



## **FINDING HOPE:** Experiences of women, children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic in their own words

### **Loss of livelihood**

**“Just after lockdown ... my work and my father’s and my brother’s work were stopped.”**

Women and adolescents are bearing a disproportionate burden during COVID-19 crisis. Here we look closer at the experiences related to food insecurity. We also highlight the range of solutions and approaches being implemented in different countries as well as the policy asks to address loss of livelihood and other significant challenges facing women and adolescents during and beyond the pandemic.

Early in the pandemic concerns were raised that half of all workers worldwide were in danger of losing their livelihoods<sup>[1]</sup>. For millions of people, no income means no food, no security and limited access to services.

In Colombia, an online survey with 1,287 participants aged 18-29 years found that 23% (96/415) of women and almost 21% (36/175) of men who were employed lost their jobs during the pandemic. Forty one percent of respondents to IPPFWHR’s survey said the pandemic had negatively affected their financial status. In a tele-survey of community members in Bihar India, over 91% (1,047/1,150) reported that COVID-19 and lockdown had adversely affected their income.

Workers in the informal economy worldwide are estimated to have lost 60% of their earnings in the first month of the crisis. The incomes of such workers are predicted to fall by 81% in Africa, 21.6% in Asia and the Pacific, and 70% in Europe and Central Asia.<sup>[1]</sup> The country reports informing this brief showed that street vendors in Colombia, India, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda were among the worst affected by mobility restrictions and market closures. Many women in the three African countries were unable to operate because they could not acquire permits or meet registration requirements during lockdown.

**“I cannot go and buy stock to sell because the market is closed to individuals who [run] informal businesses ... they only sell to people who have cards to buy in bulk. I cannot put food on the table for my children.”**

*— 40-year-old woman, South Africa*

Increased job losses in the agricultural sector were reported by participants in India, Nigeria and Uganda. Farmers in India said that their losses were due to interrupted supply chains in the initial phase of lockdown. Delayed deliveries and lack of reliable logistics meant that produce could not reach the market quickly enough and had to be thrown away.

It is estimated women perform almost 50% of all agricultural activity on the African continent.<sup>[2]</sup> In Uganda, the African Women in Agribusiness

Network reported that their agricultural enterprises were at risk, anticipating income losses due to production either stalling or ceasing altogether. Women’s enterprises, hiring mostly women, were unable to operate at full capacity because of physical distancing.

**“We are in the planting season and currently we cannot access the fields due to lockdown. As for those harvesting, we are facing losses in one way or another as there is no option of post-harvest handling, coupled with closure of markets.”**

*— Steering Committee Deputy Chair,  
Graça Machel Trust’s Women’s Economic and  
Social Advancement Project, Uganda*

In Nigeria, the New Faces New Voices Network were concerned that most micro, small and medium enterprises would collapse without economic relief. The great majority of these businesses are woman-owned.

Families in India reported that remittances have decreased since the beginning of the pandemic. Many people working in the unorganized sector<sup>a</sup> lost their jobs due to the closure of factories and construction sites. Those who remained in employment reported late payment of their salaries.

a. The unorganized sector consists of private enterprises owned by individuals or households that produce or sell goods and services and employ fewer than 10 workers.



**Figure 1.**

**Summary of solutions to challenges posed experienced by women and adolescents during COVID-19**



## Strategies and solutions

A range of strategies and approaches are being implemented in different countries to address the significant challenges facing women and adolescents during and beyond the pandemic. The figure below summarizes the most common solutions identified by partner organizations to address loss of livelihood as well as the other challenges experienced by women and adolescents. These solutions are not exhaustive but reflect the perceptions and experiences of those who participated in the country-specific activities.

### Illustrative examples from partner organizations of solutions and approaches used to address loss of livelihood across different countries

- In India, government schemes launched during the COVID-19 period include the Jan Dhan Account (Financial Inclusion) initiative: direct cash transfers of Rs 500 (US\$ 6.8) into women's Jan Dhan accounts have proved useful to support families. The government is also providing free cooking gas cylinders through the Ujjwala Yojana initiative. Some income-generating activities to support women have also been established, such as the home gardening programme in Jharkhand.
- In India, the government implemented a stimulus package worth Rs 20 lakh crore (US\$ 265 billion) including: free cereal grains to the poor; cash to poor women and the elderly; tax relief for small businesses; and incentives for domestic manufacturing. The cost of the combined package is roughly 10% of India's GDP, making it among the most substantial in the world, after those announced by the United States (13% of its GDP) and Japan (over 21% of its GDP).
- In India, to overcome issues caused by food shortages, the government introduced the Garib Kalyan relief package, which includes cash transfers and food provision.

- The Kenyan government is providing tax relief (reduction of VAT, income and business tax) together with the Inua Jamii (Uplift Families) programme, which provides social security in the form of cash transfers to orphans and vulnerable children, the elderly, people with severe disabilities and people living in the arid northern counties.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs), humanitarian organizations, non-governmental organizations, frontline workers and self-help groups have been playing important roles in reaching affected families and marginalized groups:

- a. In Nigeria, CSOs and philanthropic organizations have provided support to families, especially those displaced by the religious conflict in Kaduna state.
- b. In Colombia, CSOs and community associations have provided essential food to families.
- c. In India, CSOs, women's self-help groups and frontline workers have been distributing hygiene items, food items and cooked meals to families, especially children and pregnant and lactating women, through the Take Home Ration initiative. Elected women representatives have addressed issues related to limited access to the national distribution of rations, by identifying families without ration cards and finding alternative ways to include them.

- Government-led initiatives, such as food distribution interventions, food stamps and vouchers, were implemented during the height of lockdown. Those measures have been reported in India, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda.
- In Colombia, people started to grow their own food as a mitigation strategy to adapt to the crisis. Indigenous populations highlighted the success of growing produce and sharing seeds, a practice that has adequately met the needs, not just of individuals, but of whole communities.

## Policy asks

Supporting the [PMNCH Call to Action on COVID-19](#), and based on the lived experiences of women and adolescents, seven policy asks are put forward. These asks seek to respond to the consequences of COVID-19 in both the medium and long term and will require a collaborative approach by governments and all stakeholders. The action required will need to address loss of livelihood as well as the other challenges experienced by women and adolescents, including related to mental health, education, safety and security and access to essential services.

1. Maintain essential SRMNCAH+N services, products and information, including for contraception, safe abortion, immunization, safe delivery, stillbirth prevention and mental health.
2. Address gender inequality, including gender-based violence, and ensure the safety and security of women and adolescent girls in integrated response and recovery plans.

3. Increase attention to the mental health needs of those, especially women and adolescents, who have been severely affected by the pandemic.
4. Adopt and scale up social and economic relief measures that are gender-responsive and reduce inequities.
5. Address adolescents' needs for education and vocational training.
6. Address the digital divide within countries and between genders.
7. Collect and report disaggregated data (by age, sex, income, disability, geography) and gender statistics.

## Illustrative actions and asks from partner organizations to address loss of livelihood

- Develop gender-sensitive and inclusive social protection and income support measures to reduce the vulnerability of daily wage earners, farmers, workers in the informal sector and those living on the margins. These could include cash transfers, food stamps, small loans, vocational training and skills development programmes. Adolescent mothers must be recognized as a vulnerable population needing assistance from government support programmes.
- Ensure effective implementation of relief measures during the pandemic and equitable access to economic support.



- Spread awareness of and provide information on the availability and benefits of economic support schemes throughout the population.
- Engage self-help groups and community organizations to identify vulnerable women, children and adolescents who should be prioritized to receive support.
- Adopt tax and financial packages to stimulate small businesses, especially those run by women and young people.
- Invest in the agricultural sector and support agrarian supply chains, strengthen local producer-market links and develop channels to connect producers with consumers, e.g. by promoting home deliveries, connecting farmers with distributors, and organizing small-scale local fairs (while limiting the number of consumers per hour to protect communities' health).



## References

1. Inman P. Half of world's workers 'at immediate risk of losing livelihood due to coronavirus'. The Guardian; 29 April 2020. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/half-of-worlds-workers-at-immediate-risk-of-losing-livelihood-due-to-coronavirus>, accessed 24 June 2020).
2. Sofa Team and Doss C. The role of women in agriculture. ESA Working Paper No 11-02. Rome: Agricultural Development Economics Division, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; 2011 (<http://www.fao.org/3/am307e/am307e00.pdf>, accessed 24 June 2020).

More information available at:

<https://www.who.int/pmnch/knowledge/publications/lived-experiences-covid19/>