

COVID-19 and Food Security: Gendered Dimensions*

May 19, 2020

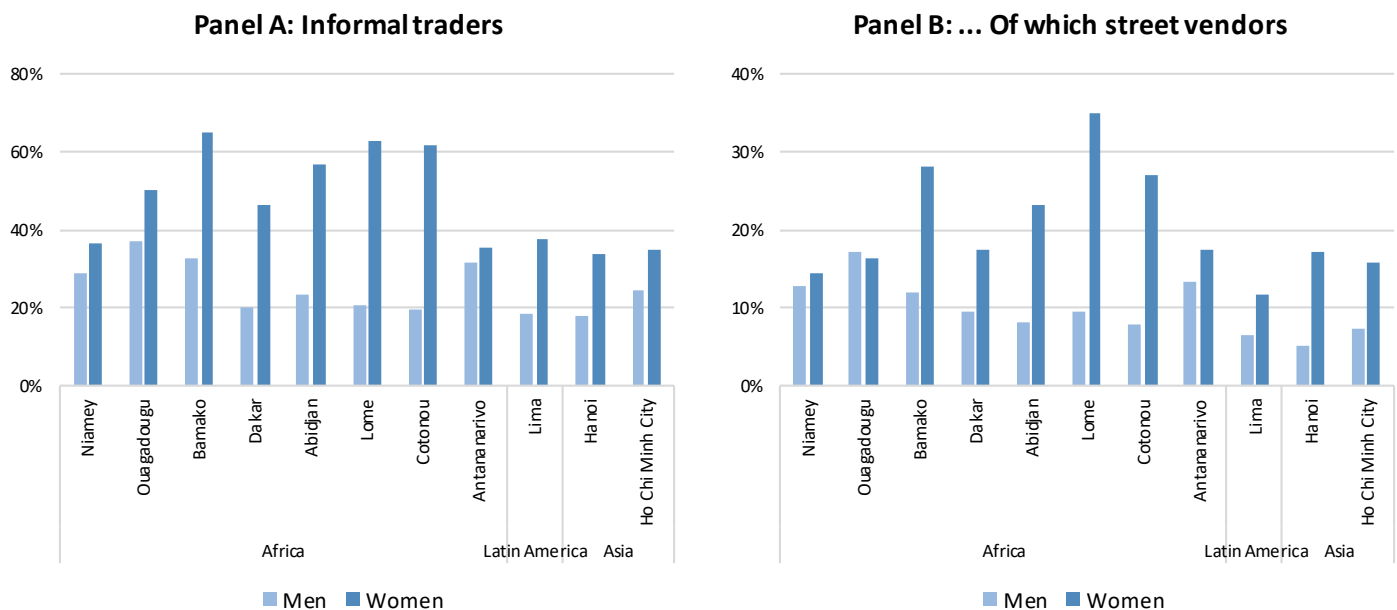
Across the developing world, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to cause massive disruptions in food supply chains. The World Food Programme estimates that by the end of 2020, 265 million will face acute food insecurity – twice as many as before the crisis. Women play a key role in keeping the food system functional. Their livelihoods also depend on these jobs, which are primarily concentrated in the informal sector, and they have little access to savings and social safety nets. This note highlights women’s contribution to food supply chains, focusing on women as informal producers and traders of food. It discusses potential impacts of the pandemic on their vulnerabilities and policy responses. It concludes with some early reports on how women along the food supply chain are rising to the challenge of COVID-19, and some considerations for investments in inclusive food systems.

1. COVID-19 and Women Food Traders

1.1. Urban Food Markets

Informal food markets are a major source of accessible and affordable food for households in urban areas. Indeed, a survey [documents](#) that about 70 percent of households across eleven African cities buy most of their food from informal daily food markets and street vendors. Street vending and informal trade are especially important sources of livelihoods and financial independence for women, who are the primary sellers of street foods and perishable goods, such as fruits and vegetables (see Figure 1, from [Roever and Skinner 2014](#)). To minimize the spread of the coronavirus, however, some governments across the developing world implemented lockdowns of these high-density markets. While possibly effective at delaying the spread of the virus, such measures [threaten](#) the flow of food trading in urban areas, and the incomes of women traders – who depend on those daily revenues to feed their families and keep their businesses going.

Fig 1: Shares of Informal Traders and Street Vendors in Total Non-Agricultural Informal Employment (%) by Gender



Source: Roever, S. and Skinner, C., 2016. "Street Vendors and Cities." *Environment and Urbanization*, 28(2): 359-374.

* This note was prepared by Joao Montalvao (Africa Gender Innovation Lab) and Patricia Van de Velde (Food and Agriculture Global Practice). We thank the cross-sectoral COVID-19 food security team for valuable discussions and comments. All errors remain our own.

Effective and sustainable mitigation measures should be implemented to protect the health and livelihoods of informal food market traders and customer. First, markets should be [redesigned](#) to minimize density while open, with measures such as alternating the days traders operate and customers visit, opening for operation every other day (and sanitizing them during the off days), or allowing traders to sell outside their homes (which can also help women cope with the increased caring responsibilities, as informal childcare arrangements may break down). Second, adherence to key COVID-19 preventive behaviors should be promoted through [carefully designed](#) health information campaigns, distribution of masks and soap bars to traders, and installation of hand-washing stations in markets. Women could participate in this economy of COVID-19 response; women could be hired to distribute masks, or manage washing stations, for example.

Third, cash transfers should be provided directly to women traders so that they can maintain their business, incomes, and consumption. Given the informal nature of these businesses, novel and practical approaches will need to be implemented to ensure that their owners are reached by any cash transfer program.¹ Whenever possible, digital payments can be made directly to the mobile money accounts (see [Togo example](#)). Market leaders can help create rapid listings of traders operating in the markets. Fourth, response efforts should leverage digital infrastructure in urban areas to not only better channel financial assistance directly and privately to women traders, but also to provide critical information (including about key public health messages, as well support initiatives by governments and other stakeholders). Market leaders and female roles models trading in the market should be mobilized to facilitate the implementation of these measures.

1.2. Cross-Border Food Trading

Women also comprise the majority of informal cross-border food trading activity in Africa, which in many countries outstrips official trading flows, thus contributing substantially to the movement of crops from food-surplus areas to deficit areas ([Brenton et al. 2013](#)). To contain the spread of coronavirus, many countries imposed restrictions on the movement of people and goods across their borders (as of March 29, 31 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa had [closed](#) their borders). The increased chaos and congestion at the borders can exacerbate specific challenges that women traders experience at border crossings, such as disproportionately higher levels of economic violence and coercion (such as prolonged inspections and quarantines, more bribes, more likely to have their goods confiscated or withheld), sexual violence, harassment and exploitation, as well as physical violence and verbal harassment by border officials and police ([Brenton et al. 2013](#), [Jacobson and Joekes 2019](#)).

Effective and sustainable mitigation measures should be implemented to keep food trade flowing across borders and protect the health and livelihoods of cross-border traders. First, adherence to key COVID-19 preventive behaviors should be promoted at the border through [carefully designed](#) health information campaigns, distribution of masks to border officials, installation of hand-washing stations, distribution of soap bars, and respectful health screening and triage strategies. Second, gender-based violence at borders should be mitigated through awareness-raising and gender-sensitive training of border officials and cross-border traders ([Croke et al. 2020](#)). Third, cash transfers should be provided directly to women cross-border traders so that they can afford the increased transportation and transaction costs; and maintain their businesses, incomes, and consumption. Given the informal nature of these businesses, novel and practical approaches will need to be implemented to ensure that their owners are reached by any cash transfer program. Fifth, response efforts should expand leverage digital infrastructure to better channel to better channel financial assistance directly and privately to women cross-border traders, and to provide them with critical information (including about key public health messages, as well support initiatives by governments and other stakeholders). In that vein, women informal

¹ The pandemic highlights the benefits of formalization of microenterprises in developing countries, as informality makes it more difficult for these businesses and their owners to access government programs aimed at mitigating impacts of COVID-19. In general the perceived benefits of formalizing are not automatic for businesses (see e.g. [Campos et. al 2018](#)).

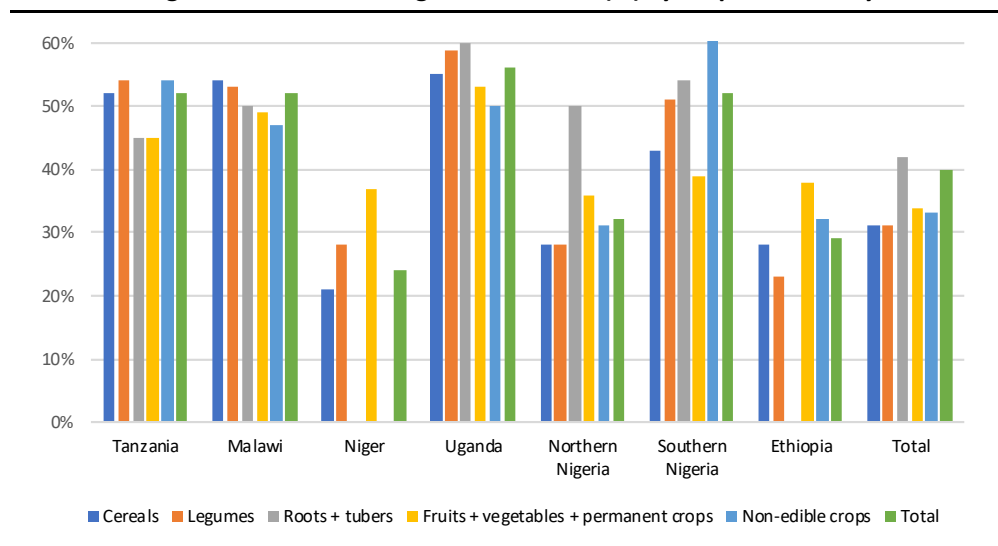
traders should be provided with mobile phones ([Suri and Jack 2016](#), [Aker and Ksoll 2016](#)) – as generally women are less likely than men to own mobile phones.

Policy Responses: Redesign food markets for social distancing; Use markets and borders as information and sanitation “hotspots”; Enhance capacity of border officials on gender; Mitigate GBV risks; Deliver cash transfers to women traders; Leverage digital infrastructure for reach, privacy, and empowerment; Give mobile phones to women traders.

2. COVID-19 and Women Food Producers

About 70-80 percent of farmland in low-income countries is managed by smallholders ([Lowder et al. 2016](#)), and most households, in turn, depend on smallholder farming for their livelihoods. Women play a key role in smallholder agriculture. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, they supply about 40 percent of total agricultural labor (see Figure 2, from [Palacio-Lopez et al. 2015](#)) – despite assuming much greater responsibilities for domestic chores and the caring of children and older adults. More than 60 percent of all employed women in Africa work in agriculture. Women are increasingly [likely](#) to be head-of-household, with nearly one in four households in rural Africa headed by women – who like men grow and sell staple crops (see Figure 3).

Fig 2: Female Share of Agricultural Labor (%) by Crop and Country



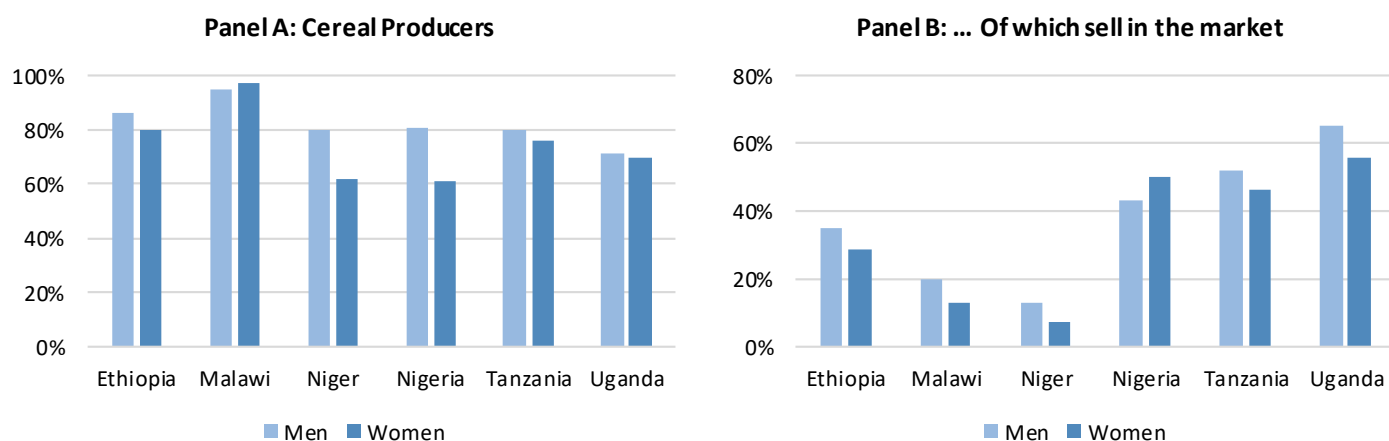
Source: Palacios-Lopez, A., Christiaensen, L. and Kilic, T., 2015. “How Much of the Labor in African Agriculture is Provided by Women?” *Food Policy*, 67: 52-63.

While the impacts of the pandemic are likely to be largest in dense urban and peri-urban areas, it will, however, also impact smallholder farmers—mostly through the disruptions in transportation logistics and demand for food. In some areas it is time to plant, in other areas it is time to harvest. However, markets are partially closed, and input suppliers and aggregators cannot easily move around. Post-harvest losses will likely increase, and investments in key productive inputs (seeds, fertilizer, and pesticides) will decrease. Farmers’ incomes will likely drop, and so will their ability to both feed their families and channel food to local food supply chains.

The impacts may be particularly severe for female farmers because of existing inequalities that constrain women’s agricultural productivity and access to markets. For example, temporary school closures and increased susceptibility of the elderly to the virus will increase women’s disproportionately large unpaid domestic and family care responsibilities. In rural areas, this will result in even less time available for women to farm the land, travel to markets to buy inputs and sell produce, and participate in development programs. Reports from different development countries suggest that many

informal urban laborers are migrating back to rural areas during the COVID crisis which could increase competition for the already disproportionately limited access women have to land, labor, and economic opportunities in rural areas. More generally, evidence shows that systematically, women farmers have poorer access to input and output markets, labor, information, and finance; and they are subject to ingrained norms and institutional barriers that further reduce their negotiation power ([O’Sullivan et al. 2014](#)). The greater barriers faced by women farmers can compound the impact that COVID-19 will have on their productivity, incomes, and food security – and this, in turn, can further exacerbate the barriers they will face in the longer term.

Fig 3: Shares of Cereal Producers and Sellers (%) by Gender of Household Head (Rural Areas)



Source: 2015/16 Ethiopian Socioeconomic Survey, 2016/17 Malawi Integrated Household Survey, 2018/19 Nigeria General Household Panel Survey, 2014/15 Tanzania National Panel Survey, and 2015/16 Uganda National Panel Survey

In order to provide a buffer for women farmers’ vulnerabilities and leverage on their capacity to keep the food system functional, policy responses should be tailored and targeted to them. First, adherence to key COVID-19 preventive behaviors should be promoted, through carefully designed information campaigns. Communities should have uninterrupted supply of clean water, and be supplied with free soap and disinfectant. Second, women farmers should be supported to channel their produce to the markets. Third, cash transfers should be transferred directly to female farmers so that they continue to produce, and sustain their incomes and food security. Fourth, countries should leverage (and expand) digital infrastructure in rural villages, as well as women’s access to mobile phones, to better channel to them critical information and financial assistance (as well as monitor their situation and health). Fifth, women should be supported through direct input provision to help mitigate systemic lower access to productive inputs.

To facilitate the flow of inputs and produce while reducing the need for mobility, local networks of female farmers should be leveraged to aggregate their demand (of inputs) and supply (of produce), and collection and distribution points should be set up near the communities. Indeed, a study shows that input vouchers had a clear, positive impact on input investment, especially when the inputs were delivered directly to villages (rather than necessitating villagers travel to purchase them). And recent research shows that providing inputs directly to women farmers has positive impacts on farm investment decisions, food production, and family consumption ([Beamen et al. 2013](#) and [here](#)). Providing direct (financial or other) incentives to intermediaries to not overlook women farmers could be considered, in addition to opening “green channels” to transport inputs and fresh agricultural produce. Investments in storage and technology to mitigate against post-harvest losses will also bolster women’s ability to last longer without direct access to markets.

Digital platforms should be leveraged to channel cash transfers to female farmers (through mobile money platforms) to both minimize human contact and increase privacy and security ([Aker et al. 2016](#)). In that vein, women farmers should be

provided with mobile phones ([Suri and Jack 2016](#), [Aker and Ksoll 2016](#)) – as generally women are less likely to own mobile phones than men. If mobile phone payments are not feasible in remote rural areas, recent [research](#) shows that a larger cash transfer can yield the same positive impacts at a lower implementation cost and with fewer person-to-person interactions, compared to many smaller transfers.

Digital platforms should also be leveraged to deliver key extension advice ([Fabregas et al. 2019](#)), as well as to collect and provide COVID-specific health information (hand-washing, avoiding large crowds, minimizing nonessential travel, isolation if symptomatic). Digital training could adapt lessons from emerging [research](#) indicating the promising impacts of gender-sensitive agricultural extension services

Policy Responses: Ensure health of female farmers; Channel female farmers’ produce to market; Channel inputs to female farmers’; Deliver cash transfers to women farmers; Create, support and leverage networks of female farmers; Give mobile phones to women farmers; Leverage digital infrastructure for reach, privacy and empowerment; Enhance digital training on production and marketing.

4. Discussion

As countries and regions have had staggered lockdowns and likely face different peaks of pandemic, the information on initial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on women along the food supply chain remain anecdotal.² There is some promising evidence that lessons learned during past food crises have been operationalized: where there were concerted efforts to strengthen women’s networks for savings, accessing value chains, and disseminating productive information, women and their communities are more resilient to this food supply crisis. For example, the National Rural Livelihoods mission in [India](#), which has enrolled more than 667 million women, developed a Self Help group model which has been tapped into and can act as financial corridors for cash transfers, to distribute sanitary equipment and to sew masks, and other information dissemination. Another promising example comes from [Vanuatu](#), where climate-smart and risk mitigation tools set up to empower women are also proving to be critical to strengthening the capacity of women farmers during national lockdowns: women are leveraging a climate information network set up to transmit meteorological information for disasters and agriculture information in local languages.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research sought to understand why women are an increasing share of the agricultural labor force, aiming to consolidate women’s gains in the sector and empower women farmers to boost their productivity. Any response should first ensure that these gains are not reversed, and then seek to restructure food systems built on inclusion as a primary pillar in order to remedy gender inequality at the systemic level. History has shown that crisis can also offer a chance to rebuild—and invite paradigm shifts in the way we can support with women farmers—with the evidence that investing in women’s capacities as farmers and producers yields more than just food, there is plenty of impetus to create valuable support systems for women farmers. In recent remarks on the potential food crisis, Johan Swinnen, director general of the International Food Policy Research Institute, noted that “Greater inclusivity in food systems is not a panacea for this or any other crisis, but it is a critical part of strengthening our resilience.” Policy responses should aim to integrate women effectively into the food supply system to build its overall capacity, and thus protect farmers’ lives and livelihoods.

² This note has focused on women as informal smallholder farmers and traders of food. But clearly women also play important roles in other segments of food supply chains. For example, in some regions of Africa and Asia, about 60 percent of [seafood](#) is marketed by women – also mostly informally. While fishing in most countries has continued to a certain extent, the processing, marketing and other work related to fish retail has been halted to slow the spread of the epidemic.