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Gendered impacts of COVID-19 and equitable policy responses in agriculture, food security and nutrition

SUMMARY

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, many countries are adopting measures to control the spread of the virus. While the health aspects of the pandemic have not affected rural areas as much as urban centres, containment measures pose new challenges to rural women with regard to their roles in maintaining household food security, as agricultural producers, farm managers, processors, traders, wage workers and entrepreneurs. Past experience shows that rural women are disproportionately affected by health and economic crises in a number of ways, including but not limited to food security and nutrition, time poverty, access to health facilities, services and economic opportunities, and gender-based violence. Further, COVID-19 is increasing women's work burden due to school closures and the additional care needs of sick household members.

This brief compiles evidence from current and previous epidemics to explore the socio-economic implications of the impact of this pandemic on food systems and rural economies, and how a gender-sensitive approach can help address key policy issues related to the functioning of food and agricultural systems and the special circumstances of rural women. It also provides concrete policy recommendations to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on rural women and girls.

Key messages

- Rural women face greater constraints than men in accessing productive resources, services, technologies, markets, financial assets and local institutions, which makes them more vulnerable to the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it.
- The effects of the pandemic are disproportionately affecting rural women's productive, reproductive and income-generating capacities because it tends to reduce their economic opportunities and access to nutritious foods while at the same time increasing their workloads and escalating gender-based violence.
- Policy responses should consider women's roles in agri-food systems and ensure that their multiple needs – as guardians of household food security, food producers, farm managers, processors, traders, wage workers and entrepreneurs – are adequately addressed.
- Rural women are key in producing, processing and trading food and agricultural products, and the COVID-19 pandemic tends to affect their agricultural activities more severely than

those of men. It is crucial to adopt special measures to support rural women's engagement in the agri-food value chains.

- Women are often constrained in their access to social protection programmes, such as cash transfers, public work programmes and asset transfers. Designing and delivering gender-sensitive social protection measures is key to reduce risks and ensure that rural women can equally benefit from such interventions.
- The tensions associated with stay-at-home measures and economic closures increase levels of gender-based violence. It is crucial to identify the most vulnerable women and girls (as well as men and boys) and develop measures to reduce their exposure to risks and increase their access to support services.
- Investing in women's leadership and engaging them in the design and implementation of COVID-19 response strategies is critical to ensure that their perspectives and needs are adequately considered.
- Supporting gender analysis and sex- and age-disaggregated data is an integral part of monitoring gender-related impacts and informing the design of response measures that adequately consider and address the differentiated needs and priorities of rural women and men.

POLICY ISSUES

Rural women are more likely than men to be affected by food insecurity and malnutrition

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it are already having a negative and gender-differentiated impact on all dimensions of food security and nutrition, through reduced food production and distribution capacities, decreased purchasing power and diminished access to nutritious food (CFS, 2020). Previous epidemics such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome and (AIDS), Ebola and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) have had a greater impact on marginalized and vulnerable women, children, the elderly and the poor than on men (Fan, 2020). Unequal access to resources and services, limited decision-making power, lower educational status and restricted mobility all affect the capacity of rural women to meet the nutritional needs of their families, access health services and earn an income during this pandemic.

There is also evidence that poor households adopt coping strategies during times of crisis like this, such as buying less food, switching to less nutritious food and reducing the number of meals eaten daily in response to reduced available income (FAO *et al.*, 2017). Given the sociocultural values and practices that underpin gender inequalities within households, women and girls tend to experience a reduction in their food intake quality and quantity in this type of situation (OXFAM, 2019). In many societies, tradition dictates that men eat first and receive the best food. In addition, when food is scarce, increased food insecurity combined with greater tensions in the household may place women at heightened risk of domestic violence (IASC, 2015).

It is worth mentioning that the 2007/2008 food crisis, which was related to high and volatile food prices, had a differentiated impact on men and women (FAO, 2012). Since they had limited access to productive resources and agricultural services, women farmers were less-well equipped than men to increase on-farm productivity, benefit from higher prices and meet the increased demand for food. The crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to affect rural women in a similarly disproportionate way.

Rural women's economic empowerment will be seriously compromised

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious threat to rural livelihoods by hindering the engagement of both women and men in economic activities as farmers, processors, traders and workers. Rural women are more vulnerable than men because they have access to fewer productive inputs, markets, services such as finance, extension and information. Consequently, women's food and crop production can decline, retail trade can fall and businesses collapse, especially if they specialize in perishable goods (Korkoyah and Wreh, 2015). Resulting declines in income can lead households to sell assets in order to buy food and other necessities, reducing their resilience and future productivity. Due to power imbalances in households, women's assets and crops may be the first to be sold and women's savings depleted (Frankenberger *et al.*, 2012). Quisumbing, Kumar and Behrman (2017) found that illness shocks had a large detrimental impact on wives' assets in Bangladesh and a death in the family negatively affected wives' assets in Uganda.

Lockdowns also undermine linkages between poor producers in rural areas and peri-urban and urban markets, affecting the income of producers. These rural–urban linkages, mainly dominated by women traders, are often unaccounted for in times of crisis and are overlooked by formal government support. For example, restrictions on the movement of goods and people during the 2014–2016 outbreak of Ebola virus disease in West Africa hampered women's trading activities, affecting trade both across borders and between communities (Korkoyah and Wreh, 2015; Kapur, 2020). These restrictions also limited the ability of women farmers to cultivate their land and engage in other agricultural activities. As a result, women were unable to pay back loans from village savings and loan associations, with negative implications for their livelihoods (UNDG, 2015; CARE, 2020).

Women are more likely than men to be engaged in informal and precarious employment, which is highly vulnerable during an economic downturn (IASC, 2020). These types of jobs do not guarantee institutional safeguards such as social insurance, pension or health insurance, leaving rural women unprotected in cases of illness or unemployment. The economic impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be felt especially by rural women and girls with disabilities, who generally earn less, save less and are more likely to live close to poverty than are able-bodied women and men. Rural women may also be constrained in their access to social assistance such as cash transfers and public works as a result of mobility constraints, care burden, constraints related to cultural norms or illiteracy and limited access to information on such schemes. Conditionalities of cash transfers can exacerbate women's time poverty and limit their ability to engage in income-generating activities (FAO, 2018a, b and c).

Rural women and girls are at increased risk of gender-based violence

Emerging evidence from the COVID-19 response shows an increase in violence, especially domestic violence and abuse against women and girls driven by tensions in the household related to isolation, food and financial insecurity, and to the closure of schools (CARE, 2020; IASC, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that 1.52 billion school students (87 percent of enrolled school-age children) and more than 60 million teachers are now at home because of COVID-19 school closures (UN Women, 2020). Rural women and girls have fewer opportunities to access support services and essential healthcare than their urban counterparts because of the reduced availability of legal, social and policing structures in rural areas. Food scarcity and restricted movement may also force women and girls into transactional sex and other forms of sexual exploitation.

Past experience shows that gender-based violence often goes substantially underreported and inadequately addressed during a crisis. For example, during the West Africa Ebola virus disease outbreak from 2013–2015, gender-based violence increased and victims were often uncounted and overlooked as these issues were largely overlooked during the response, leaving women highly vulnerable (Korkoyah and Wreh, 2015). Intersecting factors, such as age, socio-economic status, disability and ethnicity, are likely to increase the risk of gender-based violence during the COVID-19 emergency.

Rural women and their organizations are often excluded from decision-making and leadership roles in preparing the response and mitigation strategies

Sociocultural norms and gender roles often restrict rural women's ability to participate as decision makers in the design and implementation of response and mitigation strategies. Equitable participation of women and men in decision-making is crucial to ensure that their specific priorities are considered and shape development efforts, policies and programmes.

A recent global rapid gender analysis on COVID-19 found that most decision-making bodies established in response to the pandemic are dominated by men (CARE and IRC, 2020). Similarly, women and girls and their organizations are often excluded from community-level decision-making and governance structures that shape the response strategies during humanitarian crises (IASC, 2018).

Increase in women's workload across their multiple roles in productive, reproductive and community spheres

On average, women in rural contexts face an excessive work burden because of an unequal gender division of labour and their multiple roles (productive, reproductive and community), most of which are unpaid (OECD, 2020).

There is a risk that the COVID-19 pandemic will further increase women's work burden because of the increased number of people staying at home during quarantine and/or increased demands of caring for sick family members (UN Women, 2020). Women who provide care to household members with disabilities can be particularly affected. Access to healthcare facilities can also be more problematic for rural women living with disabilities and those who are pregnant and need maternal healthcare given that healthcare facilities are likely to be swamped. Many women are expected to work longer hours, juggling domestic responsibilities with productive work. School closures have a disproportionate impact on women who are responsible for out-of-school children. Furthermore, rural girls will likely work longer hours than boys because of having to take over part of their mothers' domestic housework and caregiving chores (IFAD, 2019).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy responses to address COVID-19 should consider women's key roles in agri-food systems and household food security and nutrition, as food producers, farm managers, processors, traders, wage workers and entrepreneurs. There are five key policy areas:

- **Ensure availability of sex- and age-disaggregated data and analysis for monitoring gender-related impacts**

This can help to tailor socially relevant and inclusive responses. Possible measures include the following:

- Collect sex-disaggregated data and evidence to assess the gendered impact of lockdowns on rural women and men in order to design differentiated preventive and response measures and develop robust gender-sensitive monitoring and reporting frameworks.
- Conduct gender analysis and mainstream gender in ongoing vulnerability assessments and rapid/fast track interventions to take into account the roles and responsibilities of men and women and their specific constraints and opportunities.
- Assess women's access to and benefit from social protection, emergency support and other policy instruments used for responding to the pandemic.

- **Establish measures to reduce gender inequalities in food security and nutrition**

Strategies should include both short-term assistance and livelihoods support in the long-term. Possible measures include the following:

- Design and implement gender-sensitive social protection interventions to ensure that rural women can participate in and benefit from the interventions equally.
 - Conduct gender and vulnerability analyses to assess socio-economic, health, disability and life-cycle risks to identify and prioritize the most vulnerable women and girls.
 - Set up or strengthen social assistance programmes consisting of in-kind assistance and cash transfers targeted at vulnerable women and girls. Relaxing conditions for social assistance programmes can address constraints linked to the greater care responsibilities and more-limited mobility of women.
 - Distribute food packages with adequate quantity and nutritional quality and/or use cash transfers to avoid reductions in food intake or switching to less-nutritious foods.
 - Provide information on available social assistance programmes, hygiene, food safety and nutrition and healthy diets using various communication channels; tailor the messages to different target audiences (including illiterate women).
- Support the productive capacity of men and women farmers by ensuring equitable access to productive resources, inputs and services for the next production season.
 - Set up social protection measures to promote productive investments, including agricultural inputs and cash transfers and "cash plus" programmes to help women farmers to recover from the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and to prepare for production in the following seasons.
 - Design and put in place long-term responses to enhance men and women farmers' access to and control over productive resources, inputs, rural services, producer organizations and collective action.
 - Establish innovative homestead food production programmes that will equip rural women and men with the knowledge and resources needed to produce and consume nutritious foods.
 - Adopt measures to provide targeted support to rural women with disabilities to allow them to continue generating income and a livelihood.

- **Adopt special measures to support rural women's economic activities in the agri-food value chains**

This will be crucial to ensure that the restrictions imposed do not threaten women's and men's livelihoods and their engagement in economic activities. Measures include the following:

- Put in place financial services support mechanisms targeting rural women's economic activities as producers, processors, traders and entrepreneurs.
 - Grant lower interest rates to economic activities in which women are over-represented and/or put in place relief funds and credit lines targeting women's economic activities.
 - Provide support to savings and loan mechanisms to which women have preferential access, such as village savings and loans associations and cooperatives, self-help groups and women's investment clubs, by including these mechanisms in financial policies aimed at providing relief from repayments by freezing interest payments.
 - Facilitate women's access to credit by relaxing or expanding acceptable collateral regimes (to include, for example, inventory, crops and livestock, jewellery, equipment) and group-lending schemes to respond to women's constraints and lack of collateral such as land and other household assets (FAO, 2018d).
- Facilitate men and women smallholders' access to markets by addressing mobility constraints, transportation restrictions and market disruptions.
 - Enhance women's access to markets through innovations such as mobile farm gate markets and/or electronic transaction systems to manage orders and sales of local products and public purchases of products.
 - Prioritize informal and microenterprises, which are mainly managed by women, in the relief response by ensuring their access to loans, and training and market linkages.
 - Strengthen women-run businesses in value chains that link rural and peri-urban and urban areas by establishing gender-sensitive business-development service centres close to the communities and villages; these should offer a wide portfolio of services tailored to women's specific needs.
- Adopt measures for protecting and supporting women's income-generating opportunities and labour-market participation that prioritize informal, part-time and seasonal workers.
 - Expand the job categories in public works programmes to include community-based care or home-based care of young children or sick household members, this can benefit rural women with care responsibilities and alleviate the burden on unpaid family caregivers.
 - Provide temporary employment and/or cash transfers to enhance the capacity of rural women to manage risk; this will contribute to safeguarding their welfare and productive assets and avoid harmful coping strategies, such as selling off assets and reducing food intake.
 - Put in place public work programmes that require minimum quotas for women's participation, provide transportation, childcare and separate toilet facilities and offer flexible working hours.
 - Adopt measures to prevent pregnant and lactating women being exposed to risk (e.g. flexible schedules to avoid the most crowded hours on public transport) and ensure the provision of sexual and reproductive health services (e.g. maternal health).

- Support enterprises – including micro and small enterprises – with high female participation rates to promote employment stability and transition from informal to formal arrangements.

- **Adopt programmatic and policy-oriented measures to address gender-based violence**

This includes undertaking protection risk analysis to generate data on the most affected populations, establishing mechanisms to ensure their participation in project design, and providing feedback during and after implementation. Specific measures include the following:

- Collect sex- and age-disaggregated data and conduct vulnerability assessments to identify the most vulnerable men and women, boys and girls, with particular attention to people with disabilities, internally displaced persons, migrants and refugees, to inform the design of differentiated protection and mitigation strategies and livelihood rehabilitation programmes.
- Raise awareness of existing and potential protection risks and strengthen the capacity of local partners and affected populations to identify and address these.
- Adopt the “do no harm” principle to prevent or minimize unintended negative effects that can increase people’s vulnerability to physical and psychosocial risks, and prioritize risk mitigation strategies.

- **Invest in women’s leadership and support their formal and informal networks to contribute to the COVID-19 response**

Responses and interventions should ensure that rural women and their organizations are at the forefront of the response to and mitigation of the COVID-19 response.

- Engage with rural women and their organizations in the design and implementation of response strategies to ensure that their needs are considered:
 - Establish quotas and targets for women’s participation and leadership in national and local-level committees and task forces organizing response to the pandemic to ensure that women’s voices are heard and that they can influence decision-making processes.
 - Enhance women’s leadership skills and self-confidence to ensure their effective participation as decision makers at different levels.
 - Raise awareness within institutions working on the COVID-19 response about the importance of addressing gender equality in the response policies and programmes and strengthen their capacity to respond appropriately.
- Engage with international, national and local civil society and non-governmental organizations and self-help groups to ensure a strong focus on gender equality in the COVID-19 response.
 - Leverage the presence of producers’ organizations, cooperatives, self-help groups, farmers’ associations and rural women’s organizations to facilitate the delivery of key government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, self-help groups can support delivery of cash transfers to ensure that women are not left out of the programmes.

ROLE OF THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

To address the gender implications of COVID-19, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) will work with member states to:

- support the design of gender-responsive policy measures in the COVID-19 response that address the needs of rural women and men;
- collect qualitative and quantitative sex-disaggregated data and evidence to assess the gendered impact of COVID-19 and the measures to contain it to inform future policy interventions;
- identify vulnerable rural women and their organizations in order to prioritize their needs and inform the design of response and mitigation strategies;
- integrate gender equality in strategies and recovery plans, paying attention to informal workers and gender inequalities in agriculture and rural sectors; and
- design long-term responses that support men and women farmers by enhancing equitable access to and control over productive resources, inputs, rural services, producer organizations and collective action.

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