

ADVANCING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN SMALLHOLDER FARMERS:

Lessons from COVID-19

POLICY BRIEF JUNE 2021



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COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

Mansata Keita participating in training of reforestation techniques and planting fruit and leguminous trees. CREDIT: MOUSSA SYLLIA / ACTIONAID SENEGAL

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Acronyms

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

DRC Democratic Republic of Congo

FAO Food and Agriculture Organization

GBV Gender-based violence

GIEWS Global Information and Early Warning System

ILO International Labour Organization

LGBTIQ+ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Plus



Raju Bhandari weeding in her garden during Covid-9 lockdown. PHOTO: DIVYA SHAH / NEPAL

1. INTRODUCTION

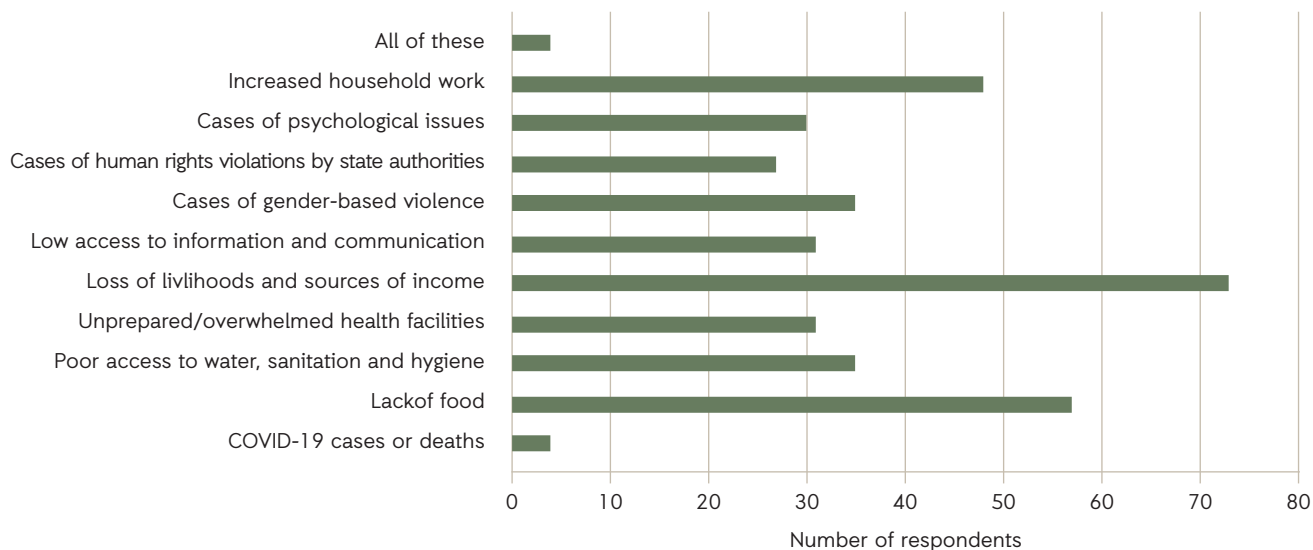
Short-term disruptions due to Covid-19 are expected to have long-lasting negative effects, particularly in the Global South. During previous epidemics and pandemics, women and girls have been disproportionately affected - by the disease burden, its socioeconomic impacts, and inadequate government responses. Pre-existing inequalities and discrimination have made women even more vulnerable. The Covid-19 pandemic has been no exception.

Declining economic activity due to restrictive pandemic containment measures has led to rising unemployment and loss of livelihoods, with consequent reductions in income and purchasing power. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that an estimated 5.4% of global working hours (equivalent to 155 million full-time jobs) were lost during the first quarter of 2020, relative to the fourth quarter of 2019.¹ These changes

have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities (based on gender, class, race and age) in the Global South, both in urban areas, where the vast majority of jobs are in the informal economy, and in rural communities, where significant knock-on effects have taken a toll on smallholder women farmers.

Women smallholder farmers are at the centre of agri-food systems –on farms and in micro, small and medium enterprises. Women provide farm labour, including as migrant farmworkers, processors and traders (including small and informal and cross-border traders), as well as overseeing household security and nutrition. Despite this, women smallholder farmers often have fewer legal rights, entitlements and social protections than men.² Women’s agricultural work is so systemically undervalued that they are often not recognised as farmers, resulting in their exclusion from national laws, agricultural interventions and policies.³

Figure 1: Impact of Covid-19 on smallholder women farmers



Women farmers have lower access to productive assets including land, input and output markets, labour, information, financial assets and technical (extension) assistance and support, and organised social protection programmes.⁴ They are also subject to socially ingrained norms and institutional barriers that further reduce their negotiation power and restrict their participation in decision-making and policy implementation processes, from local to global levels.⁵ Such inequalities make women smallholder farmers vulnerable, even in cases of temporary disruption.

ActionAid’s research across 13 countries in Asia and Africa⁶ found that Covid-19 and its associated measures have further worsened the challenges facing women smallholder farmers. The impact of the pandemic has affected multiple aspects of the lives of women smallholder farmers (as shown in the figure below), from undermining their food security and eroding their savings, to increasing their workload and heightening the risk of gender-based violence (GBV).

There is increasing recognition that women are bearing much of the impact of this unprecedented crisis, both as small-scale farmers and as caregivers.⁷ Covid-related shocks have forced many to rely on coping mechanisms with potential long-lasting negative effects, such as selling off their productive assets or making fewer investments towards next season’s harvest.⁸

Covid-19 has added to the load of already overburdened women. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, women supply about half of agricultural labour, whilst also carrying a disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic work including the care of children, the sick and older people.⁹ The typical working day of an African rural woman lasts up to 16 hours, longer in some cases, during which they perform many tasks, often at the same time. Across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, rural women typically work 12 hours more per week than men.¹⁰

Women who become widowed, including due to Covid-19, risk disinheritance, as women’s property rights are often conditional on marriage, based on patriarchal cultural norms. ActionAid’s research found that, in India, the pandemic has forced many migrant workers to return to their villages, creating greater competition over land, food and water resources. These dynamics put women’s already fragile land tenure security to the test, risking widening the gender gap in investment, productivity and incomes.¹¹

During the pandemic, there has also been a significant increase in GBV against women. Before the pandemic one in three women experienced physical or sexual violence (usually from an intimate partner), and the restrictions on movement have seen dramatic increases and intensification of such violence.¹²

‘GBV has dramatically intensified during Covid-19, especially intimate partner violence, and has been dubbed a ‘shadow pandemic’ by UN Women.’

WHO. 2020. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN FACTSHEET

1.1 METHODOLOGY

This policy brief draws on research undertaken by ActionAid over August and September 2020 in 13 countries across Africa and Asia to ask: **“How is Covid-19 (and measures to contain the virus) impacting women smallholder farmers in the Global South?”**¹³

Informed by ActionAid’s Feminist Research Guidelines,¹⁴ the research sought to adopt a feminist approach, to ensure empowerment and solidarity building for shifting power, through the transformative construction of knowledge and narratives around smallholder women farmers and the challenges they face within the Covid-19 crisis. Interviews were primarily conducted with women smallholder farmers, to ensure that they were able to speak for themselves.

The study combined qualitative and quantitative questions and data, in particular, key informant interviews with women farmers and other stakeholders, and data collection through SMS survey questionnaires. The data collected was then coded and analysed against a set of hypotheses to track emerging trends. Codes were clustered together in a set of themes using mind-mapping software. The themes were identified, and the nuances within them were then triangulated against secondary data.

The research focused on five thematic areas:

1. **Food security** for women smallholder farmers and their families;
2. **Access to markets** and the ability of women smallholder farmers to buy and sell their produce;
3. **Preparedness and plans** for the next agricultural growing season;
4. **Unpaid care and domestic work;** and
5. **Gender-based violence.**¹⁵

In the review process, **opportunities and strategies** to cope with the impacts of Covid-19 were examined for each of the five thematic areas.



Women training on how to nurture their kitchen garden, an important fallback for food security during Covid 19 Crisis. PHOTO: SWALEH KITASI / ACTIONAID KENYA



Practicing adaptation measures for sustainable production and productivity. PHOTO: KAKAD MANGOLA / ACTIONAID ZAMBIA

2. FRAGILITY OF FOOD SECURITY DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

In **DRC**, the number of people with acute food insecurity increased from 15.6 million (2019) to 21.8 million during the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020.

In **Ethiopia**, the number of food insecure people increased by 500,000, reaching 8.5 million in 2020.

FSIN. GLOBAL REPORT ON FOOD CRISES 2020

A person is food secure when they have regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. According to the recently published State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020, in 2019 nearly 690 million people were chronically food insecure.¹⁶ Preliminary projections

suggest that the pandemic may add between 83 and 132 million people to the total number of chronically undernourished in the world, depending on the economic growth scenario.¹⁷

As such, Covid-19 has exacerbated an already dire food security situation in the Global South, impacting:

- the **availability of food** (due to reduced food available on the market);
- **incomes** (due to job losses and loss of market opportunities);
- the **ability to purchase food** (due in part to reduced household purchasing power and closure of markets);
- **food value and supply chains** (caused by lockdown measures, restricted movements and border closures); and
- the **prices of food supplies** (due in part to higher prices as a result of panic buying and hoarding).¹⁸

Between 73 and 83 % of respondents reported a loss of livelihoods and sources of income. Over 65 % reported a lack of food and over 55 % an increase in household work.

2.1.1 Coping mechanisms in response to food insecurity

In response to the reduced availability and access to food, whether due to market closures and movement restrictions or lack of cash, women smallholder farmers were found to have employed a series of coping mechanisms. Some of these have left them in a much worse position for recovery from the pandemic. Figure 2 outlines the range of coping mechanisms employed by the women who participated in the research.

2.1 ACCESS TO QUALITY FOOD

ActionAid’s research found that most women smallholder farmers reported a decrease in income due to restrictions on movement and closure of markets. In households where men lost their jobs because of lockdown restrictions, the burden on women to ensure food access through subsistence farming increased, or they had to use savings to purchase food. Women also faced competing demands between care work and income generation, and with income reductions and household purchasing power reduced, this limited access to food and basic needs as well as the ability to invest in farming activities.

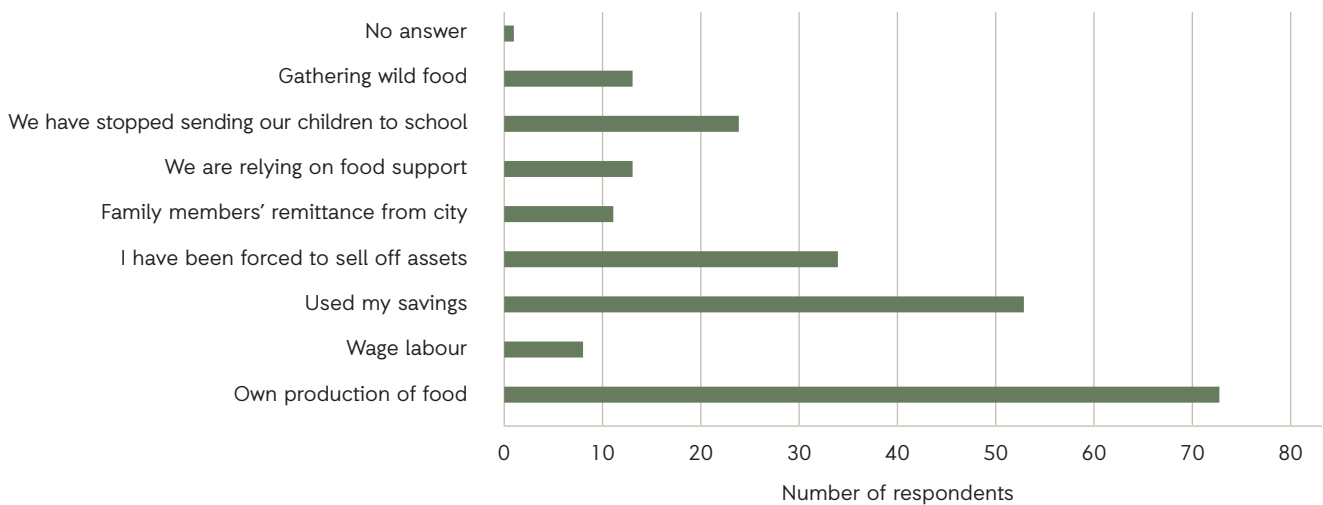
“The closing of the markets has turned our way of life upside down; we can no longer sell or buy to have money.”

PARTICIPANT FROM SENEGAL

“The disease outbreak has caused shortage of seeds and reduced income. My income is reduced because I am not going to the weekly markets to buy condiments for resale. I used to buy smoked fish, pepper, and bitter tomato from the weekly markets and resell in the village before the outbreak of the pandemic.”

PARTICIPANT FROM THE GAMBIA

Figure 2: How women smallholder farmers have coped with reduced availability of food



The majority of women smallholder farmers interviewed, over 70 %, reported that they coped by consuming surplus food they produced, which they ordinarily would have sold. In some cases, limited access to food was mitigated when communities or households had vegetable gardens they could use for subsistence. But for a few communities, even vegetable gardens were not available.

The second most common coping mechanism, mentioned by 55 % of women smallholder farmers interviewed, was to use their savings to buy food. Women smallholder farmer are typically already at an economic disadvantage compared to men, and this resulted in reduced savings for future use.

The third major mechanism reported involved women selling their assets, including livestock, to generate income to buy food. This effectively dispossesses women smallholder farmers of their future, their social standing and their ability to withstand future shocks.

"We have very limited resources. We have only been selling our livestock, poultry to access food. We do not have market for our produce. We cope by selling our livestock at very low prices so as to access food for our family."

PARTICIPANT FROM KENYA

Some of the other drastic measures taken by families interviewed included stopping their children from going to school (where schools remained open). Almost a quarter of the SMS survey respondents reported that they had stopped sending their children to school, due to either lack of income to pay school fees or to divert their little available income to food.

Above 58 % of smallholder women farmers interviewed confirmed that members of their households have had to skip meals over the lockdown period. Those affected were mostly women.

Other women indicated that their families had decreased the number of meals, reduced the portion sizes of meals – often prioritising men’s and children’s meals – or switched to cheaper, less nutritious foods.

The closure of schools, and associated feeding programmes which guaranteed children at least one nutritious meal a day, was a source of great concern. At the end of May 368 ,2020 million school children globally were missing out on school meals due to Covid-19.¹⁹

Prevailing gender-based inequalities and patriarchal norms meant that Covid19- created a situation whereby women’s nutritional intake was limited, and they were forced to sacrifice most of their accumulated wealth. This has left many women even more impoverished, and in many contexts has exacerbated gender inequalities further, both now and into the future.

2.1.2 Responding to the crisis

ActionAid recommends that governments take the following actions in the medium to long term, to protect women smallholder farmers from crisis-induced food insecurity:

- Stabilise **access to food** by supporting rural incomes, preserving ongoing livelihoods and keeping women smallholder farmers producing and guaranteeing continuous and structured demand for their products and services, as well as developing and promoting integrated public procurement and food distribution programmes (such as food assistance and rearrangement of school feeding programmes); and
- Promote and develop quality, universal, gender-responsive²⁰ **social protection programmes**, or scale up existing ones, including cash transfers, food transfers or vouchers, in addition to other in-kind support such as childcare services, unemployment benefits, free health care, subsidised social insurance or security payments.²¹

Covid-19 lockdown restrictions significantly disrupted the labour market and agricultural production, including pastoral activities, and limited agricultural supplies, services and infrastructure.

2.2 FARMS AND FARMING PRACTICES

ActionAid's research found that Covid-19 restrictions limited labour mobility in areas dependent on seasonal or migrant labour, resulting in the temporary stoppage of agricultural activities such as planting or harvesting. The productivity of many farms decreased considerably, as did incomes for farmworkers, who found themselves with reduced or no employment.

This was also associated with higher post-harvest losses through spoilage, as a result of delayed or lack of harvesting labour. Post-harvest losses were exacerbated by an increased incidence of theft from the fields, to the detriment of food availability for the farmers.

"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."

EXTENSION OFFICER IN ZIMBABWE

ActionAid found that extension services and technical assistance, critical for the uptake of improved agricultural technologies, were scaled down due to movement restrictions. While some advice was provided through virtual means, women smallholder farmers without access to mobile phones were excluded. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, nearly 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access the mobile internet.²² This has both immediate and long-term effects on women farmers' ability to improve their production and food security.

"The fresh products are difficult to keep, so we had huge losses. We have consumed some and the rest we have thrown it away."

PARTICIPANT FROM SENEGAL

"Due to reduced markets, produce is starting to go bad while still in the farms, as the

farmers delay harvesting due to lack of markets to purchase the goods."

PARTICIPANT FROM KENYA

"The majority of our products rotted and were wasted. Despite distributing it to our neighbours, we had lots of leftovers and we couldn't sell it."

PARTICIPANT FROM NEPAL

Similarly, Covid-19 adversely affected the supply of appropriate tools and infrastructure for agriculture (e.g. storage facilities including the newer post-harvest technologies). ActionAid found that those communities or households without adequate and appropriate storage facilities lost their crops, particularly perishable crops, with serious consequences on their food and nutrition security. The intersecting crises of climate change-induced floods and/ or droughts, pest outbreaks and diseases worsened the food and nutrition security of women smallholder farmers in some countries (in particular Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda).

"Due to climate change, the area received too much rain that led to making the land waterlogged and also washed away all the fertile soils, including fertiliser that was applied."

PARTICIPANT FROM MALAWI

"I set up my business at home and I favoured non-perishable products, especially spices, to avoid losses."

PARTICIPANT FROM SENEGAL

"We were supported by US Embassy to build some shea butter processing machines. We were having a balance in our account which we used to support our members. At least each member received an amount of Ghc 500 (US\$ 87). We were also doing business with the group's assets which gave us savings. We used this to help ourselves."

PARTICIPANT FROM GHANA INVOLVED IN A COOPERATIVE

The women smallholders interviewed reported innovative adaptations to their farming methods to cope with the effects of Covid-19. Some introduced changes to the kinds of crops being produced, with

a preference for low-cost, short-maturing and non-perishable crops, dried foods, or crops for which there is high demand. Others reduced their farm size, adopted food preservation methods or, more frequently, conducted transactions with buyers by phone. Many reported an increased reliance on indigenous knowledge to produce crops and goods.

"I am grateful to the Government of Rwanda because it has correctly issued lockdown and confinement guidelines that exempt farm operations. The main support we need from the Government is keeping supply chains functioning well as it is crucial to farm produce market and food security. As the food price increases, it becomes difficult for us to find crops while selective crops are also very expensive. For example, last year we bought selective crops of Irish potatoes \$0.36 but now it is \$0.67".

PARTICIPANT FROM RWANDA

ActionAid's research found that, in the short-term, governments have put in place two types of support measures targeting the agri-food sector. Firstly, governments either partially or completely exempted the food and agriculture sector from lockdowns and movement restrictions, declaring them essential services, such as in Ghana, Kenya, Nepal and Rwanda.²³ Secondly, governments actively supported all segments of the agri-food system – from primary producers to final consumers – through subsidies, direct distribution of agricultural inputs, and the promotion of mechanisation and home gardening. In Malawi, for example, the regular maize subsidy programme complemented many of the Covid-19 response actions, such as the strengthening of extension services.²⁴

2.2.1 Responding to the crisis

Women smallholder farmers interviewed by ActionAid requested that their governments provide further support in the form of technical assistance, and the provision of equipment and agricultural inputs. Specific needs included practical advice on adapting to climate change (weather information, soil mapping, seeds and cereal banks, desalination of soil) and a fluctuating market (support to diversify crops and income generation activities). They also requested improved equipment and inputs, including machinery (specifically women-friendly tools and

equipment), vaccines for livestock, subsidised seeds, fertilisers and drugs, water and water harvesting tanks, and food processing equipment. These investments should be accompanied by tailored capacity development, marketing support and technological innovation.

"The Government should support me through funding agriculture inputs like fertilizers, improved crops, manure; livestock and training to improve our farming activities. The Government should also provide weather information in order to help us have accurate predictions of the weather and to enable us to make an informed decision that will not bring losses."

PARTICIPANT FROM RWANDA

A farmer from **Tanzania** emphasised the pivotal importance of soil mapping. *"The Government uses a lot of money to import fertilizer without checking what nutrients lack from the soil – this affects productivity."*



Production of biopesticide using local resources to grow healthy vegetables for her family and to sell. PHOTO: MENG RATANA / ACTIONAID CAMBODIA

To protect women farmers from uncertainties and income losses, ActionAid recommends that – in the medium to long-term – governments phase out existing farm support programmes that are heavily dependent on external inputs, and improve access to ecologically sustainable inputs based on gendered needs analysis, as well as support the building of resilient agro-ecological food systems and other sustainable forms of agriculture. In particular, governments should:²⁵

- Ensure comprehensive representation and recognition of women farmers and their

expertise and knowledge at all levels, including leadership and political participation in decision-making;

- Support and fund the development of community-based seed banks to preserve the local agro-biodiversity necessary for climate adaptation, and provide women with greater control over their food choices and production;
- Empower women farmers through ensuring their access to and control over critical resources such as land, forest, water and markets, gender-sensitive technologies, agricultural extension services and development interventions;
- Invest in universal, quality, gender-responsive public services and infrastructure across different sectors (such as transport, health, water wells and reservoirs, irrigation canals, renewable energies, emergency livestock interventions, child and elder care services) that are accessible for women from rural communities, to redistribute and reduce their unpaid care burden.

Over 60% of women interviewed had to take out a loan in the second half of 2020.

2.3 FINANCE AND USE OF FINANCIAL PRODUCTS

Over 74 % of women smallholder farmers interviewed by ActionAid confirmed that their financial situation worsened during the lockdown period. Reductions in household income, coupled with the limited circulation of cash, meant that farmers were either not able to invest in farming activities, dipped into their savings, or increased their levels of debt. 93 % of respondents to the SMS survey reported that their savings declined due to Covid-19. Over 55 % had dipped into their savings to buy food.

This negative cash flow situation is magnified for those who have outstanding loans or who have lost income. Of the women participating in this research, 60 % indicated that they had already had to take out loans to cover household costs. Deepening indebtedness makes recovery from the pandemic an even bigger challenge.

According to ActionAid's research, some governments have also been providing support, including financial and credit support for the livelihoods of vulnerable groups in almost all countries surveyed. In Malawi, for example, payments of benefits under the social cash transfer programme included top-ups to existing beneficiaries in rural areas and a new cash transfer programme in highly affected urban centres was also introduced.

"Before Covid, the market was full of goods; there were reasonable prices for goods and transportation too. The small business I was running (that is selling tea, coffee, shiro and tella) went well. I engaged in this, taking a loan of \$111. But now, due to restriction of movement and social gatherings, the business is freezing and I am becoming unable to pay back my loan".

PARTICIPANT IN ETHIOPIA

A participant from **Tanzania** said that there is a need to, "increase loans at the district level, from Tanzania Agricultural Development Bank to have friendly conditions that attract women farmers [so that they can] increase production and value addition."

2.3.1 Responding to the crisis

Over 94 % of the women interviewed by ActionAid indicated that they needed financial support to continue farming. Women smallholder farmers are in urgent need of seed capital, loans and credit to invest in farming activities. Tailored financial products could assist women farmers to acquire necessary agricultural equipment.

ActionAid recommends that governments put in place financial services support mechanisms that specifically target rural women's economic activities as producers, processors, traders and entrepreneurs. This includes support for new grants and special loans, or cancellation of loan repayments, for example through savings and loan mechanisms over which women have control – village savings and loans associations and cooperatives, self-help groups and women's investment clubs.²⁶ Other excluded groups of people – such as youth, people living with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ should also be targeted with tailored financial packages.



As a woman market agent, she shares intelligence on the demand and price with members of her group so that they could grow the vegetable type that meet the need of the market. PHOTO: PISEY / ACTIONAID CAMBODIA

3. ACCESS TO MARKETS FOR SMALLHOLDER WOMEN FARMERS

To achieve social distancing, the number of stalls permitted in markets was reduced, in some cases by up to 50%.

ActionAid's research noted that women smallholder farmers' access to markets has been severely limited by Covid-induced movement restrictions and border closures. Impacts included the increased cost of transport, fewer buyers, relocated markets or reduced trading times. Limited market access led to market distortions and price fluctuations, creating the need for women to develop innovative market strategies.

3.1 MARKET DISRUPTIONS

ActionAid found that Covid-19 social distancing requirements significantly disrupted the way smallholder women farmers do business. Those who sell their surplus produce locally were forced to relocate from their regular markets and clientele. In some locations, markets operated on reduced schedules, limiting the hours available for traders to sell their produce. In some instances, sellers were only allowed onto their market spaces on rotation.

Women smallholder farmers across the countries covered by this research also cited significant

changes in trader and buyer behaviour as a result of the measures. Due to restrictions on market opening times and the number of traders allowed, the flow of goods was irregular, causing a glut one moment and no goods to sell the next.

“The market was done in rotation. No one could sell more than three times in a week. Moreover, consumers were spending wisely. People’s attention was on staple food (cassava, beans and potatoes ...) not fruits or tomatoes. Prices were ever changing, tending to hike.”

PARTICIPANT FROM DRC

“The main challenge was that the markets were not always open. On the days that the markets were allowed to operate more traders would come, hence the prices of the commodities would significantly go down because of oversupply. Mobile markets were closed but niche [local markets] were allowed to operate.”

PARTICIPANT FROM MALAWI

“Sometimes there were no customers in the market. My husband had to give the vegetables free of cost to people.”

PARTICIPANT FROM BANGLADESH

Both buyers and sellers restricted their visits to markets, due to fears of contracting Covid-19. In some instances, market operators stopped residents of villages where Covid-19 had been reported from coming to marketplaces. Such restrictions resulted in an absence of buyers in affected markets. Consequently, women smallholder farmers who sell directly in markets experienced a severe reduction in sales, and subsequently in income for their families.

Access to bulk buyers was significantly reduced. Women smallholder farmers who sell to school staff and pupils, restaurants and other eating places were also faced with reduced income due to closures.

“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”.

PARTICIPANT FROM NEPAL

“We grow food which is not consumed at the household. Typical Covid protective measures included closing schools, hotels, restaurants and other non-critical infrastructure that were the second target of our produce. After that, the important produce was exported.”

PARTICIPANT FROM RWANDA

ActionAid found that where markets were closed, customers were forced to buy food and other items from formal shops, often incurring higher costs.

The closure of borders further limited access to items not produced locally, including farm inputs such as seeds and fertilisers.

“Last year, when I went to a weekly market, I would buy condiments to eat with my family. This year, the weekly markets are closed, we have nowhere to buy condiments except from the shop owners in the village and their condiments are expensive. In fact, we have no money too.”

PARTICIPANT FROM THE GAMBIA

Markets in some countries implemented stricter cleaning requirements, forcing stallholders to more rigorously disinfect their stalls. This task usually fell on women and girls, adding more chores to their normal daily routines, and significantly reducing their time for doing business. Women interviewees indicated that the increased responsibilities also affected them emotionally, negatively impacting their family lives and ability to do business.

“We now have to add more time to our schedule than normal to concentrate on family nurturing. The children are home from school and before I come to work I have to ensure that I have first taken care of them. This leads for you to being late to get to work at the market where you have to ensure that you have cleaned well before opening your business thus giving us very little time to work and earn a living. With the increased responsibility upon us now it becomes hard, leading to a person even becoming mentally affected.”

PARTICIPANT FROM KENYA

“Consumers do not just buy anything. Things like baskets, clothes do not sell. Now I can take two weeks to sell a sack of potatoes while previously I could sell them in a week, as now everyone eats from the produce of their farms.”

PARTICIPANT FROM DRC

The overall impact of Covid-related movement restrictions, border closures and quarantines, and the resulting market supply chain and trade disruptions, has been to overburden women smallholder farmers and reduce their incomes, making their already precarious livelihoods even more tenuous. The measures have restricted women’s access to sufficient, diverse and nutritious sources of food, especially in countries in the Global South hit hard by the pandemic, or already affected by high levels of food insecurity.²⁷ Tragically, such food supply chain disruptions often resulted in perishable commodities going to waste.²⁸

3.1.1 Price fluctuations

Over 93 % of women smallholders reported that they experienced an increase of over 10 % in the prices of the goods they usually purchase.

Both consumers and producers suffered as a result of movement restrictions imposed within countries and across borders to stop the spread of Covid-19. As women smallholder farmers tend to be both consumers and producers of agricultural commodities, they felt the dual pressures of lower prices for their produce due to reduced demand, and higher prices for their purchases due to market shortages.

ActionAid found that food prices increased in both Africa and Asia, particularly at the local level, and in the initial phase of the pandemic, as a result of movement restrictions which reduced supplies and increased transport costs. This finding is in line with a report by the Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS), which indicated that in the

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), staple foods prices increased steeply between December 2019 and February 2020, mostly due to low supply and high demand following reduced harvests. Further price rises were registered between March and April, as commodity trade flows were delayed and impaired due to border controls and limitations on people’s movements.²⁹

“We have noticed an important difference in the market. Because there was no transport, consumers and traders were not available. Because of coronavirus restrictions, the price has decreased on the produce that was not exported, while the price has increased on the produce that is locally consumed.”

PARTICIPANT FROM RWANDA

“We were able to sell but the prices were very low, the price for our crops dropped... the price for labour was very high because the demand was huge, movement was restricted and transportation was also very difficult.”

PARTICIPANT FROM TANZANIA

Due to reduced demand from a restricted market, smallholder women reported that their goods piled up. Often they were forced to sell their produce for extremely low prices or give it away for free, and in some cases, it spoiled and they ended up throwing it away.

A participant from **Ghana** described the price increases experienced in her community, *“We used to buy maize at GHC 5.00 (\$0.87) per bowl and last week we bought at GHC 8.00 (\$1.39). The price of rice has also increased. We used to buy the local rice at GHC 7.00 (\$1.2) but now it is GHC 10.00 (\$1.74). Beans price also increased from GHC 6.00 (\$1.1) to GHC 12.00 (\$2.1).”*

3.1.2 Responding to the crisis

In a rapidly changing environment with food prices fluctuating and communities experiencing shortages of goods, women smallholder farmers are turning to the government and public bodies to exercise

their regulatory role to protect the rights of farmers and prevent speculators from profiting on their hard labour. Specifically, research participants called for monitoring of markets, regulation of food prices, and government intervention to keep supply chains functioning while also enforcing quality assurance on seeds and inputs.

“Lately I have fallen victim to buying non-genuine and not up to standard seeds, which did not yield as expected after having invested time, money and labour. We would like the government to ensure that farmers access quality seeds and products as a lot of effort goes into taking care of the farms and it also affects human health.”

PARTICIPANT FROM KENYA

3.2 THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSPORT

Poor infrastructure and high transportation costs are important drivers of food prices not only for buyers in urban centres, but also for rural farmers with small marketable surpluses who sell produce at the farm gate rather than incur high transportation costs to move their products to distant markets.

One of the biggest challenges reported by women smallholder farmers was limited access to transport which, due to lockdown measures, was less frequent, slower, more expensive and more crowded. In countries where the road and transport situations are extremely poor, most women smallholder farmers sold at their farm gates.

A participant from **Rwanda** detailed the impact of poor transport and roads on their market activities, *“The changes are that sellers are not selling as usual because the produce is poor with high price, and consumers are not consuming because*

of lack of money. The number of goods has reduced because the roads that link provinces are not properly working”.

Poor infrastructure and resulting high transportation costs in Tanzania are an important driver of food prices not only for net buyers of food in urban centres but also for rural farmers with small marketable surpluses, who sell most of their produce at the farm gate rather than incur high transportation costs to move their products to distant markets. Nearly two-thirds of Tanzanian smallholder farmers sell their produce at the farm gate with very low-profit margins, while final consumers face high food prices largely due to the high transaction and transportation costs.

“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.”

PARTICIPANT FROM ZIMBABWE

In Zimbabwe, ActionAid found that people were required to purchase a movement permit from the police. This was another added obstacle to transporting goods to and from the marketplace, particularly for women smallholder farmers. These findings are consistent with other reports from West Africa, where women were particularly impacted by market closures, including restrictions on transport and travel, as 90 % of food and produce stalls are run by women.³⁰ Because they transport their products by bus or taxi, women traders faced increased restrictions on their mobility and, in turn, on their ability to sell.³¹

3.2.1 Responding to the crisis

The limitations on movement caused by the global pandemic have highlighted the need for **quality and gender-responsive infrastructure** to enable women smallholder farmers to reach more markets

more quickly, store crops that cannot be sold and enhance the productivity of their farms. Across countries, the women interviewed all stressed the importance of better roads and transportation to connect them with markets and urban centres. Similarly, where markets were completely shut down for weeks, if not months, access to storage facilities and food processing facilities (e.g. stoves) would allow women farmers to avoid throwing away their crops or leaving them to rot in the ground. Improved access to water and irrigation systems would also allow women smallholder farmers to adapt to climate change and extreme weather events, ensuring sustainable access to food in households.

"I also need support from government in order to set up a small irrigation system on the gardens where I can grow Irish potatoes and other vegetables. We also need an improved road network with better bridges so that we are able to access markets."

PARTICIPANT FROM MALAWI

According to the High-Level Panel of Experts of the Committee on World Food Security, governments should support more diverse and resilient distribution systems, including shorter supply chains and territorial markets. In particular, governments should:

- Invest in enhanced territorial market infrastructure and rural development;
- Review policies that may unjustifiably privilege formal retail food outlets over more informal markets that provide points of connection between small producers and lower-income consumers, including periodic rural markets and street vendors; and
- Adopt stronger regulation, including competition policy, to empower agri-food small and medium enterprises to participate in national, regional and global supply chains.³²



Bountiful harvest of tomatoes from the vegetable garden, as a source of income during the pandemic. PHOTO: SWALEH KITASI / ACTIONAID KENYA

3.3 WOMEN'S ALTERNATIVE MARKET STRATEGIES

To compensate for challenges experienced with market access, ActionAid found that women smallholder farmers adopted strategies such as barter trade, where they exchanged their produce for goods they needed. There was also a resurgence of local markets, with producers selling vegetables and other food items to their neighbours at lower prices. Selling from home, delivering produce to buyers' homes or trading using their phones were also adopted as alternative modes of buying and selling. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), local food production and short supply value chains ensured a higher degree of self-sufficiency during the pandemic.³³

"A sales system is also set up to exchange products and sell to each other."

PARTICIPANT FROM SENEGAL

"As a community we borrow from each other. So, my household has been assisted by other community members through sharing and borrowing."

PARTICIPANT FROM ZIMBABWE

"A participant from **Rwanda** noted that one of the key challenges was *"the use of technology we are not familiar with, and the use of it that is difficult for us."*

While technology adopted to compensate for disruption in local marketplaces was a valuable alternative, it posed challenges to some women smallholder farmers who were not familiar with it, or had connectivity problems. Key among the hurdles women face include lack of access and lower comparative ability to buy and use the technology, lack of education, as well as other inherent biases and sociocultural norms, all of which curtail women and girls' ability to benefit from the opportunities offered by digital transformation.³⁴

"behaviours of the middlemen offering poor prices affect us due to our vulnerability and we do not have any alternative."

PARTICIPANT FROM THE GAMBIA

ActionAid also found that reliance on middlemen increased, with buyers no longer purchasing products directly from the farmers. According to the participants interviewed, this resulted in fewer selling opportunities and reduced profits for producers, particularly for women farmers, given their limited ability to negotiate due to gender-related power inequalities.

"We use the group solidarity to help ourselves. If a member has some work doing, other members go to assist her in her farm to reduce costs." Leader from a women's group.

"As a cooperative we got organised to produce and sell the produce collectively. However, we have not been able to find alternative markets to sell our produce at higher prices."

PARTICIPANT FROM A WOMEN'S COOPERATIVE MALAWI

Women smallholder farmers reported that group solidarity, both within the family and through community associations and churches, was a vital source of social capital and collective action during the crisis. Where women producers were organised – for example into cooperatives – farmers used collective strategies to reduce their costs, such as pooling produce to be transported to the market.

"I have not been able to sell maize because I am waiting for good prices which is around MK 15,000 (\$20) for 50 kgs. I treated my maize waiting to sell at the right time when prices are a bit higher."

PARTICIPANT FROM MALAWI

Some producers stored their produce whilst waiting for price changes in the market, but this was only feasible with staple foods and non-perishables. Where appropriate storage capacity was limited or facilities were inadequate (i.e. not protected against rain, pests and rats), food ended up rotting, being used as animal feed, or being dumped.

"During Corona I have found other means of selling. Instead of sitting at the market and waiting for buyers, I went to the restaurateurs to offer them millet which allowed me to make new customers in restaurants. I had at least four new clients, restaurateurs. When they need millet, they call me on the phone and I send them the order."

PARTICIPANT FROM SENEGAL

Financial strategies undertaken by smallholder farmers include: taking advantage of financial management capacity development through village savings and loans associations and cooperatives; seeking external support from non-governmental organisations and government bodies; or using existing financial resources, including microfinance.

The women interviewed indicated how they engaged in some activities to cope with the crisis, such as packaging their food to be sold; producing or acquiring masks and personal protective equipment; sharing Covid-19 related information and raising awareness among their community, household and market; and relying on outsiders to receive information about the pandemic and measures in place to contain it.

3.3.1 Responding to the crisis

ActionAid calls on governments to promote and strengthen markets to be responsive to women's needs, and provide locally appropriate advisory, business and market support services (extension, training, and market information), which are secure, easily accessible and tailored to the needs of small-scale women farmers. Ensuring gender-responsive, inclusive and non-discriminatory access to these services is essential.³⁵

“There are no community level efforts that helped our family cope with the situation brought by Covid. Because I have assets and some little savings I managed to survive

and I am still surviving; nothing has been done for people in my community to get organised during Covid to access, produce, process, and sell food.”

PARTICIPANT FROM MALAWI

According to FAO, governments should take measures to reduce gender inequalities in food security and nutrition; including:

- Adopting special measures to support rural women's economic activities in agri-food value chains;
- Enhancing 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;
- Strengthen women's cooperatives and build women's capacity through ensuring access to training, information, techniques and implementation, so that they can become well-versed in agriculture and gain equality;³⁶
- Prioritising informal and microenterprises, which are mainly managed by women, in the Covid-19 pandemic relief response by ensuring their access to loans, training and market linkages; and
- Strengthening 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 communities and villages, offering a wide portfolio of services tailored to women's specific needs.³⁷



She has planted banana seedlings and other vegetable in her garden for a diversified household diet and to pay her loan obtained from Saving and Credit Cooperatives (SACCO). PHOTO: MESERET AMSALU TADEGE / ACTIONAID ETHIOPIA

4. WIDER IMPACTS ON GENDER EQUALITY: GBV AND UNPAID CARE WORK

The impact of Covid-19 and related restrictions is particularly severe for female farmers because of existing inequalities and patriarchal norms that constrain women's food security, agricultural productivity, access to markets and participation in decision-making.

The ability of rural women to participate as decision-makers in the design and implementation of response and mitigation strategies is overwhelmingly restricted.

The research showed that the closure of schools and susceptibility of the elderly to the virus increased women's already disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work.³⁸ The result has been less time and physical energy available for women to farm the land, travel to markets to buy inputs and sell produce, or participate in development programmes and community decision-making. Covid-19 has deepened inequalities due to patriarchal gender norms and relations, increased unpaid care work, and the intensification of GBV.

According to women interviewed by ActionAid, the loss of jobs and income caused by the pandemic has worsened the financial and wider economic independence of many women, increasing their dependency on men in their households for the provision of income and food. This reduced economic independence is particularly dangerous for women

who already endure violence and abuse at their hands of their partners. Multiple participants in the research indicated that “staying at home is very problematic”.

Broad public participation by smallholder women farmers in government planning and responses is necessary to effectively address existing inequalities and the needs of vulnerable populations, as well as to minimise elite capture and urban bias.³⁹

“Covid has really affected us, I was no longer relying on my husband to buy soap, cooking oil and other food items, but since Covid-19 now I look up to my husband to provide for us. As a lady, I was able to sustain the family in terms of food by selling agricultural produce before Covid-19. We are no longer allowed to go out to sell our produce because of restrictions on gatherings. This situation makes us rely on our spouses since they are the breadwinners”.

PARTICIPANT FROM ZIMBABWE

4.1 UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK

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

Care and domestic work, both paid and unpaid, is at the heart of communities and is an integral component of economies all over the world. However, when it comes to unpaid domestic work, women bear a disproportionate burden, due to cultural norms, the gendered division of labour, and the absence of quality, universal, gender-responsive public services, especially in the Global South.

On average, women 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. The unequal division of labour within the household results in women and girls doing the vast majority of unpaid care and domestic work.⁴⁰

“We cannot pay for services due to lack of money. The pandemic has increased my household chores. I used to send my children to another village to mill my millet [for household consumption], but due reduced income I cannot pay for this service. In few moments you will see me pounding my millet. Three of our boys who used to go out could not do so this year. This has increased the workload for us, as their clothes are washed by the women and girls [in the household]. We pound millet every morning and evening.”

PARTICIPANT FROM THE GAMBIA

In Bangladesh, women, particularly smallholder farmers, spend approximately 10 hours a day carrying out unpaid care work, 2.8 times that spent by men. The inequality is more striking in Ghana, where women spend six hours doing unpaid care work every day, around 10 times that of men. In Rwanda, women spend an average of five hours doing unpaid care work, compared to 1.5 hours for men. In Rwanda, women spend only slightly longer – 5.5 hours – on agriculture and income-generating activities than they do on unpaid care work.⁴¹

“Only understanding men help their wives with household chores, others don’t.”

PARTICIPANT FROM NEPAL

The Covid-related economic crisis has forced workers to return to rural areas, even without prospects for employment, and impacted the flow of financial remittances. Migrants who have returned to their home countries have added to the size of households but not to the resources.⁴² Cross-border income opportunities have ceased, further reducing the remaining income available to the household, largely generated by women.

ActionAid’s research found that, despite the protracted presence of both men and women in the household during lockdowns, the responsibility for managing food consumption remained with women. Women are left with the increased burden of looking after an expanded household with reduced earnings. Women interviewed indicated that the anxiety around ensuring access to sufficient quality food for existing, and often additional, household members amid Covid-19 lockdown restrictions has negatively affected their mental health.

4.2 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

GBV is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms, with women and girls suffering disproportionately.⁴³ Patriarchal norms condone and perpetuate the dominance by men and male-oriented institutions over women, their bodies and their lives.⁴⁴ This can include the threat of - or actual - physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, emotional or economic harm. Furthermore, women are commonly 'blamed' by their perpetrators, communities and wider society, for instance, due to transgressing or failing to meet stereotypical gender norms and behaviours.

Over 64 % of women smallholder farmers emphasised that during lockdown women and girls became more vulnerable. Examples included: men forcefully taking money from their wives, an increase in police harassment of women and girls, difficulties reporting cases of violence to the relevant institutions.

Before Covid-19, on average one in three women globally experienced violence in their lifetimes, and for many more it is a daily occurrence.⁴⁵ GBV has dramatically intensified during the pandemic, especially intimate partner violence, and has been dubbed a 'shadow pandemic' by UN Women.⁴⁶

Women participating in ActionAid's research highlighted that, due to movement restrictions, there was an unprecedented presence of men in households and communities, including those who under normal circumstances would migrate for seasonal work. According to research participants the limitations on movement and economic stress have led to an increase in substance abuse, drinking, fighting, abuse and harassment within the household. Cases of polygamy, incest, adultery, and sex in exchange for food have been reported, together with instances of men abandoning their households.

"For the lockdown situation the male members of the family are staying longer in the home. As they have less income and even some of them are jobless, they are mentally stressed. Their frustrations are coming out and they are raising hands on women about little things."

PARTICIPANT FROM BANGLADESH

"I think women violence has increased a lot during the lockdown. It happens inside the four walls of their own houses as they cannot escape from there."

PARTICIPANT FROM NEPAL

ActionAid found that the provision of services to prevent and respond to GBV is inadequate, particularly for rural women, including psychosocial support services, sexual and reproductive health services, shelters for women fleeing violence, and police and justice services. According to research participants, the increased presence of men in households and communities has made it more difficult for women to report cases of violence to the authorities. Covid-related movement limitations, fear of contracting the virus, and the need to wear a mask when accessing public institutions – an expense most rural women cannot afford – have become additional obstacles in the reporting of GBV cases and women's access to justice. These trends have impacted heavily on women's mental health, with research participants reporting some cases of women they know committing suicide.

"Due to Covid-19, we fear to go to report the cases at the district unit in charge of gender and child protection, and the cases continue to exist. Another man also beat the wife, and the family told her that if she goes to the hospital, she should say she fell down. I don't know but it seems things are changing for the worse."

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

4.3 EFFECTS ON GIRLS

ActionAid found that Covid-related restrictions have had a devastating effect on girls in the countries under review.

UNESCO estimates that 1.52 billion school students (87 % of enrolled school-age children) and more than 60 million teachers are now at home because of Covid-19 school closures.

UN WOMEN, 2020

Concerned that the Covid-19 restrictions exposed women – and in particular girls – to abuse and violence, many households restricted the movement of girls, according to women interviewed. Such limitations placed on the mobility of girls are informed by patriarchal norms that reflect the perception that girls’ bodies and sexuality need to be controlled, to preserve the ‘honour’ of the family and community.

“The family load will be on women and girls’ shoulders again. They must satisfy the needs of both men and children: waking up early and travelling to fetch water and firewood.”

PARTICIPANT FROM DRC

ActionAid found that school closures have seen girls in smallholder farming communities take on more unpaid care and domestic work, which has resulted in increases in girls dropping out of school. Research participants reported a spike in child and early marriages, with parents encouraging children to get married for their own survival. Similarly, there was a reported increase in teenage pregnancy, reflecting a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services, and the research finding that many young girls were forced to engage in sex work or have sex with older men in exchange for food or money.

4.3.1 Responding to the crisis

By failing to provide adequate, publicly funded gender-responsive public services, including health, water and sanitation, transport, childcare and education, governments are not only exploiting women’s unpaid labour – assumed to be elastic and infinite, including in times of crisis – but are failing to deliver on fundamental human rights.

“A class six girl in my neighbourhood is now pregnant, the situation which has now curtailed her education. Most of her peers in the same situation end up marrying early. A lot of free time now that schools are closed, poverty, and a lot of peer pressure play a big role in teenage pregnancies.”

PARTICIPANT FROM KENYA

“I also know three cases of girls who are pregnant. There is also one case of incest that is being followed up on, but the girl is already pregnant.”

PARTICIPANT FROM KENYA

Gender-responsive social protection is a crucial immediate and longer-term intervention for addressing the impacts of Covid-19 and wider, sustained inequalities faced by women smallholders. The predominance of informal employment among women smallholder farmers means that they have less access to social protection. ActionAid urges governments to expand and adequately finance social protection systems to ensure universal coverage, to protect lives and livelihoods, and ensure sustainable access to food and resilient food systems.

To prevent and respond to GBV, governments should adopt a zero-tolerance policy and mobilise maximum resources and measures to prevent and respond to the problem.

5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE NEXT AGRICULTURAL SEASON

Over 91 % of smallholder farmers interviewed said they intend to continue farming, fishing or livestock production over the next six months.

Covid-19 has exacerbated existing pressures caused by climate change, negatively affecting the incomes of women smallholder farmers and reducing the money available to buy inputs and prepare the land for next season. Instead, savings have been used, assets sold, and income from other sources (employment or sale of produce) reduced, while funding from financial institutions (already skewed against women smallholder farmers) was further limited, and technical assistance and extension services highly inadequate. This paints a bleak scenario for the next growing season.

"I am very down economically and confused since I have no reliable sources of finance".

PARTICIPANT FROM KENYA

"The yield this year was too low due to climate change and Covid-19".

PARTICIPANT FROM DRC

Asked about their plans for the next growing season, some women smallholder farmers participating in the research indicated that they will not be able to grow and expand their businesses. Others questioned whether, in this challenging context, it is worth continuing to work in agriculture. Some indicated that they will be storing seeds and crops until better times arrive.

Despite this harsh reality, ActionAid found that preparations were underway for the next season in most countries covered by this research. What was clear, however, was that the next season will be far

from normal. Over 94 % of research participants confirmed that they will need support to continue farming. Many participants indicated that they will need to access more loans, through village savings groups, cooperatives and microfinance institutions, increasing their levels of debt.

In the medium to long term, one of the biggest challenges farmers will face will be reduced access to inputs (such as seeds and fertilisers), due to restrictions in movement and increased costs. Pastoral communities that have faced disruptions in traditional migration practices and lack of access to feed and health services, have lost animals through ill-health, sale of stock or premature slaughter of animals and will start the next season with fewer assets. Consequent reductions in productivity will affect the future availability of food, both for their households and wider communities.

"The cultivation of rice can be done only in rainy season but in winter season no crops are produced. In Nepal, the lockdown happened soon after winter season so we were not able to cultivate any food properly."

PARTICIPANT FROM NEPAL

"Covid-19 pandemic was the main source of all evils because markets were closed for long time and farming activities were no longer being effectively practiced as we could not find agriculture inputs."

PARTICIPANT FROM RWANDA

To improve on yields, in the absence of technical advice on sustainable methods of agriculture, some farmers are contemplating using more fertilisers and chemicals. While this may result in quick wins, it will potentially be at the expense of future agricultural seasons.

Over 94 % of research participants confirmed that they need support to continue farming.

"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."

PARTICIPANT FROM GHANA

"I set up my business at home and I favoured non-perishable products especially spices to avoid losses."

PARTICIPANT FROM SENEGAL

ActionAid found that, overall, women smallholder farmers are developing innovative strategies to address reduced agricultural yields. For the next season, many women smallholder farmers indicated they will continue to implement strategies and changes put in place over the past six months including reducing the size of the farm, dropping

animal rearing, using the seed reserve, and diversifying the crops grown (e.g. preference for low-cost, short-maturing, non-perishable crops, dried foods or crops for which there is a high demand). Some, however, said that they struggle to find crops that respond to these uncertain and unpredictable times. Other strategies include switching to, or integrating, other income-generating activities, such as sewing and tailoring.

ActionAid recommends that governments focus on supporting women smallholder farmers in their preparations for the next growing season, and assist them in rebuilding assets lost during the crisis. As outlined in previous sections, research participants identified five areas where they need the most support:

- adequate financial support;
- technical assistance, equipment and inputs;
- improved market and rural infrastructure;
- the enforcement of laws and regulations that support women smallholder farmers; and
- the upholding of women's rights.



Farming on the farm allocated by village council where she has made good sales particularly during the pandemic as people were still buying food.
PHOTO: OLUWAKEMI AKINREMI-SEGUN, NIGERIA

6. CONCLUSION

According to FAO, “If inequalities are not addressed, eventual economic recovery will have less impact on reducing poverty brought on by Covid-19. Addressing inequalities needs to be an explicit priority and viewed through a medium and long-term lens”.⁴⁷

ActionAid’s research demonstrates the multiple impacts Covid-19 has had on women smallholder farmers and girls, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. The pandemic has been devastating to the rights of women and girls, including in rural communities. Levels of unpaid care work have increased, public services remain vastly inadequate, and women’s access to productive assets (land, markets, finance and technical support) has further deteriorated. Combined, all of these have had a detrimental effect on the availability of food, pricing of commodities and household purchasing power.

In response to the crisis, women smallholder farmers have adopted innovative coping mechanisms. Some of these, however, are likely to have negative effects on their health and livelihoods in the longer term, as well as their long-term capacity to engage in agriculture and other sustainable income-generating activities.

This research has shown that, despite efforts by governments to cushion the impact of Covid-19 measures, state responses to the plight of women have been weak, leaving women smallholder farmers in an even more vulnerable position and reinforcing prevailing structural barriers and inequalities. Covid-19 provides a vital opportunity for governments to go beyond mere mitigation of this and future crises, to enact policies and reforms that seek to transform gendered power relations and ensure the full realisation of the human rights of women.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

ActionAid urges governments to consider the following recommendations to ensure the full and just recovery of women smallholder farmers from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and contribute to the longer-term achievement of gender equality and the realisation of women's human rights.

7.1 PROMOTE AGRO-ECOLOGICAL PRACTICES

Enhanced investment in sustainable agriculture and rural development, grounded on scaling out and scaling up agro-ecological initiatives – with a focus on women smallholder farmers – would provide an anchor for improved food availability and household purchasing power.

This investment should include, but not be limited to:

- Supporting innovative agricultural research and development as well as the implementation of, for instance, improved soil fertility through increasing the dynamic of soil organic matter rather than the use of chemical fertilisers;
- Encouraging crop diversification to minimise total loss of income and ecological degradation due to a monocrop production system that is easily and negatively affected by climate change;
- Strengthening women's cooperatives and building women's capacity through ensuring access to training, information, techniques and implementation using agro-ecological principles;
- Supporting and funding the development of community-based seed banks to preserve local agro-biodiversity necessary for climate adaptation, with women farmers in control of seeds to give them greater control over their food choices and production; and
- Ensuring women's access to and control over critical resources such as land, forest, water

and markets, gender-sensitive technologies, agricultural extension services (including and strengthening the presence of female extension workers) and development interventions.

7.2 GUARANTEE FAIR PRICES FOR PRODUCE

Smallholder women farmers must receive a fair price for their produce. Governments should establish measures to reduce gender inequalities in food security and nutrition, through:

- Enhancing 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;
- Prioritising informal and microenterprises, which are mainly managed by women, in the Covid-19 pandemic relief response by ensuring access to loans, training and market linkages; and
- Implementing policies that enhance transparency and accountability by service providers to stop theft and the exploitation of women smallholder farmers by the powerful and middlemen.

7.3 PROMOTE TERRITORIAL AND DOMESTIC MARKETS

Linked to fair prices for women smallholder farm produce, governments and other actors should establish countrywide distribution and redistribution systems to shorten agriculture supply chains (reducing the distance between food producers and end consumers and ensuring the availability of fresh foods at the right price) and prioritise local markets for agricultural produce. In particular, governments should:

- Develop a dynamic rural agriculture sector through supporting the development of robust rural non-farm enterprise systems, collective agro-processing and rural infrastructure, with an emphasis on investments in gender-sensitive public services and infrastructure (including roads, water wells and reservoirs, irrigation canals, renewable energies and emergency livestock interventions, as well as accessible information and communication technology); and
- Strengthen rural women's economic activities in agri-food value chains through supporting women-run businesses in value chains that link rural and peri-urban and urban areas, in particular by establishing gender-sensitive business development service centres close to communities and villages (offering a wide portfolio of services tailored to women's specific needs).

7.4 PROTECT AND PROMOTE THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN SMALLHOLDERS TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISION-MAKING

Existing inequalities based on gender and other intersecting forms of discrimination (including race, age, disability, sexual orientation, location and migrant status) need to be recognised and addressed in the Covid-19 response, explicitly acknowledging the heightened health and socioeconomic impacts on women smallholder farmers, and their particular risks of exclusion and marginalisation due to Covid-19.

As part of their global commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, amongst others, governments must ensure the equal and meaningful representation and participation of women smallholder farmers at all levels of decision-making. The lived experiences of women should inform the formulation and implementation of both short- and long-term policies to address the impacts

of food crises and management of Covid-19, as well as gender-responsive social protection schemes and public services.

7.5 PROMOTE AN INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE PROCESS OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Policies to contain and respond to the direct and indirect impacts of Covid-19 should address the constraints faced by specific marginalised groups. The promotion of an inclusive and equitable process of economic recovery is critical. Broad public participation by smallholder women farmers in government planning and responses is necessary to effectively address existing inequalities and the needs of vulnerable populations, as well as to minimise elite capture and urban bias.

ActionAid recommends that governments:

- promote gender-responsive agriculture programming, which requires the meaningful participation of women smallholders in programme design and implementation, including those from the poorest and most marginalised communities, while recognising that women are not a homogenous group; and
- empower women farmers by protecting and promoting their rights to access and control land, resources, services, information and opportunities, recognising the particular risks of exclusion and marginalisation due to Covid-19.

7.6 GLOBAL POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO COVID-19 RESPONSE INITIATIVES

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS), an inclusive international and intergovernmental platform, provides space for all stakeholders to work together to ensure food security, nutrition and the right to adequate food for all through global policy coordination and coherence. The CFS is the most legitimate and authoritative space to convene a process to develop a global coordinated response

to Covid-19, building on the recommendations of the High-Level Panel of Experts 2030 Global Narrative report, Covid-19 policy brief and other reports, as well as its own relevant policy outputs.⁴⁸ Governments should support the role of the CFS in providing policy guidance on responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and addressing its underlying structural causes.

Moreover, the global political response should be supported through an expansion of existing official development assistance which emphasises climate change adaptation and gender justice. Financial support should be primarily channelled through multilateral initiatives, such as the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) Trust Fund, to provide much-needed assistance to countries and communities battling the food crisis. The GAFSP should be replenished with new and additional funds, in order to continue to support producer organisations and low-income countries that are highly affected by the crisis.

7.7 FINANCE, EXPAND AND IMPLEMENT GENDER-RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION

Gender-responsive social protection is a crucial immediate and long-term intervention for addressing the impacts of Covid-19 and wider, sustained inequalities faced by women smallholders. The predominance of informal employment among women smallholder farmers means that they have less access to organised social protection. Social protection systems need to be adequately financed, and expanded to ensure universal coverage, to protect lives and livelihoods and ensure ongoing access to food and the resilience of food systems.

Governments should adopt social protection measures, including:

- Protection and support for women's income-generating opportunities and their right to decent work, including informal, part-time and seasonal workers;

- Provision of temporary employment and/ or cash transfers to enhance the capacity of rural women to manage risk, contributing to safeguarding their welfare and productive assets and avoidance of harmful coping strategies such as selling off assets and reducing food intake; and
- Provision of ecologically sustainable inputs based on gendered needs analysis.

7.8 EFFECTIVE GBV REPORTING AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS

CEDAW mandates countries to monitor and investigate violence against women, provide legal aid and mainstream gender into national policies and research. Governments should recognise the rise and intensification of GBV against women and LGBTIQ+ people during the Covid-19 pandemic, adopt a zero-tolerance policy, and mobilise maximum resources at levels commensurate with the crisis. Specific responses should include:

- Directing funding to women's rights organisations that are often on the frontline delivering GBV services;
- Urgently classifying GBV services, including women's shelters, as essential services – as advised by the World Health Organization (WHO) – so that they can continue to operate during Covid-19-related lockdowns and restrictions. GBV services must be prioritised by law enforcement, health and other responders – this includes universal free hotlines and safe shelters, emergency medical responses and clinical management (treatment of injuries, emergency contraception, post-exposure prophylaxis and the treatment of sexually transmitted infections), mental health support, police services and justice-sector support; and
- Ensuring minimal disruptions to the delivery of universal, quality, gender-responsive sexual and reproductive health information and services to rural communities, including for adolescent girls and other excluded groups.

7.9 RECOGNISE, REDUCE AND REDISTRIBUTE UNPAID CARE WORK

Now more than ever, it is crucial that all global and national policy responses to the crisis are informed by robust gender analysis that addresses the multiple, intersecting forms of oppression faced by women. This is vital if Covid-19 response measures are to go beyond merely mitigating its impacts to redressing deeper, structural injustices and inequalities, including in agriculture. In particular,

measures must address the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women, through:

- Recognising and redistributing women smallholders' unpaid care and domestic work by investing in universal, quality gender-responsive public services, including education and health, energy, water and sanitation, transport and care services in rural areas;
- Recognising how disproportionate levels of unpaid care and domestic work by women have increased further during the pandemic, including by collecting time-use data and including these in national accounts;
- Reducing women smallholders' unpaid care and domestic work by investing in labour-saving agricultural technologies to reduce women's time spent on, for instance, gathering fuel and fodder. This can be achieved through providing services such as water wells and reservoirs, irrigation canals, renewable energies and emergency livestock interventions; and
- Promoting the redistribution of unpaid care work between women and men at community and household levels through programmes that challenge harmful stereotypical gender norms on care work and promote greater sharing of care responsibilities and domestic work.

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ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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