

Women Feeding Cities: Supporting Women in the Informal Food Sector in the Global South Beyond COVID-19

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Issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted women in the Global South who work in the informal food sector, deepening food insecurity, gender inequality and economic inequities in urban areas.

Background

Women who are informal food vendors in the Global South perform an important role in feeding the cities where they live and work. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has produced multiple negative gendered impacts on their lives and livelihoods, pushing women in the informal food sector into precarious situations. This policy brief presents two case studies to highlight the challenges that women face while working in the informal food sector and how these issues were exacerbated by COVID-19.

The pandemic recovery context provides a historic opportunity for Canada to act on its strong commitment to promoting gender equality, as enacted by the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) (Office of the Prime Minister 2021). Aligning with the UN Women “A Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice” (UN Women 2021), FIAP’s priority area of “Growth that Works for Everyone,” will be particularly important to economically empowering women in the informal food sector. By supporting women-led informal enterprises

in the food sector, recovery efforts and preparation for inevitable future food system shocks can be supported.

Women’s Role in the Informal Food Sector

Women in the informal food sector, who operate outside of legal frameworks, are the backbone of local food systems and household food security in many parts of the world. They play important roles across the food supply chain and contribute to its stability by holding jobs in food production (availability), food distribution (access) and food utilization (consumption) (Chakraborty 2020). Informal food vendors make cheaper-priced, diverse and nutritious foods available to marginal and poorer urban communities.

Women are also largely responsible for care work and domestic duties. Before the pandemic, women spent 3.2 times as many hours as men on unpaid care and domestic work (UN Women 2022). During the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns, these duties for women increased significantly (Chakraborty, 2020), limiting their time to focus on their informal businesses and thus having negative impacts on their earnings. However, women’s work inside the home is unpaid — rendering it invisible.

Women’s participation in the informal economy is due to the ease of entry into informal work (McCordic and Raimundo 2019). However, across cities, workers in the informal economy have lacked social protection, access to

credit, and government pandemic relief measures needed to prevent themselves from slipping into poverty (UN 2020). Drawing on evidence-based research from the Hungry Cities Partnership, this brief provides two urban case studies to identify the crucial roles women food workers play in contributing to urban household food security and outlines the challenges they faced prior to the pandemic.

Case Study 1: Mexico City, Mexico

In Mexico City, approximately 51 percent of total employment constitutes informal work, with women making up 44.5 percent of informal workers in the city (Capron et al. 2017). Informal workers participate as street food vendors or operate food stalls in one of the city's 300 markets (ibid.), supplying diverse food products for their neighbourhoods. More than 60 percent of urban households frequent these small shops on a weekly basis (Capron et al. 2018), making informal food vendors a critical source of food in Mexico City.

Despite their key role in food provisioning, numerous policies have been put in place to restrict their activities, including a heavy police presence to displace the activities of informal workers (Capron et al. 2017). This lack of legal security puts informal workers in a vulnerable situation. Considering that the average income earned from informal work in Mexico City was only about US\$308 before COVID-19 (Capron et al. 2018), women working in this sector are left living hand-to-mouth.

Case Study 2: Maputo, Mozambique

Women dominate the informal sector in Maputo. More than four million women are involved in the city's informal economy, constituting 59% of total informal employment (Chikanda and Raimundo 2016). Many women rely on the informal food sector as a main source of their household income and food security.

Like Mexico City, most urban households regularly obtain food from these informal vendors. Small informal shops were the most widely used source to buy food for 75 percent of Maputo's households (Raimundo, McCordic and Chikanda 2018). Most urban residents depend on these informal vendors for household food supply. Yet, informal workers face legal challenges as "unplanned" informal marketplaces are considered illegal in Maputo (Chikanda and Raimundo 2016).

Women food vendors often start their informal businesses with their own savings or from family loans (Raimundo et al. 2020). They survive on an average income of about US\$290 (Raimundo, McCordic and Chikanda 2018), leaving many without the ability to reinvest or grow their businesses. This lack of financial security is an indication of the survivalist, rather than opportunistic, strategy orientation of many informal food workers (Crush, Kazembe and Nickanor 2023).

COVID-19's Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the financial risk and social security challenges faced by women in the informal food sector. Lockdowns, containment measures, disrupted supply chains and increased food prices have disproportionately impacted women in this sector. UN Women reported that globally, women lost over 54 million jobs in 2019 and 2020 — leading to a "Shecession." Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) confirms that women experienced higher job losses than men in 2020 and 2021, particularly in the informal sector. This trend was observed in countries such as Mexico and Mozambique (ILO 2023).

During the pandemic, many women dropped out of the labour force to provide at-home care during lockdowns and school closures (Karkee and Sodergren 2021). As a result, much of the progress made under Sustainable Development Goal #8 of Decent Work and Economic Growth as well as Goal #5 of Gender Equality threatens to be rolled back.

In countries like Mexico and Mozambique where millions of women are working in the informal sector, lockdown measures during the pandemic had crippling effects on women's livelihoods and has increased food insecurity for their families (Nyabeze and Chikoko 2021). The pandemic compounded existing vulnerabilities and pushed women into survivalist strategies. In a Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing-led survey, 35 percent of respondents reported drawing on already meager savings, while 23 percent were forced to reduce spending on food items (Reed et al. 2021). Consequently, many women vendors faced the dilemma of "dying from hunger" or "dying from the virus" during the pandemic.

Policy Responses

There is an urgent need to address the issues surrounding the challenges women face in the informal food sector or food insecurity, gender inequality and economic inequities will continue to be felt by millions of people in urban areas.

On the one hand, gender mainstreaming in policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has been insufficient. Out of 4,968 global response measures, only 1,506 (32.30 percent) were found to be gender-sensitive, indicating a lack of prioritization of women's needs by governments (UN Development Programme 2021). Measures addressing women's economic security, violence against women, unpaid care and informal sectors were notably lacking worldwide (ibid.). Inadequate attention to gender dynamics by many governments has resulted in weak policy reactions to the challenges faced by women in the informal food sector.

On the other hand, even if governments have taken action in the social and economic protection of women when carrying out COVID-19 response measures, those engaged in informal work do not benefit from government stimulus measures because support often does not extend to informal enterprises (UN 2020). For instance, the Government of Canada's international development assistance focuses heavily on supporting formally registered women-led small- and medium-sized enterprises (Government of Canada 2018) and fails to specifically mention informal food businesses or vendors.

Moreover, there is a strong rural bias present, in which assistance measures mitigating food insecurity and empowering workers seem to be disproportionately geared to rural areas in the Global South (Crush and Riley 2017). Although Canada has prioritized food security (Government of Canada 2018), its international development assistance is mainly productivist or food production centred, rather than on strengthening local food systems. With rapid urbanization and many of the informal workers operating in urban centres, these existing initiatives do not address the needs of informal workers in urban areas.

Recommendations

Short Term

Support countries to take adequate action in the social and economic protection of women when carrying out COVID-19 gender response measures: Gender-disaggregated data on informal employment and social protection measures should be improved to identify evidence-based weaknesses so that progress can be assessed, and decision-makers made accountable to these gaps. Improving the global response to COVID-19 can be achieved by providing resources to develop gender-sensitive pandemic response measures — such as the expansion of family leave, emergency childcare services or cash-for-care — and ensuring that gender is mainstreamed into all COVID-19 response activities. Such actions will ensure that the pandemic response is effective and inclusive, leaving no one behind.

Target the informal sector specifically within Canada's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Aligning with the recommendation by the UN Women (2021) "Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice," livelihoods-led interventions, especially for workers in the informal sector, should be a central aspect of post-COVID recovery. Canada should expand its existing development assistance initiatives regarding financing or entrepreneurial training to include women working in the informal food sector. This will promote a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by Canada.

Use innovative and blended finance: Canada's FIAP should pursue gender-responsive design practices in blended finance initiatives. Through the Equality Fund, Canada can fund women's organizations in developing countries through predictable and flexible funding, along with technical assistance. Canada can use these funds to address new pandemic-related challenges for women food vendors, as well as future protracted crises. Canada should focus specifically on taking a feminist and intersectional pandemic recovery approach when financing women in the informal food sector to overcome challenges and build more resilient communities to maintain growth that works for everyone.

Long Term

Strengthen Canada's partnerships and empower women:

Canada's FIAP needs to broaden its focus to build diverse multi-stakeholder partnerships in the Global South across informal vendors' organizations, women's civil society organizations and government institutions — especially at local levels. There is an opportunity for Canada to use its rich experience in fostering women's entrepreneurship by leveraging the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) to create a triangular cooperation model with urban women working in informal food sectors across cities in the Global South. By drawing on WES's established knowledge hubs, Canada can transfer knowledge and capacity-building training to women in the Global South, while building strong alliances and empowering women.

Address the rural bias and support women in rapidly

growing urban areas: Although food security is already a priority within Canada's international development assistance initiatives, the focus needs to be broadened from rural areas to include support for urban areas. Since women are the largest constituents of urban food environments, support for their activities in local informal food systems will contribute to gender equality and local food security in the rapidly growing urban areas across the Global South.

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