Addressing gendered impacts of COVID-19: Experiences from Pakistan

Webinar – 19 October 2020

SUMMARY POINTS, QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Speakers:

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Moderator:

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Background

This first webinar on risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) for COVID-19 prevention along the food value chain, was presented as part of a series of webinars organized by the Knowledge Sharing Platform on Resilience (KORE), within FAO’s Office of Emergencies and Resilience.

Introduction

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the gendered implications highlight the unequal impact of the pandemic. Lack of gender-sensitivity in the preparation for and subsequent response has only compounded the challenges for women and children.

Women in Pakistan are essential contributors to economic and social sectors and yet face limited access to necessary resources and services – factors that hinder their productivity. With COVID-19, the multidimensional gender inequalities and gender gaps have exacerbated, giving rise to massive challenges across the country, striking on societies, economies and political systems. Women are predominantly affected as they are more exposed to health risks and loss of income, take on a larger share of unpaid care work, and face a heightened threat of gender-based violence during social confinement measures. The pandemic has also overwhelmed the activity lists of women farmers, who run household obligations while ensuring a safe and sufficient food supply for their families and communities. Approximately 20 percent of the women in Pakistan are currently involved in income-generating activities. Agriculture is the largest employer of women, who account for 75 percent of the work force. Regardless, only 55 percent of women have access to adequate healthcare, while 34 percent have reported consulting a medical professional for health-related problems.

To avoid further widening inequalities, preparedness and response efforts must better understand these gender dimensions. Looking beyond the immediate and necessary response to the crisis requires identifying the best strategies to address the impacts by framing policies to build back inclusively and set a new course of action in all sectors and in collaboration with policy makers, local government and other institutions.

It is therefore an obligation to adopt communication strategies, including risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) strategies, which ensure targeting of vulnerable members of rural communities, including women and children. This webinar looks at the impacts of COVID-19 on women and explores the gender and COVID-sensitive RCCE activities of two United Nations (UN) agencies in Pakistan. The
heads of agencies in Pakistan of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) share lessons learned from these activities.

Against this background, the webinar specifically aims to:

- Stress the importance of understanding the specific needs of stakeholders, namely women during the pandemic.
- Explore innovative ways of communicating risk and engaging with communities via social and digital media.
- Assess the potential for replicability and up-scaling of the RCCE activities.
- Discuss complementary activities/areas between the two UN agencies to address gendered impacts of the pandemic.

Summary points

1. **Addressing gendered impacts of COVID-19: FAO Pakistan perspective**

   Presented by Mina Dowlatchahi

Pakistan, with a population of 64 percent residing in rural areas, depends on agriculture and allied activities for their livelihoods. Sixty-eight percent of rural women and girls in the labor force are employed in the agriculture sector. With COVID-19 affecting the entire population, FAO is helping to raise awareness against the virus amongst rural farming communities in the most remote areas across the country where the organization has wide networks and is running parallel campaigns, both online and at the field level. FAO is closely collaborating with UN partners in support of Government efforts maintaining uniformity of messages for the public and oneness of information under the national risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) task force for the COVID-19 response. Using the platform of farmer field schools (FFS), key messages are disseminated on a regular basis. FAO is also conducting online campaigns through WhatsApp, Twitter, and online sessions for smallholder farmers, public service messages, radio messages and communication campaign highlighting the role of women in agriculture.

COVID-19 has disrupted the livelihoods of many, women and children being the most affected segment of the society. While responsibilities of women farmers have increased, a significant proportion are still losing their job as daily wage workers, the financial constraint gravely impacting household income and food security. Women farmers also face issues in accessing both quality agri-inputs and buyers for their products.

It was observed that disseminating messages related to the COVID-19 situation is a big challenge amongst a large low-income and less literate population. Furthermore, limited mobility of women during COVID-19 has resulted in a lack of access to resources and health care.

FAO aims to communicate mitigation behaviors at individual, household and community levels through the FFS approach. Providing women with = digital technology and telecommunication that
facilitate access to resources, information and healthcare, counters the negative impacts of the pandemic, transforming the current situation into opportunities and bridging the gender gap through gender sensitive responsive plans.

2. **Addressing gendered impacts of COVID-19: UN Women Pakistan perspective**

   Presented by Sharmeela Rasool

   *Gender: discussion limited to women, girls and transgender*

Globally, but more specifically in Pakistan, women face various impacts of COVID-19. The differential impacts of the virus depend on many factors including, risk of exposure, susceptibility to the disease and socio-economic implications generated as a result of the pandemic. The overall observation is that these differentiating impacts are not only manifestations of the existing inequality conditions among women, but they also exacerbate these conditions.

Women, regardless of representing the majority of front-line health workers and caregivers, still take on the larger share of household work and responsibilities. Even so, the contributions and important role that women play in the combat against COVID-19 is hardly recognised and appreciated. Reports indicate that the crisis has affected women three to four more than their peers: more women experience challenges accessing medical services. Eighty-six percent and 74 percent of women conveyed a decline in income from family businesses and farm-related occupations respectively. Additionally, while cyber harassment towards women heightened with the growth of online presences, there also has been an increase in reported gender bases violence (GBV) cases.

In order to build back better, UN Women identified critical areas in which interventions are needed and has responded in mainly these four steps.

1. **Implementing an evidence-based approach**

   In order to respond immediately to the situation, UN Women produced a policy paper useful for making predictions, using existing and readily available information. Focusing on ten districts, the Organization identified and gathered information, within a couple of months, regarding actual needs and the most effective approach of addressing them. One of the points to highlight being the diversity among women and the differences in their needs.

2. **Internal and external communication**

   A communications task force put together by the UN, implemented a multidimensional communication approach. It provided clear communication among local UN stuff especially, regarding how to respond and in a nuanced manner to women's needs in various categories. Diverse platforms, including radio and social media, were employed to disseminate tailor-made messaging that underlined women's role as partners and change agents in the fight against the pandemic.
3. Community engagement

Closely linked to communication, community engagement also needed to be tailor-made to cover different socio-economic needs. It is the importance of strengthening collaborations with community-based organizations (CBOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) was noted, as the partnerships greatly facilitated community engagement.

4. Policy advocacy and coordination

This communication also helped steer policy dialogue around proper responses and inclusion of women needs in response strategies. From webinars and online discussions that brought together diverse stakeholders from different sectors, UN Women identified key elements to be taken up at the policy level.

COVID-19 serves as a wakeup call for improved services that better serve and protect especially vulnerable women. It is imperative to ensure that the hard-won gains so far are preserved and that national action plans account for women’s needs right from the design stage to the implementation and feedback stages. Having the right technical information, proper coordination and communication of this information is essential to ensuring the messages are heard and are acted upon at community levels.

Questions and answers

Collated answers provided by the speakers

• On women’s employment:

1. I have often read that women have been disproportionately affected by loss of informal jobs and drops in regular incomes. Is there any hard data in Pakistan that supports this statement?

   FAO has been working with the International Labour Organization (ILO) particularly in the agricultural sector, but it is very difficult to gather substantial statistics since much of the job market is informal.

• On access to support:

2. We have seen in other contexts that in the aftermath of shocks, men-led households tend to access more formal support than women-led households. Has this also been noted in Pakistan?

   Yes, especially because men have more mobility and can more easily access information as well as social protection schemes provided by the government. A big challenge is that many women and girls especially in rural areas, difficult to reach do not possess a national
identity card (CNIS), which is required for accessing social services. The government through the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and the Benazir social protection program is working and has thus far made considerable progress in ensuring that women are registered.

While programs have been set up to support women in accessing necessary services and social protection schemes, many are very limited in scope and capacity. There is therefore need for upscale at national level so that more women are reached.

**On food insecurity:**

3. **Do the latest figures on acute food insecurity from the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) and/or figures on the Reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI), the Food Consumption Score (FCS) or Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) from United Nations (UN) agencies in Pakistan show disaggregated data on differentiated impacts? Is there any hard data on real impact differences between women and men?**

As we have already established, most households are headed by men. Thus, responses to questionnaires are given by male representatives that answer on account of the entire household including the women and girls. A good source of gender inclusive data are women-led households, which in most cases are in a more vulnerable state.

FAO and UN partners including the World Food Programme (WFP) are still looking into the data collected through an IPC exercise in Sind and Baluchistan in 2019, as well as the newly merged districts in 2020. The Pakistan Bureau of statistics, FIERCE, is currently running the data collection, including at provincial and district levels. FAO is also supporting the country to improve its evidence-based data collection and statistics capacities so that data more accurately reflects the food insecurity situation. Additionally, as part of the national food security and nutrition information system, FAO, WFP, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO), worked jointly with the government of Pakistan to launch the first national food security overview publication. The second publication, the Pakistan overview for Food Security 2020 (POFI), is currently in the finalization phase.

**On mental health:**

4. **Please share your views concerning the psychological impact that has been tremendous on many middle and upper middle-class women.**

One of the points highlighted in our assessment is that women experiencing different pressures from income cuts, work stress, household responsibilities etc. have no way to reach out for assistance. Unfortunately, the previously existing counselling services were shut down. As UN Women, we try to address mental health issues through our civil society engagement in the districts mentioned. However, despite working with community
organisations, we are only able to provide support to a limited extent especially given the stigma and stereotypes associated with mental health.

- **On farmer field schools:**

  5. *We have seen two pictures of women’s farmer field schools (W-FFS). I did not know there was a specific full curriculum dedicated to women. Was it developed in collaboration with UN Women? Could you elaborate on the main women-sensitive features?*

      Farmer field schools existed before and were formally called women open schools, focused on specific activities including literacy and kitchen gardens. We worked on putting it at the center of our interventions, the program adopted the name women’s farmer field school and underwent an identity and content change. Bearing in mind the roles of women within their communities, FAO begun training women as well in climate-smart agriculture, water management, livestock and animal health, increasing yields etc. However, we also included modules on;

      - safety in the fields, in collaboration with ILO
      - Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), in collaboration with UNICEF
      - Nutrition,
      - business plans, and
      - COVID-19.

      While the center is on women, these programmes are being provided for both women and men. We are working on documenting all these activities as part of the farmer field school manual that will be finalized and distributed to about 200 000 thousand women and men farmers as part of FAO’s green climate fund project in Pakistan.

- **Moving forward:**

  This disruption provides an opportunity to break gender stereotypes. Now is the time to advocate for change: change in our behaviors as individuals but also as communities. One practical example could be to encourage men to actively participating in the running of their households and to share these responsibilities with their spouses.

  In long run, we need to ensure that national response plans for COVID-19, have a strong gender lens and that there is proper coordination among the various stakeholders including human rights experts to ensure that solutions and policies are gender inclusive.

  Though we do need more data to have a clearer understanding of the exact situation regarding gender issues, we do know for a fact that women have limited access to social services and are disproportionately impacted in times of crises, including the current COVID-19 pandemic. This evidence is enough to begin changing the design and structures of development and implementation plans and government funding etc. so that women and girls are better represented and protected.
For more information

- Webinar series on risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) for COVID-19 prevention along the food value chain
- FAO in Pakistan page
- UN Women Pakistan page
- FAO's Guidance note on risk communication and community engagement: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic
- UN Secretary-General’s policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women
- UN Women Rapid Assessment to measure gendered impact of COVID-19 in several countries of Asia Pacific Region
- Policy Brief on Gendered Impact and Implications of COVID-19 in Pakistan
- Gendered impacts of COVID-19 and equitable policy responses in agriculture, food security and nutrition
- COVID-19 and Gender Monitor
- COVID-19: Emerging gender data and why it matters
- From insights to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19
- COVID-19: The gendered impacts of the pandemic (podcast)
- Sensitizing Pakistan’s female breadwinners to the risks of COVID-19 — via WhatsApp
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