ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RURAL WOMEN AND MEN IN UGANDA

COVID-19 in Uganda
The first case of COVID-19 in Uganda was reported on March 22, 2020. The number of COVID-19 cases remained low during the first three quarters of 2020, before a first spike toward the end of the year. In 2021, COVID-19 cases were low through mid-May when the country experienced a second wave which peaked in early September before case numbers declined again. A lockdown was imposed in the country in mid-March 2020 and continued until June 4, after which restrictions began to be lifted gradually. The government reimposed a 42-day lockdown in June 2021 as cases began to surge. According to the WHO, as of 4 November 2021, Uganda reported 126,348 cases and 3,221 deaths.

Study description
To understand the gendered impacts of the pandemic, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) conducted phone surveys with rural women and men in Uganda with support from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Data were collected from a sub-set of households drawn from a survey conducted in 2017 in eight districts of the country: Iganga, Kasese, Kiboga, Luwero, Masaka, Masindi, Mbale, and Mubende. Four rounds of phone surveys were conducted in October 2020, February 2021, April 2021, and June 2021. The first round corresponds with a low number of cases; the second and third round followed the first wave of COVID-19 cases, while the last round was conducted during second surge of cases. Among households that reported a phone number, a sub-sample of 1,000 households were randomly drawn for phone survey rounds 1-3 and 500 households were interviewed in the 4th round. Approximately 50 percent of respondents were women across survey rounds. Figure 1 provides a detailed description of the COVID-19 situation and study timeline.

KEY FINDINGS
- Income losses resulting from the pandemic affected both men and women from agricultural households.
- Government transfers played a minor role in the COVID-19 response and were limited to the early lockdown period.
- Men were more likely to report selling assets while women were more likely to report borrowing as a coping strategy, with rotating savings schemes an important source of credit for women.
- More women reported worrying about not having enough food, were unable to each healthy foods and had to skip meals due to the pandemic.
- Minimum dietary diversity for women changed with severity of lockdowns and COVID-19 case numbers.

Figure 1: Uganda COVID-19 and study timeline
Study findings

a. Economic impact

Most of the rural respondents are involved in farming – more than 80 percent of men and women respondents reported crop or livestock farming as their primary occupation. A smaller number of households reported self-employment or salaried jobs as their primary occupation. Very few men and women respondents reported engaging in wage labor as their primary occupation. Women were slightly more likely to report farming as their main activity, while men were somewhat more likely to report self-employment or salaried jobs. Between 1 and 2 percent of men and between 3 and 5 percent of women reported not working across survey rounds. Both men and women experienced significant income losses because of the pandemic, across all rounds of data collection (Figure 2). Rounds 1 and 2 reported the highest share of income losses (over 70 percent). However, as mobility restrictions of the lockdown were relaxed in round 3, only half of households interviewed reported income losses (April 2020). However, income losses increased again in round 4, corresponding with the rise in COVID-19 cases in late May and the associated lockdown in June 2021. Men were more likely to report income losses across all survey rounds, especially during round 4.

Figure 2: Share of households that experienced income loss due to COVID-19, by gender of respondent

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Respondents across all occupations reported income losses, however, the small number of men and women respondents who were self-employed or employed in a salaried position were slightly more likely to report income losses across rounds compared to those engaged primarily in farming. Among those engaged in farming, men were more likely than women to report income losses across rounds.

Data from the first survey round show that 61 percent of men and 51 percent of women report working more than they did before the start of the pandemic. However, the number of men and women who reported working more declined over survey rounds. By round 4, only 23 percent of men and 11 percent of women reported working more than they did before the pandemic, while 36 percent of men and 39 percent of women reported working less. As this round coincided with a rise in COVID-19 cases in the country, men and women may have worked less to avoid contracting the virus or in response to the new lockdown.

b. Coping strategies

Drawing down savings was the most common coping strategy to address income losses for both men and women respondents across most survey rounds (Figure 3). Use of savings was especially high during the first two survey rounds when economic lockdowns were in place. Households again relied on savings when COVID-19 cases spiked in June 2021. Selling assets was the second most important coping strategy across income rounds and was especially high during the first two survey rounds. Men were slightly more likely to report selling assets to cope with the pandemic during survey rounds 2 through 4. Borrowing was another important coping strategy across rounds, with between 25 and 50 percent

Figure 3: Strategies to cope with COVID-19-related income losses

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Share of respondents

Used savings
Sold assets
Borrowed money
Used government
transfers
Used NGO
transfers

Male Female Male Female Male Female Male Female
Round 1 Round 2 Round 3 Round 4
of men and women respondents reporting borrowing due to COVID-19-related income losses. Women were slightly more likely than men to report borrowing as a coping strategy in rounds 2, 3 and 4 and in rounds 3 and 4 borrowing was a more important coping strategy for women than selling assets. Very few households reported receiving transfers from government or non-government institutions and among those that did, transfers were only reported at the onset of the pandemic.

The most important sources of borrowing for most rural men and women were informal sources, such as rotating savings schemes and friends and neighbors. Very few respondents borrowed from formal sources of credit, such as banks and micro-finance organizations, and men were more likely to borrow funds from these sources. Across all rounds women were more likely than men to borrow from rotating savings schemes. Women’s reliance on rotating savings schemes during the pandemic highlights the importance of these schemes in increasing women’s resilience to manage shocks and stresses.

c. Impact on food security and dietary diversity
Access to food was hampered by the lockdown, especially in the early stages of the pandemic when strict lockdowns were in place. More than 60 percent of men and women respondents reported that limited mobility prevented them from buying food in round 1, but these challenges eased during later rounds. Women were more likely than men to report experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic. More women reported worrying about not having enough food, were unable to eat healthy foods and had to skip meals (Figure 4). Food insecurity experiences were particularly high during the first round, following the severe lockdown and during the last round when COVID-19 cases surged, and new lockdowns were imposed.

Minimum dietary diversity for women (MDD-W) was calculated for women respondents in rounds 2, 3 and 4, based on a 24-hour recall period to assess impacts on nutrition. The results show diet adequacy was quite low in round 1 with only 32 percent of women reporting that they consumed at least five food groups in the preceding day. Diet quality improved during round 3 when the income losses due to the pandemic declined; 45 percent of women reported having adequate diets during this survey round. However, diet quality declined again in round 4, with only 34 percent of women consuming five or more food groups, coinciding with the increase in COVID-19 cases and associated income losses. The most consumed food groups are grains, pulses, other vitamin-A rich foods, and nuts and seeds. Slightly fewer than half of women across survey rounds consumed leafy greens and other vegetables and less than one third consumed meat, fish, or poultry. Very few women consumed fruit, dairy, or eggs.

d. Impact on children’s education and care burden
Most surveyed households – over 70 percent of respondents – reported having school-aged children between the ages of 6-18 years, who were enrolled in school before the start of the pandemic. School closures occurred on and off throughout the pandemic during various lockdown periods with detrimental effects on school-aged children, especially girls. Of particular concern, 17 percent of respondents reported that they had heard or seen underage girls getting married in their communities because of uncertainty about the health and economic situation and sudden loss of income by the bride’s family due to the pandemic. About half of the respondents reported seeing or hearing about teenage girls that got pregnant when schools were closed during the lockdown in the first survey round.

Rural men and women experienced changes in the amount of time they allocated to unpaid care work during the pandemic, especially during periods of lockdown. In rounds 1 and 2, households were asked about the care burden during lockdown compared to the period just before (pre-pandemic) and just during reopening. Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents reported that they and their spouses spent more time on unpaid care work during periods of lockdown, with a larger share of men reporting an increased care burden during the initial lockdown.
Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on rural people in Uganda, including losses in income, increased work and care burden, food insecurity and poorer diet quality. Both men and women reported using savings and selling assets to cope with income losses, especially during the first two rounds of the survey. While both men and women contributed to coping with the negative impacts of COVID-19, they did so in somewhat different ways, with women more likely to borrow money and men more likely to sell assets, especially in later rounds of the survey. Women tended to rely more heavily on rotating savings schemes, highlighting this as an importance source of resilience for women. The long-term effects of savings and asset depletion may be worse for women given that they were likely starting with a lower level of financial capital.

Despite relaxation of restrictions on mobility, impacts on food insecurity continued to be felt in later rounds of the survey, especially for women. Women were more likely to report food insecurity challenges and many lacked access to healthy diets. A strong link between income losses due to the pandemic and diet adequacy was observed, with women's dietary quality improving during a period when COVID-19 cases had waned, and lockdowns were not in place. The impacts of the pandemic were far reaching for women and girls, including reports of child marriage and pregnancy.

The data show that few households had access to government and NGO transfers even at the start of the pandemic, underscoring the need for short-term assistance closely linked with the severity of the crisis. In addition, long-term strategies are needed to help men and women cope with the ongoing pandemic and to begin restore savings and accumulate assets to build resilience to future shocks.

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