tax exemptions and extensions. The government's attempts to reduce the economic and social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic were successful to a certain extent, but women were often left behind by these measures. The women interviewed explained that, while measures, such as increases in child allowances and tax benefits and exemptions, were financially supportive, they did not help women to continue to work.

Child allowances, meanwhile, provided financial support to all women and their families. The vast majority of women who continued to work put their children's money in savings accounts. For women who lost their jobs and incomes, child allowances helped them keep their households running by paying for food and activities for their children. Overall, most women experienced negative financial impacts during the pandemic because of a loss of benefits and partial or complete loss of income. At the same time, women who continued working noted increased costs related to work.

Policy Gaps:

Tax relief schemes are often more beneficial to larger businesses and workers with higher incomes. They are rarely applicable to those working in the public or informal sector – sectors that are often female dominated. This finding raises the question of whether relief measures, overall, can be more progressive and inclusive and how such measures might be put in place to contribute to a more equitable recovery for Mongolia in the longer term.

ANNEX: METHODOLOGY

Literature review

The research team conducted an initial literature review in October and November 2020 that focused on scanning existing information and evidence related to the impact of Covid-19 on working women with young children in Mongolia. The light-touch review included relevant government resolutions and mayoral decrees, as well as research publications produced by international donors, businesses, and NGOs, particularly by UN agencies and the World Bank.³²

Semi-structured interviews

The research team then conducted a set of 16 qualitative semi-structured interviews with women working in the public and private sectors in Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, between January and February 2021. Due to Covid-19 restrictions in the city, all of the interviews were conducted over the phone or internet on Zoom.

The team adopted a purposeful sampling approach. All of the women interviewed were mothers with one or more young children under the age of 12. In order to enable comparisons between the public and private sectors, equal numbers of interviews were conducted with women who had been working in the public sector at the start of the pandemic and those who had been working in the private sector. Both groups included women who had continued to work and those who had stopped working. Among those who had continued to work, some continued to travel to their workplaces while some were able to work from home. The research team also made efforts to ensure diversity within the sample by including women from different districts in Ulaanbaatar (including ger settlements and apartments)

and from a range of professions. Women were largely identified through existing The Asia Foundation Mongolia projects and networks. Each interview took between 60 to 90 minutes. With consent, the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and handwritten notes were taken by a dedicated notetaker. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were translated into English. Efforts were made to ensure the English versions were as accurate as possible and that they kept to the original meaning of what was said. Each of the transcripts were then coded to enable interpretive and thematic analysis.

Research ethics

Researchers applied a feminist and human rights-based approach, based on an agreed set of ethical principles which were translated into clear protocols for everyone on the research team to adhere to. These included an emphasis on participant confidentiality, inclusivity, and diversity, and ensuring informed and ongoing consent.

Challenges and limitations

The fact the interviews could not take place in person presented some challenges. At a practical level, where the internet connection was bad, some of the interviews were unexpectedly interrupted, which broke the flow of questions. Conducting interviews over the phone or online also made it more challenging to build a rapport with the interviewees, which at times may have impacted how open and honest they were in their responses. Some interviewees were also cautious about disclosing information related to their employer and sharing opinions concerning government decisions.

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