

# Gender Effects of COVID-19: Evidence from the Kenya Life Panel Survey

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We measure outcomes for Kenya Life Panel  
Survey (KLPS) respondents using phone surveys  
during the COVID-19 pandemic!

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## Topic at a Glance

The Kenya Life Panel Survey (KLPS) is a 20+ years longitudinal survey on health, educational, nutritional, demographic, social, and labor market outcomes among a sample of thousands of Kenyans who were participants in one or more randomized health, skills training, and financial capital interventions during childhood and adolescence. Respondents attended primary school in Western Kenya; many have since moved (and been tracked) around the country, and now reside in both rural and urban areas. We conducted phone surveys with KLPS respondents from April to September 2020 in order to understand their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These surveys measured labor market activity, childcare hours, food security, migration, the home learning environment (including parent-child reading), knowledge of COVID-19 and social distancing adherence. Schools in Kenya were closed for most of 2020, highlighting the importance of understanding female labor market outcomes and home learning. Phone surveys were conducted in representative batches, allowing us to trace out trends over time.



*Caption:* The gender pay gap grows with education. The gender pay gap is the highest for jobs requiring college educated candidates: job ads posted for male graduates advertise a 33% higher salary than those posted for women.

## New Insights

The coronavirus pandemic has caused economic disruptions and dramatic labor market changes around the world, both in terms of directly changing behaviors and through government policies and restrictions designed to reduce transmission. This has raised concerns among policymakers that gender gaps may be exacerbated, as many of these disruptions could disproportionately affect women. For instance, school closures -- a common policy response -- increase childcare expectations for adult women and increase the risk of dropout for girls. Women are more likely to be in the informal sector, and thus do not benefit from the expansion of formal social protection programs, such as expanded unemployment benefits; many areas also closed the markets used by informal traders. Lower living standards may also reduce agency and increase stress and domestic violence within the household.

This project seeks to better understand these effects, and the broader impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic using the Kenya Life Panel Survey (KLPS), a 20+ years longitudinal survey on health, educational, nutritional, demographic, social, and labor market outcomes among a sample of thousands of Kenyans who were participants in one or more randomized health, skills training, and financial capital interventions during childhood and adolescence. We conducted phone surveys between April and August 2020, and combine these with economic data collected from 2017-19 to provide a pre-COVID benchmark for comparison. Phone surveys of individuals also provide important microeconomic data that can be missed in official national statistics, such as informal sector economic activity, smallholder agriculture, home production and childcare. We surveyed over 75% of non-deceased respondents in our sample.

- We see substantial declines in total household earnings over the last 2 weeks during the early months of the pandemic, though there has been some gradual recovery. Total earnings in April are 50% lower than what respondents report for February, and have recovered to about 75% of these levels as of August. Wage earnings in particular are lower than 2017-19 averages, while self-employment profits and agricultural earnings have held steadier.

Trends in living standards, based on a short consumption expenditure module, are broadly similar.

- Reported hours worked actually increased in the early months of the pandemic for households in rural areas, while those in urban areas see a decline. While males have seen increases in hours worked over time, returning to 2017-19 levels, women in urban areas have not.

- We find large increases relative to 2017-19 averages for both men and women: women report almost a doubling of childcare hours from 16 to 30 hours per week; men also report roughly twice as many childcare hours relative to earlier survey averages. Note that this measure includes childcare that is being done concurrently with other tasks.

We are continuing to follow up with the respondents in this sample, which will provide important additional insights into the nature of any economic recovery that takes place over the course of 2021.

## Policy Recommendations

While we see some encouraging signs that economic recovery may have been beginning by August 2020, we document substantial declines in living standards during the initial months of the pandemic. The declines in living standards we document in this sample mirror falling living standards in nine low and middle income countries, highlighting the negative economic consequences of the pandemic in addition to its health effects. The authors have joined a call for bold international responses, including increasing investments in cash assistance and food security and prioritizing strategies that recognize the lengthy nature of the crisis. The international community should focus on both the health-related challenges of the pandemic -- including vaccine distribution in low and middle income countries -- and the economic challenges that the pandemic has created for many households.

The large increases in childcare hours, particularly for females, raises particular concerns about the labor market effects for women with children, an issue for many women around the world. It will be key to continue monitoring their labor force participation rates over the coming months. Interventions to promote female businesses may be needed.

Specific attention will also be required to ensure that, given the long absence from school and sometimes limited learning resources at home, students are able to successfully resume their studies and adequately progress with their educational attainment. It will also be important to continue monitoring child health. Declines in educational attainment and food security

for children may have long-term effects for their lives and livelihoods.

## Limitations

There are three main limitations to these results:

- When looking at trends over time, one cannot fully disentangle the effects of COVID-19 from seasonal fluctuations in earnings or living standards. The declines in living standards that we document are larger in magnitude than the seasonal declines that we see in data from previous years, but we cannot rule out that seasonal declines are also playing a role over this time period.

- Our results are representative of the KLPS sample, rather than the country as a whole. The KLPS respondents are representative of primary school students attending school in Busia in the late 1990s. That said, our history of interactions with these respondents, including the detailed contact information we collect, helped us obtain high survey rates, especially compared to phone survey methods such as random-digit dialing.

- Phone surveys are necessarily shorter than in-person surveys, and as such some of our surveys measures had to be shortened in order to remain feasible, and is thus not as rich as previous rounds of in-person longitudinal data.

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*G<sup>2</sup>LM|LIC is a joint program by IZA and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) – improving worldwide knowledge on labor market issues in low-income countries (LICs) and providing a solid basis for capacity building and development of future labor market policies.*