



Mainstreaming Gender for Enhanced COVID-19 Rural Livelihood Recovery in Zambia

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Key highlights

- COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed diverse national responses across sub-Saharan Africa.
- Gendered impacts of COVID-19 have generally been silent in national policy discourses.
- We do not know how national policy responses in Zambia impact agricultural livelihood and gender.

- COVID-19 policy responses heightened household provisioning, labour, and care burdens.
- There are disruptions to relationships and social networks relied upon by women.
- Membership organizations and social initiatives relied upon by women as fall-back strategies have equally been disrupted, affecting wider pathways of membership.
- Zambia made several policy pronouncements towards curbing the spread of the Coronavirus and to promote recovery, but these have been macro and less inclusive of rural women.

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the role and importance of women in driving livelihood and resilience, particularly in agricultural settings. Pandemic-related restrictions have affected agricultural livelihoods whilst exposing inequalities across gender. Frequently cited statistics show, across sub-Saharan Africa, women contribute 60–80% of labour, producing food for household consumption and for sale. In Zambia, the agricultural sector is dominated by women, yet land and other economic opportunities often marginalize women (Manda 2022). Women constitute 64% of the rural population and approximately 80% of food producers (GRZ 2010; FAO, 2018). Living conditions reveal diverse gender based vulnerabilities (ZAMSTATS 2015). Without fittingly relevant policy interventions, COVID-19 is more likely to worsen gender divides and inequalities in several key productive sectors such as agriculture. Whereas sector-specific policies can help mitigate impacts of COVID-19, little is known about the impacts of the pandemic across gender and how policies play out. To address these knowledge gaps, this study aims to:

1. Explore national policy responses to COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Interrogate how policy response affects agricultural livelihoods and gender.

Summary of research

This policy briefing note aims to explore and understand the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on agricultural livelihoods. The study draws on multi-level interviews ($n=12$), group discussions ($n=9$), in-depth household case study interviews ($n=18$), and household surveys ($n=150$) across three agricultural camps in Mumbwa (Mupona, Mulendema, and Mumba). At its furthest point, this study sheds light on how efforts towards just pandemic recovery can be made with a consideration of gender.

Key findings

Results reveal gendered impacts of COVID-19 through five main frames:

1. Markets and material wellbeing were negatively affected

COVID-19-related social restrictions affected market access mechanisms, particularly through transportation and market demand. Whereas potential customers reduced their frequency of business visits to rural communities, transportation costs affected market-seeking behaviours with more impact on women. Pandemic-related care and workload burdens alongside loss of economic activities for men previously engaged in informal mining and game sectors led to women generally retreating to their domestic sphere and scaling back their market engagements both within Mumbwa and in Lusaka. This led to a concentration of men in marketing activities. One District Agricultural Officer explained, “*only men are able to sell in the capital city, accessing lucrative markets than women*”. Women farmers specifically in the horticultural crop industry, which has seen a general increase in production in the past decade (e.g., tomatoes and cabbages) complained about lack of markets, “*yet horticulture is a new space where we find many women operating*” said one District Agricultural Officer. A related loss of access and control of income further raised input challenges for women, with inputs prices blamed for concentrating women on seasonal crops such as legumes with little market linkages. Cross-country businesses for women (e.g., the border town of Nakonde), including those reliant on Lusaka sources (e.g., clothing) fell out of business. COVID-19 altered material wellbeing for women. Missing gender-sensitive agricultural credit schemes or support mechanisms in part due to shrinking wider fiscal space means women's livelihoods are made worse by COVID-19. More broadly, this includes the limited role and importance of Social Cash Transfer (SCT) coverage in rural areas.

2. COVID-19 increased household provisioning, labour and care burdens

Women in Mumbwa play a central role in household wellbeing. Before COVID-19, women participated in land preparation, planting, and weeding. They also participated in household caring responsibilities, marketing, and most importantly food provisioning. Results show “*a heightened role of women in household provisioning during COVID-19*”, explained the District Agricultural Officer.

Women expressed opinions that COVID-19 heightened their household work and responsibilities more so around caring and food provisioning spheres (Table 1).

Table 1: Perception of labour intensity and after COVID-19 (based on group discussion: Red = High; Black = Medium; Green = Low; White = NA)

Task	Men before	Men during	Women before	Women during	Male youths before	Male youths during	Female youths before	Female youths during
Land preparation	Red	Red	Green	Green	Red	Red	White	White
Planting	Green	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Weeding	Green	Green	Red	Red	Black	Black	Red	Red
Spraying	Black	Green	Green	White	White	White	White	White
Caring	Green	White	Black	Red	White	White	Green	Green
Marketing	Black	Red	Black	Green	Green	Green	White	White
Food provisioning	Green	White	Black	Red	White	White	White	White

COVID-19 has “increased mouths to feed and frequency of meals now that everyone is home at the same time”, one woman explained in a group discussion. Community reports show heightened responsibilities for women also related to increased supervision of children after closure of schools. Group discussions revealed care responsibilities increased sharply for the sick and elderly, including children (67%) and other family members during the pandemic. Heightened roles were reported in cooking fuel, frequency in water (44%), and food provisioning (84%).

3. Relationships and social networks were disrupted

Traditional patterns of household and community relationships are very important as fall-back strategies. In Mumbwa, these pointed to solidarity and the ability to draw support from various sources, but these networks have been particularly significant to women. Before COVID-19, relationships with neighbours and wider community relations acted as reliable sources of assistance, including food and credit sources. Social networks were frequently cited by women as providing “avenues for building psychological wellbeing”. They were sources of support and assistance during COVID-19.

However, women's reliance on social networks for survival during COVID-19 reduced as “everyone was scared of contracting COVID-19” (Group Discussion 2021). COVID-19 affected ability to receive visitors (51%) and visit relatives outside Mumbwa (and thus remittances) (54%), including relationships within the community (64%). It also affected relationships with other families within the communities (64%), relationships within extended families (66%), and food availability (48%). Meanwhile, restrictions around social gathering eroded solidarity such as during bereavements

or celebrations. Within declining social relations, survey data shows respondents received assistance from relatives (30%), neighbours (27%), and membership organizations (20%). A smaller number received support from community associations (13%) and other members of the community (10%). Whereas women continued to help each other in communities, “*social relationships were disturbed because we couldn’t have gatherings as we used to do before*” explained one female household case study participant.

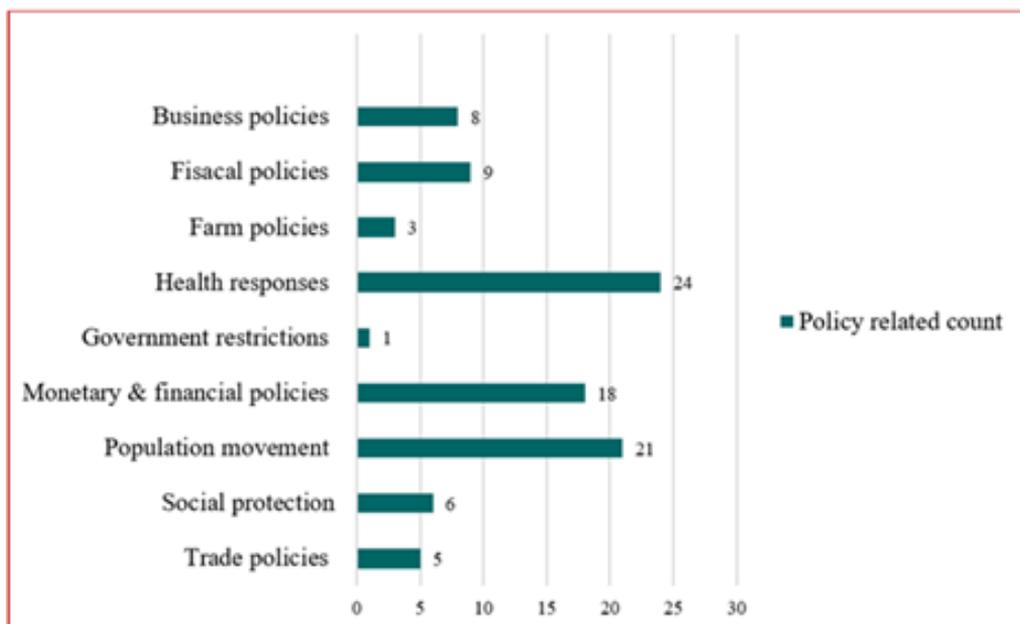
4. Membership organizations and social initiatives

Social restrictions and general fear of the disease created difficulties in meetings and affected savings commitments. Women explained that “*women here depend on Village Banking Savings Groups but with COVID-19 we were unable to conduct our monthly meetings*”. This affected friendships and ability to access farm inputs as women were unable to pay membership fees.

5. Macro policies and failure of good intentions

National policy interventions have largely been at the macro-level despite national claims about the need for a multi-sectoral pandemic approach (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Count of policy descriptions in Zambia (March–December 2020) (see also Malambo et al. 2020)



Agricultural and gender-specific interventions are missing in national policy responses, raising the need for locally driven gender-sensitive initiatives that can build resilience and empower rural women. The general perception is that COVID-19 policy interventions “*have generally excluded many of us in rural areas*”, explained one District Agricultural Officer, adding: ranking the adequacy of state response at between 17–25%.

Policy recommendations

1. **Promote and strengthen gendered access to savings and credit:** Women-run credit/savings schemes for rural women can relate to membership organizations and women's collectives to channel resources aimed at strengthening livelihoods.
2. **Strengthen intra-household relations to increase men's participation in the domestic care:** This will require shift in cultural norms and beliefs on the role of men and women in the household.
3. **Promote gender-sensitive agricultural policies including markets:** Supporting gender-sensitive agriculture and creating livelihoods should form part of a long-term solution. Policy interventions such as FISP and other agro-projects should place gender at the centre of its thinking, including how pre-existing conditions shape differential access to opportunities.
4. **Social protection – Social cash transfer:** Social protection measures such as social cash transfers and food aid have been limited in coverage by the wider shrinking fiscal space and debt burdens, precluding any additional government action. These initiatives, however, can help to enhance, not only agro-based livelihoods, but can also create opportunities for asset-based support measures among women—on a revolving basis.
5. **Build multi-level progressive partnerships and collaborations:** Engagements between state institutions and NGOs, including volunteers, and other organizations to provide agriculture and livelihood support and assistance to rural women. This should include specific extension services that the rural women households need.
6. **Deliberate policy and other measures** can help to advance women's access to markets during the pandemic recovery. This includes training, awareness, sensitization, and other measures that can help to advance women's access to markets during the pandemic recovery.

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