

Covid-19 Food Crisis

Monitoring Research



ActionAid conducted qualitative research in September 2020 to understand **how Covid-19 and the measures undertaken to control it have affected the lives and livelihoods of women smallholder farmers in 14 selected countries in Asia and Africa.** Employing a feminist analysis, the research used a purposive sampling approach, i.e. a selected sample comprised of respondents who were representative of the target populations we wished to study. The research sought to understand whether Covid-19 has led to any changes in the following five thematic areas: **food security** and prevalence of hunger; **access to markets** to buy food as well as sell produce; prevalence of **gender-based violence (GBV)**; preparedness for the next **sowing season**; and **coping strategies and innovations** by smallholder women farmers.

In Asia, the research was conducted in Bangladesh and Nepal. In Africa, the research was undertaken in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The study covered 190 individuals, of whom:

- 79 were smallholder farmers - 80% of whom were women smallholders.
- 72 were farmer leaders - 71 of whom were women farmer leaders, together representing 80,876 smallholder women farmers.
- 22 were government officials, extension workers and NGO staff - of whom 12 were men and 10 were women, all of whom in total reach out to a rural population of 721,560 individuals across these countries.
- 17 were market vendors or market association members.

Findings

The Covid crisis did not happen in vacuum. It came on top of multiple existing crises caused by conflict, natural disaster, climate change, transcontinental outbreaks of pests, as well as sustained failures by States to invest in gender-responsive public services and social protection. The effects of the rapidly implemented and severely restrictive measures aimed at stemming the spread of the virus have triggered increased hunger in rural areas, where many poor households rely on small-scale and subsistence farming, daily wages, remittances, tourism and school feeding programmes. While Covid-19 affected the entire smallholder farming community in the 14 countries, women were more adversely affected than men. For example, it led to increased workloads for women within households, as well as reduced food availability, as women tended to prioritise the food needs of children and men over themselves.

1 Covid-19 reduced income levels for many smallholder women farmers. Market disruptions such as closure of local markets made it difficult for women smallholder farmers to sell food they had grown, as well as to buy supplementary foodstuffs. This in turn affected income levels and access to food for their households.

Some 83% of the respondents reported facing loss of livelihoods and income. Over 93% of participants confirmed that the Covid-19 pandemic had led to reductions in their savings, which were having to be used to cover essential household needs. Approximately 60% of the respondents had to take out loans to meet their household needs. Reduced income led to limitations in liquidity, which in turn led to obstacles to investing in farming activities and to obtaining food, ultimately leading to reduction in the quantity and quality of food available to them.

“Right now, we are not eating for a balanced diet but for survival”- Catherine Wanja, woman smallholder farmer from Isiolo county, Kenya

2 Covid-19 related market disruptions led to reduced access to markets, which had several debilitating effects:

- A. Reduced access to inputs, such as seeds and fertilisers, due to increases in price as well as non-availability, which further affected farm production.
- B. Reduced market hours and rotations of vendors (i.e. limits to the time they were allowed to spend at the markets) affected about 50% of the respondents and their businesses.
- C. Restrictions on movement affected the market price of the produce being sold in the markets. On the one hand, locally produced crops were sold at lower prices, given the reduced number of buyers and the over-supply due to limited market access. On the other hand, other food and items coming from other regions that were usually purchased locally were scarce and sold at higher prices, often by middlemen, as a result of the increased transport costs associated with travel restrictions or due to hoarding.

"We were not able to get food because our farm produce, garlic and onions, was the non-household food but we used to export to Kenya. The rest was sold in hotels and restaurants in different cities in Rwanda. Due to lack of buyers, we could not even get money to buy the food from the market."

Mukanganzizi Marie Chantal, smallholder woman farmer from Northern Province, Rwanda

- D. Closure of markets induced a change in buyers' and consumers' behaviour because of the fear of being in crowded spaces and of contracting Covid-19. Farmers reported being more dependent on middlemen, incurring higher costs and reducing selling opportunities and profits.

"We had produced foods but due to restrictions on vehicle movement, we couldn't sell it in the market. Our product got wasted and we didn't make money for the last 5 or 6 Months"

Sanu Nagarkoti, smallholder woman farmer from Lalitpur, Nepal.

Over 93% of women smallholders participating in this research reported that they experienced an increase of over 10% in the prices of the goods they do not produce and which they usually purchase. A participant from Ghana described the price increases experienced in her community: "We used to buy maize at GHC 5.00 (USD \$0.87) per bowl and last week we bought at GHC 8.00 (USD \$1.39). The price of rice has also increased. We used to buy the local rice at GHC 7.00 (USD \$1.2) but now it is GHC 10.00 (USD \$1.74). Beans price also increased from GHC 6.00 (USD \$1.1) to GHC 12.00 (USD \$2.1)". Gbande Veronica, smallholder woman farmer from Northern/Nanumba North, Ghana

3 Women and men smallholders had to skip meals because of shortage of food at household level, and women more so than men.

Parents - especially women - prioritized their children's nutrition over their own.

Over 58% of the smallholder women farmers interviewed confirmed that parents, especially women, had to skip meals over the lockdown period. Children were severely impacted by food insecurity following the closure of schools which, in many cases, offered feeding programs that would guarantee children at least one nutritious meal a day. This has impacted the nutrition of both women and children.

"My husband and I have started to skip food to feed our baby. Hunger puts detrimental effects on children. In empty stomach they can't even focus on reading. That's why my husband and I am skipping our three times meal and eat only two times, even sometimes have only one meal."

Laila Begum, a smallholder farmer from Gaibandha, Bangladesh.

A reduction in the number of meals, cooking food just once a day, reduced rations and, when food was particularly scarce, prioritizing men's and children's meals, limited the nutritional intake of women.



4 Lockdown restrictions also caused an increase in police bribery, stigmatization, intimidation and sometimes harassment.

In some countries, such as in Zimbabwe, people were required to purchase a movement permit from the police, which created another obstacle and cost that farmers had to take into account when deciding to travel to the markets. Rosemary Manyunga, a woman smallholder farmer from Nyanga, Zimbabwe, reflected: *“We also need letters to travel to the market. We stay far away from the police station. So, we need money to travel to acquire the letter and it is not easy to acquire one. In some cases, we get the letters from the village head. The challenge is that some village heads do not have a stamp. At the roadblocks the police require every letter to be stamped and signed. So, accessing the markets has not been easy since the start of the lockdown and travel restrictions”.*

In another case, Laxmi Lohar, a woman smallholder farmer from Doti, Nepal, said: *“People believe that the place I live in has many Covid-19 cases. They constantly tell us ‘there is corona in your village so don’t come here’. This has made it difficult for us to go to the market.”*

5 The impacts of Covid-19 have led to an increase in women’s unpaid care and domestic work.

Over 60% of the respondents confirmed that the household chores of women had increased during the last six months.

In households where the men worked as labourers or waged employees, job losses caused by lockdown restrictions along with school closures meant that women experienced an increase in the number of dependents, leading to an increased burden of ensuring household food and nutritional needs were met, as well as greater levels of unpaid care and domestic work. The unequal division of labour within the household resulted in women and girls taking responsibility for the vast majority of such unpaid care work.

“Because of COVID 19, the extended family depended on me. So, we could not get enough food to feed ourselves.” **Hagar Tiah Nyamekye, woman smallholder farmer from Bono, Tia, Ghana.**

Due to the closure of schools, in many cases girls too have had to take on more household work than before.

6 Gender-based violence (GBV¹) has intensified due to Covid-19 restrictions and social isolation measures²

Over 52% of respondents reported an increase in GBV in their community. Over 64% of the women smallholder farmers underlined that during this lockdown women and girls have experienced an increase in violence.

Yandeh Gissey, woman smallholder farmer from North bank region, Upper Niumi district of The Gambia said: *“In my community, we are witnessing physical abuses to women and girls by men. Especially where the women provide for the family and now they cannot, the husband is always violent. If men equally cannot provide for the family, and the women ask questions, it is still a problem”.*

Other participants reported several problematic behaviours, such as men forcefully taking money from their wives, increases in police harassment of women and girls, and an increased lack of confidentiality and difficulty in reporting cases of violence to the relevant institutions. Similarly, with school closures, there is increased ‘policing’ of the movements of girls by household members, leading to increased stress and tension for the girls.

GBV is being driven by patriarchal norms that condone and normalise gender-based violence in both private and public spaces, with women blamed when they transgress stereotypical norms and expectations. It is well documented that GBV increases with any type of emergency, including health epidemics. With one in three women experiencing GBV in their lifetime, it was a global pandemic long before the onset of Covid-19. The reality of underfunded, understaffed and poorly coordinated essential services to address gender-based violence is made more stark by rising GBV cases in the context of Covid-19, which is headlined by ‘stay at home’ directives that amount to confinement in hostile environments for many women and girls.

7 The longstanding impacts are yet to come: The dark future

Not only does the loss of income and jobs affect access to food for many households with disproportionately negative impacts on women, but the more severe impacts will be felt in the future if we don't act now.

The next planting season is at risk:

One of the biggest challenges faced by smallholder farmers was the reduced access to inputs (seeds, fertilizers), due to their increased costs and lockdown restrictions, including the closure of borders and limited access to markets where such inputs are purchased. Some 91% of research participants confirmed that they intend to continue to engage in farming, fishing and livestock production over the next six months. But the current situation means that they will probably be obliged to introduce **changes, such as reducing the size of their farm and changing crops, with great uncertainties of what this will mean for their future income.**

"I reduced the farm size and did not cultivate yam since the cost involved in cultivating yam is higher. I concentrated more on the cereals to get better yield." Gbande Veronica, smallholder woman farmer from Northern/Nanumba North, Ghana

Anwara Begum, a woman smallholder farmer from Sunamgonj, Bangladesh, stated: "I am still struggling with the situation. I am surviving by catching fish from ponds and producing vegetables such as onion, garlic, lentils, chillies etc. on land".

Another challenge is the reduced access to extension services. This is coupled with an increased reliance on fertilisers and chemicals, with governments distributing them through public schemes. This will increase small-holder farmers' input costs and be detrimental to agricultural ecosystems in the long run.

A male extension officer, Trymore Chinyama, from Makoni, Zimbabwe, who supports 1428 smallholders, reflected: "Covid-19 has resulted in a lot of changes. There is limited movement in the Chiendambuya area where I work. Our work has been affected in terms of mobility. We are no longer able to move around and conduct trainings with large gatherings. We have to adhere to the Covid restrictions of avoiding large gatherings and observing social distancing. The restrictions have greatly affected our work".

Another participant from Tanzania pointed out when she was discussing the pivotal importance of soil mapping: "The government uses a lot of money to import fertilizer without checking what nutrient[s] lack from the soil – this affects productivity". Mariam Zablon, a woman smallholder farmer from Dodoma, Tanzania.



ActionAid Call to Action

Women smallholder farmers are the primary food producers across Africa and Asia. A Covid-19 relief package that is fine-tuned to the needs of women smallholder farmers, including through the development of gender-sensitive social protection programmes, and measures to address both immediate needs and ensure their rights are fulfilled in the longer term, is the most pressing need. Some 91% of research participants confirmed that they intend to continue engaging in farming, fishing and livestock production over the next six months. We therefore urge that governments and donors take actions to ensure that.

1. Women smallholder farmers are in urgent need of seed capital and interest-free financing to invest in farming activities and switch to cultivations that respond to new and unprecedented demands.
2. Women need improved access to technical assistance, equipment and agricultural inputs tailored to their needs, means and time availability. These range from support to better adapt to climate change (such as easy access to weather information, soil mapping, and agroecological practices to improve agro-ecosystems, build climate resilience, and improve fertility and productivity of soils), as well as support to enable women small-holders to adapt to changing and fluctuating markets (for instance, support to diversify crops, for the processing of food and non-food products, and income generation activities). Government procurement programmes that prioritize products from women small-holder farmers groups and cash transfers for women are essential.
3. Women need quality, gender-responsive infrastructure to reach local and domestic markets safely and in reasonable time, to store and process crops that cannot be sold, to easily access water and firewood, and enhance the productivity of their farms. Across the 14 countries, the women interviewed highlighted better roads and transport connecting them with markets and urban centres as critical enabling factors for their livelihoods.
4. Governments must enact their regulatory role and enforce legal frameworks to protect the rights of farmers and prevent speculators from profiting from their hard labour. Such regulatory measures relate to the monitoring of markets, the regulation of food prices, and government intervention to keep supply chains functioning, while also enforcing quality assurance on seeds and inputs.
5. Women's human rights must be guaranteed. The specific challenges faced by women in agriculture, including the prevailing marginalisation and exclusion of women farmers due to patriarchal norms, need to be addressed. In particular, women must have secure access to and control over land and other productive natural resources, which in many countries is fraught with legal and administrative obstacles, exposing women to a whole range of vulnerabilities and rights denials. Women's right to their right to meaningful participation in the decision-making processes, including with respect to Covid-related measures, must be recognized and fulfilled. Women and girls' caring responsibilities must be recognised, reduced and redistributed, through for example investments in quality, gender responsive public services in rural areas, including healthcare, the establishment of early childcare centres, water and sanitation, and child feeding programmes.
6. Governments must recognize the rise and intensification in GBV, classify GBV services, including women's shelters, as essential services that can continue to operate during lockdown and urgently increase resources to prevent and respond to GBV to levels that are commensurate with the crisis, including direct funding to Women's Rights Organizations.
7. In order to address all these needs, Governments must play their part by discussing and coordinating their efforts through the Committee on World Food Security and by funding the Global Agriculture Food Security Program. This includes the launch of its extraordinary call for proposals which is due in early 2021, targeting producer organizations, as well as low-income countries that are highly affected by the crisis.

References:

¹ GBV is rooted in patriarchal norms that condone the dominance and control over women, their bodies and their lives by men. It can include actual or the threat of physical, sexual or psychological or economic harm, with women commonly blamed for somehow 'provoking' such attacks, for instance, by transgressing or failing to meet stereotypical gender norms. Even before Covid, globally on average, one in three women experience violence in their lifetimes (Ref: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>), and for many this is a daily occurrence. GBV has dramatically intensified during Covid, especially intimate partner violence, and has been dubbed a 'shadow pandemic' by UN Women (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>)

² In posing questions around GBV, research teams were trained on the need to follow a sensitive and survivor-led approach to the interviews, including with respect to privacy, confidentiality and informed consent, as well as safeguarding, including halting interviews if distress was detected and referring participants to appropriate support services.