



Women as key players in food resilience:

a reconfiguration of gender relations in times of covid-19 pandemic

Policy brief - 29 November 2021

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic and its response measures have intensified the vulnerability and inadequacies of food systems in West Africa, affecting all activities and processes of food production, distribution, and consumption. To this end, rural women in Senegal and Burkina Faso have improved the resilience of poor and vulnerable households, thus generating recognition of this reality by men. It is therefore essential to give women decision-making power at all levels in spheres related to the four (4) pillars of food security. It would be desirable to support and accompany the positive reconfiguration of the power relations between women and men, already under way in the communities studied. This would ensure that they have the means and skills (social, cultural, economic, political and legal) to be able to fully play this role. Support for farmers' organizations and networks of women's organizations is essential.

Highlights



Measures to counter the pandemic have caused a decline in food security in all its four pillars (availability, access, utilization, and stability).



Women have played a big role in the food resilience of communities – they are recognized by men as pillars of food resilience



A reversal of women's economic and decision-making power has been seen by men. Women helped men work in the plots, to compensate for limited food supplies, and even repay their debts.



The destabilization of traditionally gendered roles during the pandemic. Men participated more in household chores, although sometimes not well received, which is an opportunity for greater equality between women and men.



Women, supported by some men, are demanding access to land tenure and security, financing, agricultural equipment, and inputs needed to fully participate in the pillars of food security.

Introduction

The political authorities of Burkina Faso and Senegal have put in place restrictive measures to counter the COVID-19 pandemic, with little anticipation of the repercussions in terms of food security of their populations. Patterns of production, consumption and access to basic foods and essential products have been affected. Sales and movement of people have been profoundly disrupted, but rural areas and women are most affected (WFP, 2020; CNCR et al., 2020). There has been a considerable decrease in food quantity and quality, and feeding frequency in households of rural areas decreased by up to 82% in Casamance in Senegal (Niang, 2020). Some authors have highlighted their fear that pre-existing inequalities between men and women experienced before the pandemic will worsen during and after the pandemic, resulting in a loss of the progress made over several decades in terms of gender equality (Grown et al., 2020). The results of the research conducted in four border areas of the two countries confirm the stronger impacts of the pandemic on women. However, the food insecurity caused by the pandemic has disturbed the power relation dynamics existing between Females and Males (F/M)— in favour of women. This shift offers opportunities for the longer-term reconfiguration of F/H power relations that could lead to greater gender equality. The objective of this brief is to alert the Burkinabe and Senegalese authorities to the key role that women have played in ensuring the food resilience of rural households, and to highlight the positive and negative reconfigurations of gender relations generated by the pandemic. The brief proposes evidence-based solutions (our research, 2021), that can influence decisions and policies in the management of future pandemics, and to support gains in reducing inequalities in gender social relations.

Approaches and Results

The research analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on gender power relations in the pillars of food security in four rural border areas. The approach was qualitative and combined semi-structured interviews with participatory data co-construction workshops. A total of 189 traders, producers, and processors (53% women) and 73 community leaders (26% women) participated in the interviews and eight groups of six to nine men and women participated in the co-construction workshops. The men's and women's workshops were held separately to ensure free speech. In addition to generating evidence, the participatory process led to reflections and solutions from the communities themselves.

Eating is difficult for rural communities in times of the COVID-19 crisis

The constraints related to the COVID-19 public health measures have led to a decrease in the availability and accessibility of food. Food availability and prices fluctuated over time and location in line with periodic changes in sanitary measures. As a result, men and women reported reducing the quality (43% of respondents) and quantity (43%) of food consumed and the number of meals per day (36%). The latter being reported in particular by women in Burkina Faso (48%). Several women reported going from three to one meal a day and depriving themselves for the benefit of their children. The reduction of adult portions was sometimes done without the knowledge of men, for fear of reprisals.

Disruption of traditional gender roles

Coping strategies for COVID-19 control measures have caused upheavals (positive and negative) in traditional gender roles within households. Men unable to fulfill their role as breadwinners due to travel restrictions, market closures and curfews (loss of economic power) felt helpless. However, distancing measures made it difficult for men to consult among themselves to try to find solutions (loss of social power). The women are also overloaded. In addition to their usual tasks and the extra burden of children (closed schools), they must also manage to compensate for the lack of food intake for the family. To do so, they have to be creative and find informal ways to continue some trade of food and necessities. Some women even explained that they contributed to the repayment of their husbands' debts from agriculture through trade. In some of the studied regions, women replaced the lack of agricultural labour force in their households due to travel restrictions. This resilience capacity of women (increase in economic power) destabilized the purchasing power balance between men and women and weakened men's leadership in the family and the community (giving women an increase in decision-making power).

Another role reversal revealed by this research is that men – stuck at home – participated in women's domestic tasks. While it can be considered positive that men are exposed to the workload usually reserved for women, their presence nevertheless is perceived negatively by women as it destabilizes their leadership at home.

Women perceived by men as key players in food resilience

Men openly recognized women's resilience during the COVID-19 crisis, and they were perceived as more resilient than them by their communities. Yet women also have less access to land, means of production, and even training/advice. However, during the participatory co-construction workshops in Senegal, women claimed the right to have access to arable land, and several men supported them in order to obtain new land developments from the authorities, from which they could benefit.

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It was found that the women tried to keep up despite the disease, [...] they tried to adapt. Look at the big market [...] for example, we were forced to close and right away we noticed that the women tried to make their little *yaars* [...] and always brought something home, so that the family could eat [... They have] created initiatives to be able to provide for the family. We understand today that man cannot do everything so, if the woman also does not get up it's not going to work, so she fought to keep the course. They are to be congratulated for that!

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Testimony of man participating in the project in Burkina Faso

An opportunity for a more egalitarian reconfiguration of power relations between men and women

The shift in the traditional roles and powers of women and men created by the crisis offers important opportunities for a more egalitarian reconfiguration of power relations and bring new social norms and organization during and after the pandemic. One can postulate a gain towards more egalitarian relations between women and men, linked to the exposure/participation of men to the roles traditionally held by women and the increase in women's economic and decision-making powers – both at home and in the community.



WORRIED ABOUT THE FUTURE – MEN AND WOMEN MUST WORK TOGETHER
 PHOTO CREDIT – Photo taken by a male participant in Burkina Faso

However, the research team noted that despite the power gained by women during the pandemic, much remains to be done. Men and women testified that in some households, mutual aid between women and men has increased. However, women were perturbed by the presence of men at home because they could no longer manage their home independently. In addition, some women talked about the additional weight associated with their obligation to compensate for men's loss of earnings. There were also tensions related to the fear of illness and hunger, the pressure to provide for needs, and the role shift.

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Yes, men and women do not have an equal share in land allocation. Where they distribute the land [decision-making place], there are no women sitting. If there was a woman there, the sharing would be fair. If one man receives a plot it will be the same for the woman.

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Testimony of women participants in the project in Senegal

Political support is essential to the successful completion of this positive reconfiguration

The current shift, combined with the recognition of the key role of women in resilience, presents significant opportunities for a more egalitarian reconfiguration of power relations between men and women after the pandemic. However, support for the women's movements that can accompany this positive reconfiguration at the community level seems essential. Equally, this analysis highlights the importance of considering the issues and realities experienced by women in national programs and policies, in order to give them the economic, physical (access to land) and skills/powers to take part in decisions related to the local and national food system.

Conclusion

This study highlighted an awareness, on the part of men, of the key role that women play in food resilience, a destabilization of power relations and roles. The combination of these factors represents opportunities for a more egalitarian reconfiguration of power relations between women and men. However, it is currently difficult to predict how this will evolve after the pandemic. It will be important to support women's organizations and movements so that they can guide this new balance in their favor and unlock their potential in household resilience. It was recognized by the men in the study that – even if change is scary – giving women more decision-making and productive power is important for community resilience. In this sense, it is important that decision-making structures and agricultural, land and social policies offer more space for women.

Recommendations for action

- Include rural women in the implementation and adaptation of health measures in the event of a pandemic for rural regions to avoid or limit food security challenges – lack of availability/accessibility of food.
- Support the positive reconfiguration of power relations between women and men by highlighting the benefits of greater gender equality for both men and women.
- Support women's networks and organizations so that they can guide this positive reconfiguration and work on positive masculinity.
- Strengthen women's economic empowerment (financial capacity, access to employment and access to finance).
- Strengthen women's productive empowerment (facilitate women's access to agricultural land, agricultural equipment and inputs, training on resilient agricultural production).
- Strengthen women's decision-making empowerment at all institutional levels (local – regional – national).
- Integrate cross-cutting gender issues into the program and intervention priorities that support the strategic interests of women and girls in transforming social gender relations, this benefiting greater community resilience.

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Research project:

This policy brief is an output of the project "Effects of the COVID-19 crisis on Food Security (SA) in Burkina Faso and Senegal: An opportunity to reconfigure gender unequal relations", implemented by the Center for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI)¹, the Center for Economic and Social Studies, Documentation and Research (CEDRES)² of the Thomas Sankara University of Burkina Faso and the National School of Agriculture (ENSA)³ of Iba Der Thiam University of Thiès in Senegal and Brock University⁴, Canada. This work was carried out with a grant from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Ottawa, Canada. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

For further information: https://bit.ly/Etude_Burk_Sen.

Cite of this policy brief:

Fatoumata L. Baldé, Vandeplass I., Touré K., Sanfo S., Vasseur L. (2021). Women as key players in food resilience: a reconfiguration of gender relations in times of COVID-19 pandemic – Policy brief. Project: Assessing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic on food security in Burkina Faso and Senegal: opportunities for reconfiguring gender inequality relations. Centre d'Études, de Documentation et de recherches économiques et sociale (CEDRES) de l'Université Thomas Sankara du Burkina Faso, Centre d'études et de coopération internationale (CECI), École Nationale Supérieure d'Agriculture (ENSA) de l'Université Iba Der Thiam de Thiès au Sénégal et Brock Université, Canada. Financial support: International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. Policy brief no 1. November 29, 2021.

Research financed by:

