

Enhancing Food Security in Developing Countries Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Gender-Focused Triangular Cooperation Response

Zack Ahmed, Fatma Alsefaou, Kaitlyn Berriman, Sophia Foster

Issue

Women are critical to food systems and have the potential to significantly alleviate food insecurity in developing countries, but COVID-19 is exacerbating the pre-existing barriers inhibiting women's accessibility to food and participation in food systems.

Background

There is an opportunity for Canada to advance its Feminist International Assistance Policy by engaging with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to support women in the food system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The FAO has established a working group that aims to support countries facing food crises within the context of COVID-19. Canada is well-positioned to build a stable food system that will strengthen food security in the short term while investing in long-term food system resilience. This can be facilitated through gender-responsive triangular cooperation. This policy brief has focused on women due to the limitation on data available. Sexual and gender minorities must also be considered to ensure an inclusive and equitable approach.

Women's Role and their Challenges within the Food System

Women play a critical role in keeping food systems functional and engage with every point of the food system. Overall, in developing countries, women make up 43 percent of the agricultural workforce (del Rio & Salazar 2017; Ugwu 2019). In West Africa, 68 percent of employed women work within the food system and 83 percent work within food processing (Nordhagen 2020). In Ghana, for example, women produce 80 percent of the country's total food output (Ugwu 2019). Women also play an important role in the livestock sector, such as in Yemen, where they are responsible for 90 percent of livestock rearing (FAO 2018).

Despite their prominent role in food security, women face many challenges with gender inequality and discrimination along the food supply chain. Various patriarchal norms produce disadvantages for women. For instance, in male-headed households, studies show women's participation in farm or food management decisions reaches as low as 20 percent (Ugwu 2019).

Influenced by patriarchal norms, laws also inhibit women from engaging in food systems equally. Women face challenges with land ownership and discriminatory

inheritance rights. As a result, women possess only a 20 percent share of global land ownership (Ugwu 2019). In some countries such as Rwanda and Ethiopia, marriage is the sole means that women can access land. When women do own land, it is disproportionate to their participation in the food system. For instance, Congolese women form 60 percent of the agricultural workforce but only have 25 percent ownership of agricultural land (Ugwu 2019).

Women also face limitations in accessing financing. Banks often require land as collateral when issuing loans and since women are less likely to own land, they cannot receive credit to purchase agricultural inputs such as fertilizer or machinery. This lack of credit affects all sectors of the economy as women cannot obtain funds to start or expand their own businesses and fund their households (Ugwu 2019).

The role of women in the food system is imperative. The barriers in place are limiting the potential women have to strengthen food systems. Canada has recognized the issues women face with the adoption of its Feminist International Assistance Policy. It is imperative that Canada continues to advance this policy while specifically recognizing the current context of COVID-19 and the impact it has had on women in the food supply chain.

COVID-19's Impact

COVID-19 has further exacerbated the already existing issues women are facing along the food supply chain. Women are excluded from mainstream employment opportunities leading to many of the jobs that women hold to be informal and precarious. According to the International Labour Organization, 74 percent of women's employment in Sub-Saharan Africa is in the informal sector of the food supply chain, compared to 61 percent for men (Blanke 2020). This leaves their jobs to be the first ones cut in an economic downturn. For example, many East African flower farmers are women and due to COVID-19's extensive impact on the horticultural sector, many have lost their livelihoods. In Kenya, around 50 percent of female flower workers have been given compulsory leave and about 150,000 have lost their jobs in Ethiopia (Bhalla and Wuilbercq 2020). COVID-19 has also impacted women smallholder farmers, by disrupting transportation logistics and demand for food which in turn, constrains women's agricultural productivity and access to markets (Montalvao and Van De Veldea 2020). This results in profound consequences as approximately

70-80 percent of farmland in low-income countries are managed by smallholders, with a large portion being women. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 40 percent of smallholder agricultural labour supply is provided by women (Montalvao and Van De Veldea 2020).

Furthermore, COVID-19's prevention and containment measures predominantly disturb informal food markets by considerably affecting women's employment in the food sector, exposing their precarious economic security. As governments implement measures to contain COVID-19, curfews and lockdowns have led to targeting and discrimination of female workers. In Ugandan informal food markets for example, where women make up 66 percent of the workforce, chaos ensued when COVID-19 measures required authorities to forcefully stop women from selling their products. Women were then beaten and brutalized by police who imposed lockdowns and curfews (Aceng 2020). In Mali, curfews have restricted movement and led women to be forced to quit working in the fields while men were permitted to continue work. Therefore, women's productivity and income levels are affected in a discriminatory manner (CARE 2020).

Despite the several barriers women face, they play an instrumental role in supporting food supply chains disrupted by COVID-19 with innovative solutions such as farming during curfews, selling produce in socially distanced open markets, and community meal preparation. However, the resilience displayed by these women is not reflected in national and global responses to the global food insecurity crisis. For instance, the government support systems developed to combat COVID-19 lack recognition of women's issues. In Morocco, women are not permitted to register for COVID-19 relief unless they are widows and Nigeria's women have lost cash-related social protection programs that allow them to earn income to support their households (CARE 2020). Without gender-focused policies, the food insecurity crisis risks derailing the right to a stable food system.

To alleviate food insecurity, the Canadian government recognizes that a gender focus and the integration of women's voices within solutions is critical. Now, to combat issues stemming from the pandemic, Canada must continue supporting a gender focus in its COVID-19 prevention and containment measures by partnering with the FAO and local actors. By doing so, Canada can support women affected by the pandemic through gender-

responsive policymaking, addressing structural barriers they face in the food system, while also strengthening food security by boosting resilience along the food supply chain.

Opportunities

The FAO Working Group

The FAO has formed a Technical Working Group with the aim of supporting food crisis countries amidst COVID-19. The group consists of diverse global actors, such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF. This group will focus on various initiatives, such as crisis communication, awareness and advocacy. Notably, it has established a global COVID-19 food security unit to support data collection and analyses in food crisis countries.

Triangular Cooperation

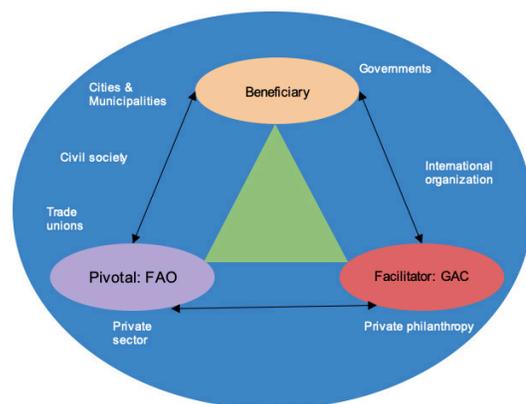
There is an opportunity for Canada to support a food system that guarantees women's access to food and markets for employment and progresses the aims of its Feminist International Assistance Policy by assisting women in the food system not only in the context of COVID-19, but for future crises. This can be facilitated through a gender-focused triangular cooperation model. This model is well-positioned to meaningfully integrate women within food systems with the values of: shared commitment, result-oriented approaches and solutions, inclusive partnership, transparency and mutual accountability, and innovative co-creation. According to the Canadian Council for International Co-operation, triangular cooperation includes a range of stakeholders that play three key roles:

1. The **beneficiary partner** is the target of the development results to be achieved; ultimately the women farmers themselves. In this case, GAC and the FAO can leverage existing and establish new partnerships with NGOs and governments to collect and analyze gender-disaggregated data to identify those most impacted by food insecurity and COVID-19 policies.
2. The **pivotal partner** has proven experience and shares its resources, knowledge and expertise, often playing an implementing role. There is an opportunity for GAC to partner with the FAO as a pivotal partner. This is due to its role as a specialized UN agency that is well-positioned to lead international efforts to defeat hunger. The organization's working group is currently pursuing similar objectives. The FAO

as a pivotal partner provides technical expertise and capacity in delivering sustainable development outcomes for a resilient food system.

3. The **facilitating partner** connects beneficiary and pivotal partners to form a partnership and provides financial and/or technical support. GAC is well-positioned to ensure the facilitation of gender-focused programming. By ensuring the support reaches its target beneficiary, Canada can play a crucial role in enhancing the participation of women in food systems by scaling their success, thereby building resilient food systems that will alleviate food insecurity.

Figure 1: Triangular Cooperation Model



Source: Authors, adapted from Abdelnaiem and Kindornay, 2020.

A gender-oriented triangular cooperation model offers an optimal route to implement the following recommendations. They have the potential to positively transform food systems by achieving greater impacts both in the short and long term.

Recommendations

Short-term

1. **Carry out gender-disaggregated data collection using triangular cooperation with the FAO working group.** Data collection is essential to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on food security, as well as on women. Disaggregated data in cooperation with a gender lens can be used to identify beneficiary partners, redefine power relations, and account for current changing social contexts. In addition, it is important to include a context-specific gendered analysis on individual countries as each country faces distinct challenges that create barriers for women.
2. **Develop gender-oriented food market infrastructure.** The development of robust infrastructure for urban and rural food markets that support efficient and inclusive food systems for women should be prioritized. Rather than shutting down markets, they should be redesigned to minimize density. Circulation of clean air, social distance measures, sanitation stations, and washrooms should be integrated. Market regulations will allow women traders and producers to operate in a safe environment through controlled flows of sellers and buyers. Triangular cooperation will allow for the identification of opportunities for collaboration with local civil society and non-governmental health and women's organizations, international organizations, and state authorities to implement such initiatives.
3. **Integrate women into decision-making processes around COVID-19 prevention and containment regulations.** Using triangular cooperation, parties should ensure workers along the food supply chain, the majority of women, are involved in the design and development of preventative measures and initiatives. This can include involving women in carefully designed health information campaigns, distributions of PPE, and working with state authorities to create gender-sensitive COVID-19 directives.

Long-term

1. **Support the success and profitability of smallholder women farmers.** A focus should be placed on strengthening the capabilities of smallholder women farmers to engage in profitable agriculture. Providing inputs directly to women farmers has positive impacts

on farm investment decisions, food production and family consumption. Direct access to financial services should be provided to channel produce to markets and access physical capital such as farm machinery, agro-processing, and fertilizers. Triangular cooperation will identify local networks of female farmers where women can leverage their community to share their supply and demand.

2. **Support the implementation of gender-sensitive COVID-19 social protection.** Universal gender-responsive social protection programs and other COVID-19 response programs should be supported to preserve women's livelihoods during the current pandemic, and for future crises. Triangular cooperation practices allow women-focused organizations to participate in the development of social protection programs. New initiatives could include mobile cash transfers and contactless services specifically designed to allow women to operate their businesses to improve income security and maintain consumption levels despite crisis conditions.

About the Authors

Zack Ahmed is a student in Wilfrid Laurier University's Master of International Public Policy program, based at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

Fatma Alsefaou is a student in the University of Waterloo's Master of Arts in Global Governance program, based at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

Kaitlyn Berriman is a student in the University of Waterloo's Master of Arts in Global Governance program, based at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

Sophia Foster is a student in the University of Waterloo's Master of Arts in Global Governance program, based at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr. Jonathan Crush, Dr. Zhenzhong Si, and Jeremy Wagner for their mentorship and guidance throughout the development of this brief. Special thanks to Global Affairs Canada for their feedback and support throughout the course of this project.

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