

Women Entrepreneurs Struggling & Innovating in the Face of COVID-19:

New research findings from the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women on the impact of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs in low and middle income countries.

As COVID-19 began to take a hold across the globe impacting individuals, families, and economies, we could barely begin to imagine the impact this would have, both on the businesses run by women entrepreneurs, but beyond this on their lives, economic independence and agency.

To better understand what was happening and how we could help we ran a short survey with women who have participated or are currently participating in our mentoring and entrepreneurship programmes. We have analysed the results and started to tailor our products and services accordingly.

Unfortunately we know we are only at the start - as the crisis and its implications develop we will continue to seek women's advice and experience to inform how we work to reduce emerging barriers to their business survival and success.

How? The Methodology

We shared a survey link with the women business owners we had contact with online. We wanted to hear directly from the women we support at early stages of the global pandemic. Participants were asked to fill in a brief, online survey with a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions relating to their businesses. Topics covered included COVID-19's impacts on their enterprises, what steps they had taken to mitigate these, what support they needed, and what business training areas and skills-building topics are their current priorities.



Who responded and what kind of businesses do they run?

This briefing has been drawn from data collected in April 2020 from 580 women entrepreneurs in low and middle income countries currently participating in the Foundation's Mentoring Women in Business and Road to Growth programmes or using the Foundation's HerVenture mobile app.

These women run businesses in a wide variety of sectors:

Sector	Businesses	% of Total
Other sectors including charity, financial services, construction, automotive etc. each worth <1% of total	110	19%
Manufacturing	86	15%
Professional services / consulting	66	11%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing	64	11%
Retail	50	9%
Food and beverage manufacturing	47	8%
Education	46	8%
Beauty (hairdressers, salon etc.)	34	6%
Hospitality (including hotels and restaurants)	30	5%
Travel and tourism	17	3%
Media and entertainment	15	3%
Healthcare providers	15	3%
	580	

What they told us...

Severity of impact: The responses to our survey paint a challenging picture of the landscape and depth of need:

- 93% of respondents had already been negatively impacted by COVID-19, and 4% haven't yet been impacted but think they will be in the future
- Of those already impacted, 44% have ceased operations temporarily and 3% have ceased operations permanently
- Of those whose businesses have not yet been but will be impacted, 4% have already ceased operations temporarily in advance of impact
- 76% of respondents have requested additional support from the Foundation
- In addition to skills training, advice and networks, there is an overwhelming need from women entrepreneurs for direct financial support right now

Nature of impact: Of the respondents already impacted:

- 43% report access to customers – either individuals or other businesses – having been reduced or stopped completely
- 29% report production or services reduced
- 21% report supply chain problems

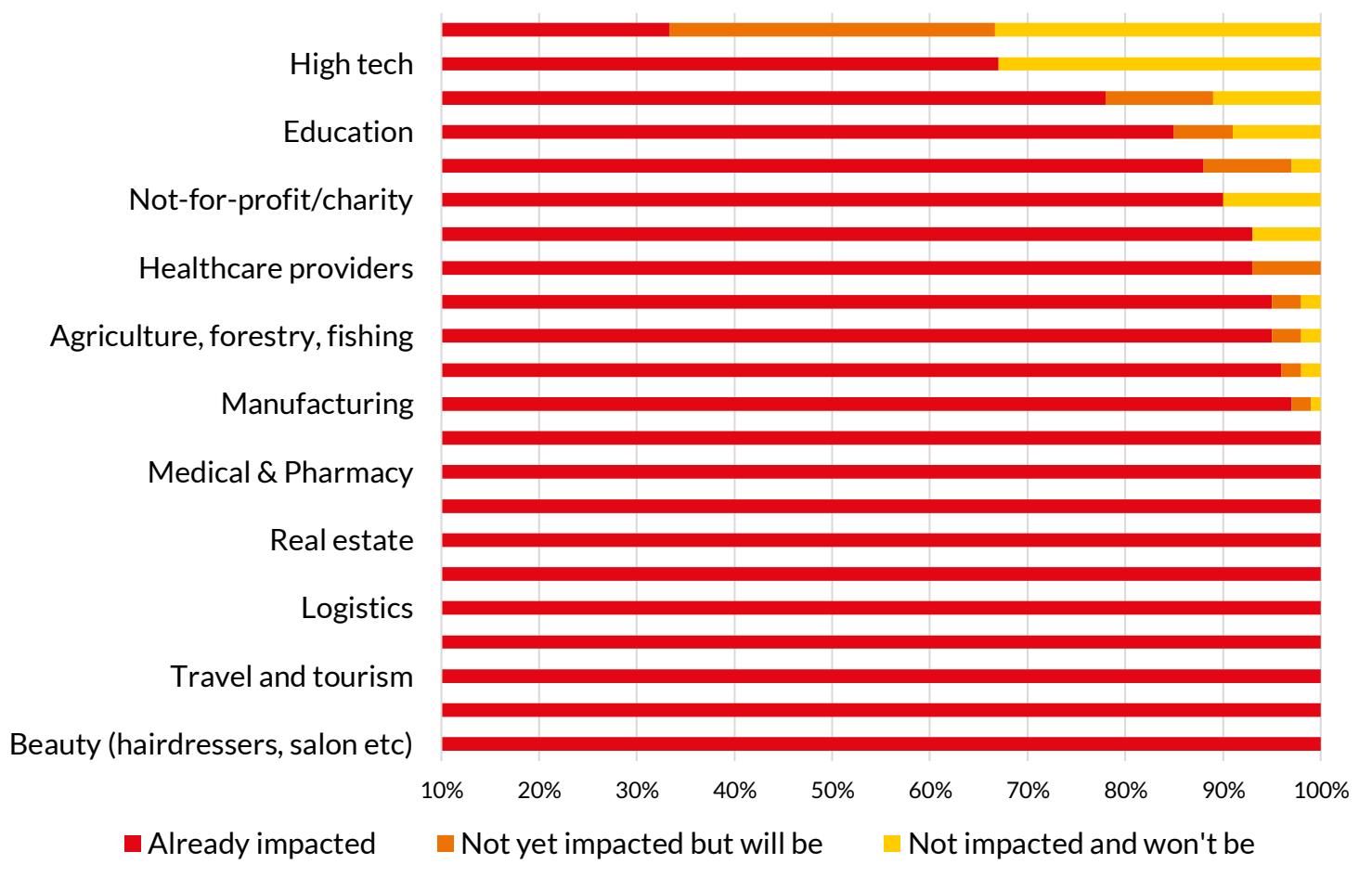
The most-immediately-affected sectors are beauty, hospitality, travel and tourism, construction, logistics, energy, real estate, telecommunications, medical and pharmacy, and utilities – 100% of all respondents' businesses in these sectors had already been affected at the time of the survey. When respondents whose businesses have either already been or will be affected are combined, food and beverage manufacturers and healthcare are also 100%.

“Been operating at a wholesale level. With hotels and restaurants closed, we are thinking about how we can reorganize our operations to serve the retail market.”

Meanwhile, the most common sectors of businesses which have not yet been impacted but are predicted to be are automotive (33%), financial services (11%) and professional services/consulting (9%), which shows a delayed or less immediate impact on these sectors.

The sectors which have the highest percentages of businesses, which haven't been and do not expect to be impacted belong are automotive (33%), high tech (33%), and financial services (11%).

Current Impact by Sector



Adaption and innovation underway: Women told us about how they were adapting and responding to the impacts they were experiencing. Many are pivoting, adapting and re-purposing their business in the short term, with some already anticipating the implications of COVID-19 in the longer term.

“We are working on new products that will suit the situation the way it is now.”

“Due to diminished or no business revenue, I am now in the process of venturing into a new product line to help generate income”

Women are looking to look at new ways of operating, producing and delivering with a particular focus on how to use technology most effectively; we heard loud and clear that they are looking at online solutions, improving websites, increasing online marketing and social meeting. Whilst professional services, training and education sectors explore online approaches those in retail and food production are responding with delivery services where possible. Women Entrepreneurs also shared with us the concerns their feel for the health and wellbeing of their staff.

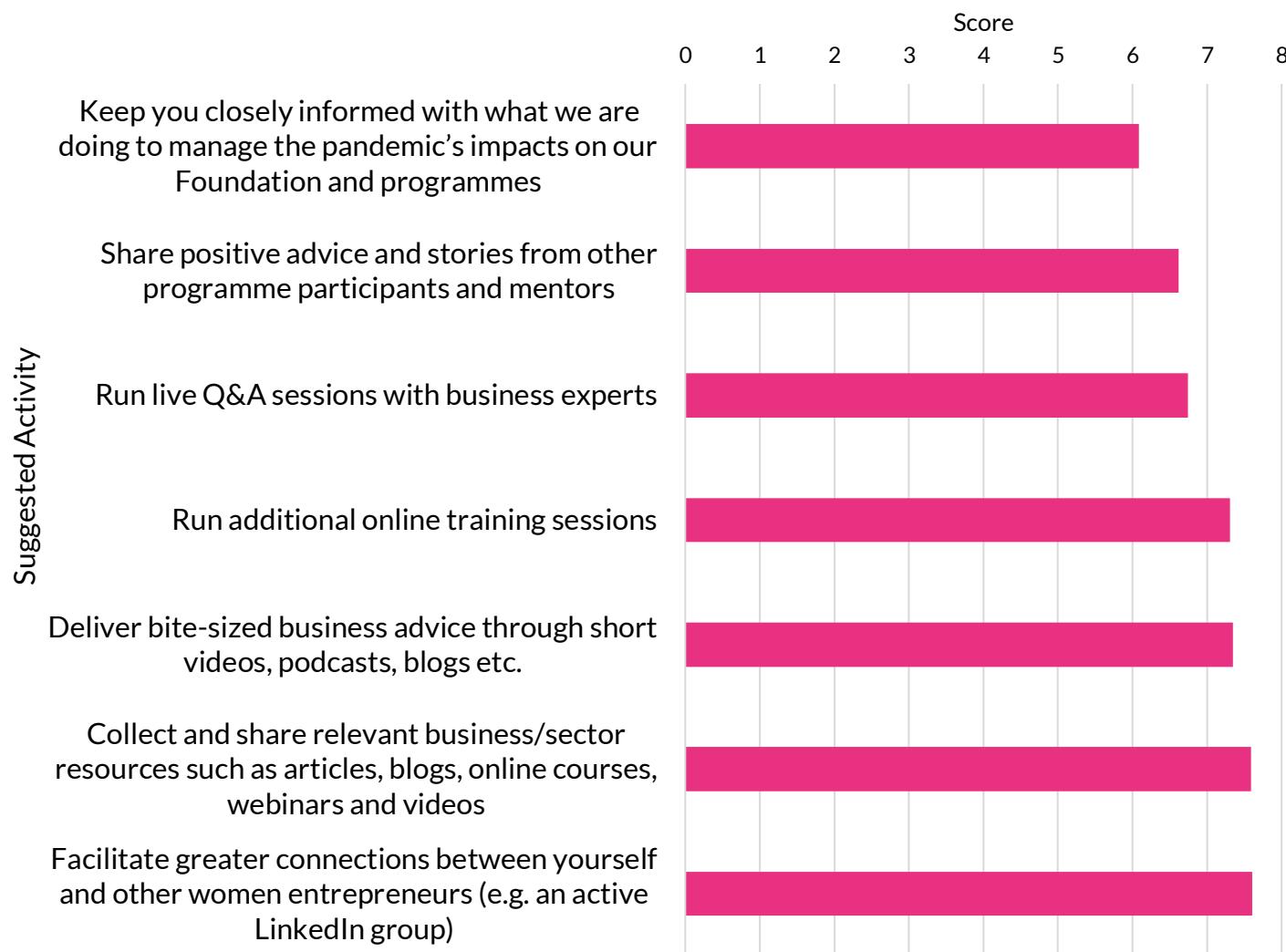
“We are all working remotely, and engage very well and have virtual happy hours to stay emotionally healthy and connected.”

“Our biggest concern now is our staff and how to support them both financially and mentally.”

What did respondents tell us they want more support in?

Respondents were offered a list of different types of immediate support the Foundation might be able to provide them with in order to mitigate the current or potential impact of COVID-19, and asked to rank the options from most to least helpful. The higher the ranking score, the more helpful the support was ranked by respondents:

Popularity of Suggested Activities with Respondents



Respondents who requested additional support requested information on the following topics:

Respondents Requesting Skills Topics



What we can take away from this is that in order to survive COVID-19 and rebuild their business afterwards, women are primarily seeking to develop their online and digital skills, particularly around marketing, and their planning and resilience approaches and skills. This links to an increase in innovation and diversification of business model and products. We already know that access to networks is crucial for women entrepreneurs and this too was reiterated as being more important than ever.

“I really wish to switch most of our marketing and sales and business management online through a mobile application to operate digitally.”

How we have responded to date

We continue to deliver all of our programmes – the need for them has proven to be greater than ever now. Fortunately, our experience with technology and the online nature of many of our services, like our global online Mentoring Women in Business programme, has helped us be a relevant resource and adapt quickly.

We are rapidly creating and repurposing resources to strengthen women's skills to respond now and to emerge as well as possible from the crisis so they are well equipped to rebuild their futures. This includes:

- Re-releasing existing webinars and training materials as freely available on our website with practical advice for women entrepreneurs:
 - [Managing your Cash Flow](#)
 - [Using Social Media to Access New Markets](#)
 - [Writing a Business Plan](#)
- Creating and bolstering networks, supporting women to connect with each other and to access our resources through our new LinkedIn group.
- Providing additional support to Mentors to ensure that they can provide increased pastoral support to mentees.
- Producing webinars by our mentors, which will be opened up to a larger global audience of women entrepreneurs.
- Providing additional training on what respondents reported needs: personal resilience, business diversification, business resilience, financial management, online marketing, e-commerce and more.
- Giving the women in our programmes the option of sharing their experiences through our website and other digital channels so that their voices can be heard and they can help others.
- Partnering with School of Marketing and the Cambridge Wireless network to deliver additional marketing resources, in response to the need expressed by survey respondents.
- In partnership with DHL, launching the HerVenture training app for women entrepreneurs in Kenya. We hope to add e-commerce and expand this support in the coming months.
- Working to have the HerVenture training app available again with updated content for women in Nigeria, Vietnam and Indonesia in the next few months thanks to partnerships with ExxonMobil Foundation, Qualcomm, and USAID.
- [Seeking additional funding and nominating partners for our Mentoring programme](#) – and thus more mentors – following the clear finding from this survey that women entrepreneurs need mentors more than ever.
- Producing and sharing blogs, podcasts and other resources which also focus on the needs and topics women reported.

What we also heard

We offered the women entrepreneurs surveyed the chance to provide us with qualitative responses as to the impact of COVID-19 on their businesses and to tell us of any additional support, which they would find useful.

Other business needs that emerged:

- **Financial support** - Women told us that they are facing new financial challenges – with an overwhelming response that they needed financial support, access to investors, and other material goods such as machinery and vehicles. While this is not something we provide, we are signposting access to finance as well as the related tools and resources we offer in order to build financial resilience
- **Social Protection** - What also came through loudly is that there is insufficient social protection and support for MSMEs being provided by the governments of many low and middle income countries.
- **Human Resources** - Many have fed back to us other needs for advice and skills in supporting their staff during the crisis, and in navigating having to let staff go because of its impacts.

Non-business-related compounding factors which came across strongly:

- Women spoke very openly about the challenges that they are facing in terms of juggling family priorities. Schools are closing. Many childcare centres on which women would ordinarily rely to go to work are also themselves small businesses, which are struggling and having to close. Gendered expectations around childcare responsibilities mean that women entrepreneurs are having to stop working in order to look after their children. And with more people at home the increased unpaid care work is being thrust into the remit of women we surveyed.
- Mental health was referred to less openly, but we could infer from the tone of the feedback and frequent references to “stress” that women entrepreneurs are experiencing a high levels of anxiety, and that this crisis is taking its toll on their wellbeing.

This research will also supplement our programmatic response by helping to inform our advocacy work to support women entrepreneurs, their families, communities and economies with recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

We are keen to work with others who are advocating for or can provide injections of cash and other needs for businesses, provision of better healthcare, and support with childcare. We aim to collaborate with these organisations to deliver a robust response.



Conclusion

The survey demonstrated how quickly COVID-19 has impacted on the businesses of the women in our programmes. We are concerned about longer-term impacts and it is increasingly clear that these are beyond the scale known in the last 50 years.

We will continue to evaluate the relevance and impacts of our programmes across our portfolio – Mentoring Women in Business, HerVenture and Road to Growth – so we can ensure women entrepreneurs are supported. We will do this through listening to the women entrepreneurs themselves, having regular engagement and conversations with our partners, and through conducting regular research and monitoring our impact.

We remain committed to working with technology to ensure women have access to tools, resources and networks they require, both through the pandemic and beyond.

How can you support us?

With major implications for economies, businesses and entrepreneurs around the globe, the need for our work during this time increases. If you are able to help by [making a donation today](#) or contacting us to build a funding partnership, you'll be enabling us to continue and expand the services women entrepreneurs need more than ever to support their families, communities and societies for years to come.

www.cherieblairfoundation.org.uk
partnerships@cherieblairfoundation.org

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