

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Women's Social and Economic Outcomes: An Updated Review of the Evidence

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Abstract

In an updated review on the gendered social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, we examine 49 studies identified by our search criteria between January and March 2021. This review included peer-reviewed papers, pre-prints and working papers that met specific search terms, contained empirical analyses and complete information on the study methodology, and included findings on the gendered social and economic impacts of the pandemic in low- and middle-income contexts. This collection of evidence largely confirms previous findings that in many arenas, women are bearing the greatest burdens of the crisis. Evidence continues to mount that women have faced greater employment and income losses, have shouldered the majority of increases in unpaid care work, and have endured increased levels of violence. Gaps remain regarding the impacts on women agricultural workers and women entrepreneurs and, importantly, intrahousehold poverty and food insecurity. New evidence largely confirms however, that women are disproportionately and negatively impacted by the pandemic and policy responses must be sensitive to this reality.

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1. Introduction

CGD's COVID-19 Gender and Development Initiative seeks to deepen decision-makers' understanding of the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and related policy responses, as well as propose evidence-based solutions to support an inclusive recovery. Recognizing that the academic and policy dialogue around gender inequality in the COVID-19 context has largely emphasized challenges facing women and girls in high-income settings, our analysis centers on low- and middle-income countries. As donor institutions and governments seek to provide relief and support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and global recession, our work aims to ensure that their policy and investment decisions equitably benefit women and girls.

In April 2021, our team of researchers published an initial set of working papers that examined the social, economic, and indirect health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis from a gender perspective (O'Donnell et al., 2021a; O'Donnell et al., 2021b; Krubiner et al., 2021). We synthesized findings from studies published between March and December 2020 focused on gender gaps in work and employment, including entrepreneurship, wage and salaried work, formal and informal work, work in subsistence and commercial agriculture, and unpaid housework and care work. We also compiled studies examining implications of the COVID crisis for poverty, food insecurity, gender-based violence, and access to essential health services.

Now, in collaboration with researchers from the Center on Gender Equity and Health's EMERGE initiative at the University of California, San Diego, we have updated our initial review to include studies identified by the search methodology between January and March 2021. In this paper, we cover the COVID crisis' social and economic impacts, whereas health impacts are discussed in an accompanying review (Awofeso et al., 2021).

2. Search approach

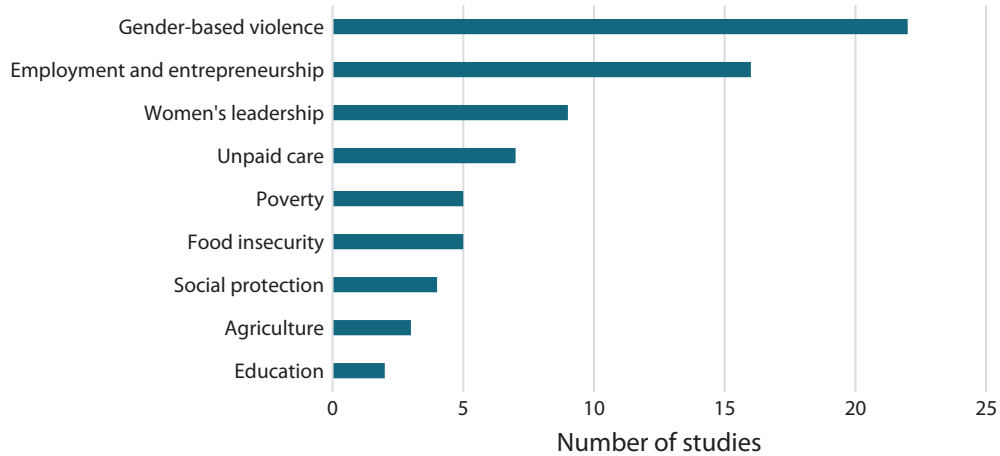
Using search terms and databases consistent with those employed for their previous quarterly reviews, EMERGE colleagues led the compilation of studies on the gendered social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis (Center on Global Equity and Health, 2021; Center on Global Equity and Health, 2020). This review included peer-reviewed papers, pre-prints and working papers that met specific search terms, contained empirical analyses and complete information on the methodology adopted for the study, and included findings on the gendered social and economic impacts of the pandemic in low- and middle-income contexts. A full list of search terms and databases are in Annex A for reference.

In an accompanying database, we document each study's title, author(s), abstract, URL, publication date, topic, country and region of focus, income level of country, population of focus (e.g., adolescent girls, migrant women), study design, data collection approach and timeline, and sample size. We draw upon these underlying data to highlight key trends in studies' coverage and findings.

3. Scope of new literature

From January through March 2021, we find 49 studies that meet outlined criteria, covering a wide variety of social and economic impacts. The highest concentration of studies examine gender-based violence during the pandemic (22 studies), followed by 16 studies on employment and entrepreneurship, nine studies on women’s leadership, and seven studies on unpaid care work (Figure 1).¹

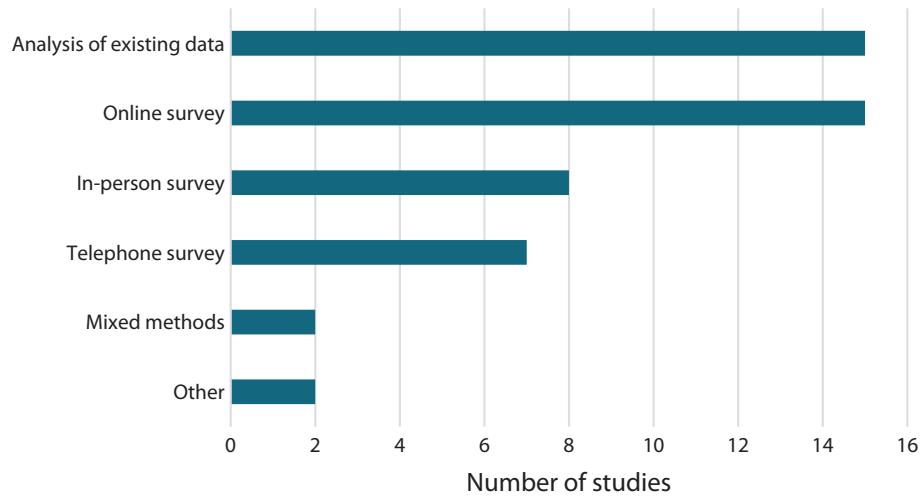
Figure 1. Number of studies by topic



The majority of studies (82 percent) are peer-reviewed publications. Six are working papers, and three are pre-prints. Across the entire sample, 40 papers employ a cross-sectional study design, four studies are reviews and meta-analyses, three employ a serial cross-sectional design, and two use a longitudinal design. In terms of data sources, while many studies use data which came from pre-existing data sets (15 papers), the majority carried out primary data collection (32 studies) (Figure 2).

¹ Some studies included more than one topic.

Figure 2. Number of studies by data source



Regionally, about a quarter of our sample of studies focus on Sub-Saharan Africa (13 studies), followed by South Asia (10), Latin America and the Caribbean (8), and East Asia and the Pacific (8) (Figure 3). Studies span across 32 countries, with the most frequently represented countries being India (9), China (5), and Kenya (4) (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Number of studies per region

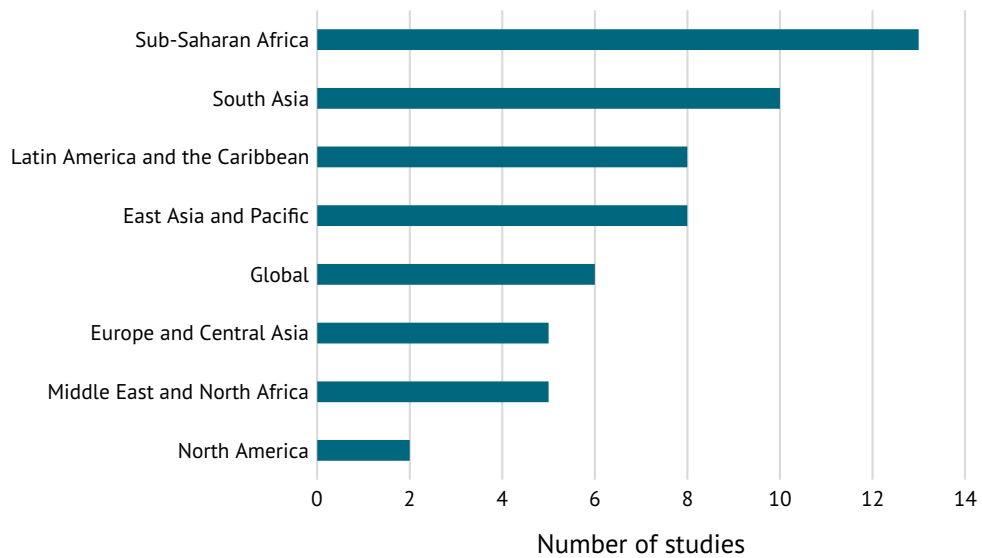
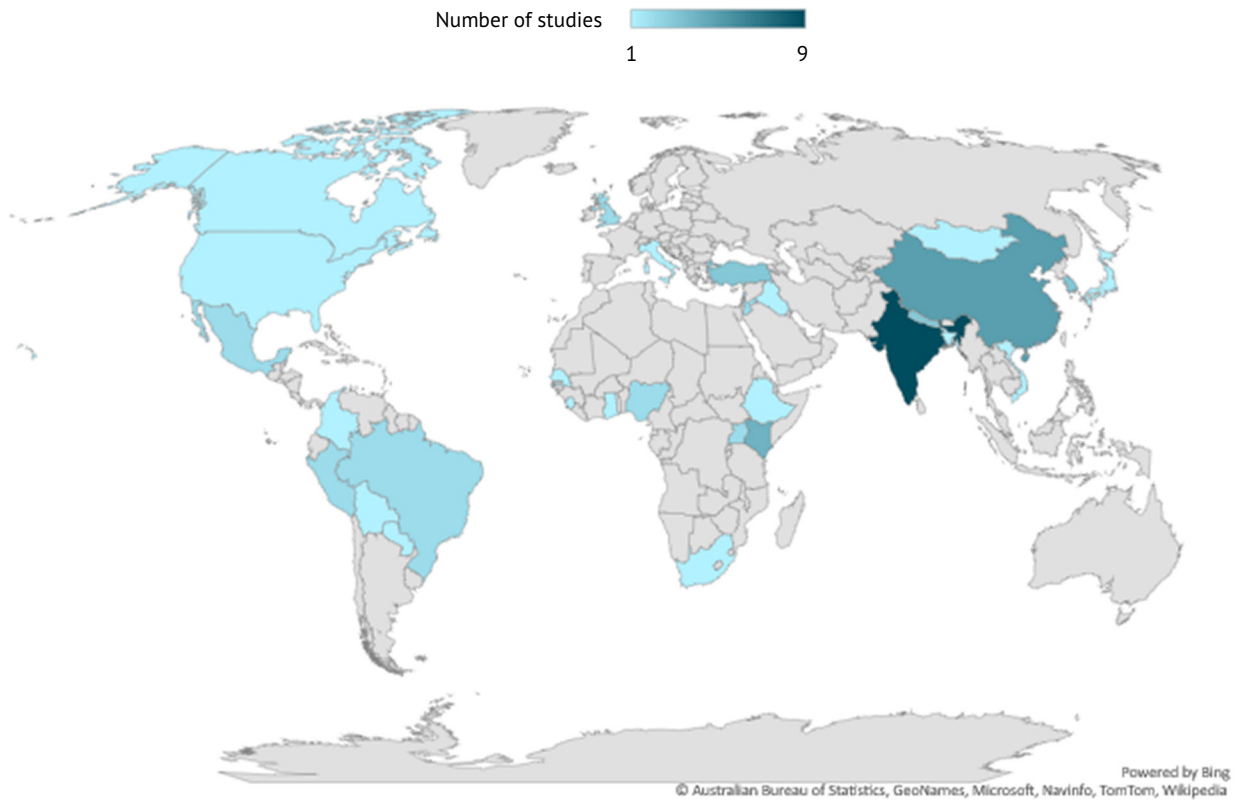


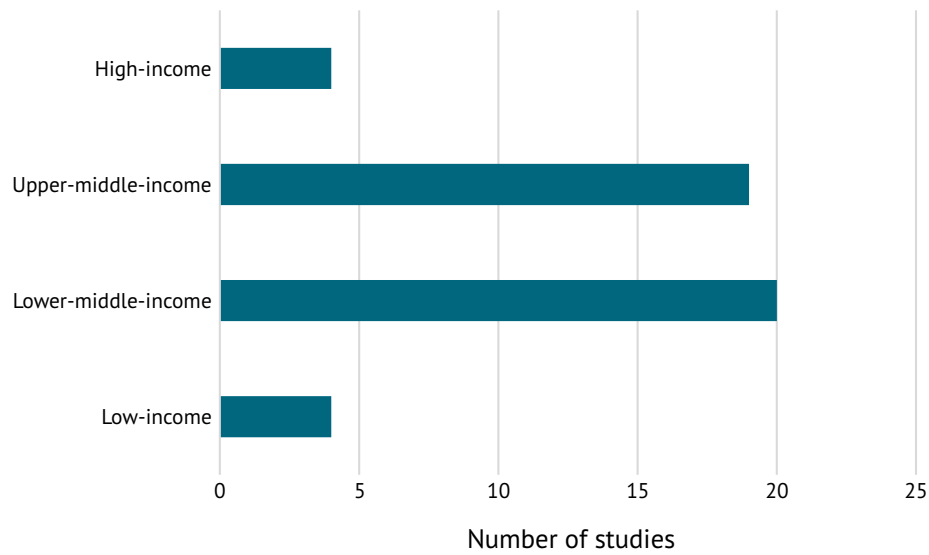
Figure 4. Number of studies per country



Finally, the studies are diverse according to income category. There are 20 studies in lower-middle income countries, 19 in upper-middle income countries, and both high- and low-income countries have four studies each.² It is promising to see that 80 percent of studies focus on middle-income countries, but our review reflects that more work needs to be done to fully understand the impacts of the pandemic in low-income settings in particular.

² High income countries were included only if they were in a study that also included a low- and/or middle-income country, and met all other inclusion criteria.

Figure 5. Number of studies by country income level



4. Findings from updated review: How do new studies compare?

In our first set of working papers, we emphasized the data limitations associated with the evidence we synthesized, noting that long-standing challenges around measuring women’s paid and unpaid work, and broader limitations in the availability and quality of gender data, have been exacerbated in the COVID context. As researchers have resorted to using remote data collection methods, including phone and internet surveys which disproportionately exclude women (who are less likely to own a mobile phone or have access to the internet), it is possible that the gendered impacts of the crisis, especially on the most vulnerable populations, have been underestimated. Additionally, while many of the gendered impacts of the crisis are immediate, many also take some time to unfold. Just as Buvinic and Knowles highlight the importance of tracking the long-term impact of women’s empowerment programs over several years, ongoing data collection will be necessary in the subsequent waves and aftermath of this crisis to fully diagnose the extent of the damage (Buvinic and Knowles, 2021).

With those caveats, our earlier synthesis pointed to gender gaps in employment and income losses, with women being disproportionately impacted, as well as women-owned businesses more likely to suffer revenue losses and shut down operations (O’Donnell et al., 2021b). For both wage workers and entrepreneurs, early evidence suggested that both increased unpaid care work burdens – disproportionately borne by women – and the sectors in which women were located contributed to gender gaps in impacts. Few studies were available on the crisis’ implications for those working in agriculture, but evidence from past crises suggested that subsistence agriculture would increase as farmers struggled to make ends meet and seek to mitigate the risk of food insecurity. With women and girls already at higher risk of poverty and food insecurity pre-COVID, the global recession was predicted to exacerbate these

effects, and lockdown measures combined with rising intra-household stress were seen to increase various forms of gender-based violence, especially intimate partner and domestic violence (O’Donnell et al., 2021a; Bourgault et al., 2021). Early evidence also suggested the important role of women’s self-help groups and empowerment collectives in promoting resilience within communities.

Below, for each of these areas of impact, we summarize whether more recent evidence has aligned with or diverged from our previous findings.

Table 1. Summary of COVID crisis’ gendered impacts

Topic	2020 Evidence (March–December)	2021 Evidence (January–March)
Employment and Entrepreneurship	Women face disproportionate job losses due to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sector of employment; – Concentration in informal employment; – Increased care burdens. Women’s businesses face higher revenue losses and are more likely to close.	New evidence confirms previous findings on women’s disproportionate job losses due to sector of employment and higher informality, and increased care burdens. Little new evidence, but evidence does confirm women’s businesses are more likely to be negatively impacted.
Agriculture	Women may return to subsistence farming, but evidence is unclear.	Evidence still lacking, though early findings show women farmers face challenges in resource allocation and knowledge dissemination.
Unpaid care	Women’s care burdens have increased relative to their care burdens before the pandemic and relative to men.	New evidence confirms previous findings.
Poverty and food insecurity	Women are more likely to live in poverty and food insecurity, but there is little evidence available on whether COVID has exacerbated gender gaps in poverty and food insecurity.	Evidence is still lacking on the intra-household allocation of resources by gender in the COVID context.
Gender-based violence	Strong evidence that GBV, and especially domestic violence, has increased around the world due to the pandemic, subsequent lockdown measures, and economic shocks.	New evidence confirms previous findings.
Women’s leadership	Women’s groups seem well positioned to support resilience in local communities during crisis.	New evidence suggests no significant impact of women’s leadership on effectiveness of policy response to COVID, but at local levels women have played a major role in responding to the pandemic.
Education	Survey of frontline education service providers reveals their fears that girls will be less likely to return to school.	New evidence suggests no gender difference in likelihood of students returning to school.

4.1. Employment and entrepreneurship

New evidence reflects greater disruptions to women's employment compared to men's across contexts. In urban Nairobi, women were 58 percent more likely than men to abide by lockdown measures, and those who stayed home were significantly more likely to have lost employment (Pinchoff et al., 2021). Additional evidence from Kenya showed that only 11 percent of self-employed women were able to work from home, and none of the women in temporary employment could do so (Kithiia et al., 2020). In Bolivia, women experienced greater job losses due to their sectors of employment (Escalante and Maisonnave, 2021). Evidence from China and Paraguay reflects that women's labor force participation decreased at a higher rate than men's, 4.9 percent compared to 2 percent in China and 9 percent compared to 4 percent in Paraguay (Dang and Nguyen, 2021; IMF, 2021). Similar findings come from a study on China, Hong Kong, the United States and the United Kingdom, with women experiencing disproportionate job losses (Smith et al., 2021). In China, women migrant workers were 8.8 percentage points less likely than men to return to cities for work after the pandemic (Song et al., 2020). The same study found that women in manufacturing, wholesale and retail, hotels and catering, and residential services were particularly hesitant to return to cities. One study, however, points to opposite impacts: Ilkkaracan and Memis find that women experienced less employment disruption than men in Turkey, though the authors attribute this primarily to women's lower labor force participation prior to the pandemic (Ilkkaracan and Memis, 2020).

A study of paid domestic workers in Peru, predominantly women, found that 86 percent were not working during the early months of the pandemic and that only 5 percent had received a salary through the government social protection programs rolled out in response to COVID-19 (Perez, et al., 2021). Perez and coauthors' findings substantiate our earlier assertion that informal workers, disproportionately women, are at risk of exclusion from vital social protection programs and other economic relief efforts. Fortunately, there are positive exceptions: the MNREGA program in India, guaranteeing work to rural households, is shown to be effective in cushioning the worst labor market shocks in areas hardest hit by COVID. The program increased the likelihood of women being employed during the pandemic by 8.6 percentage points (compared to only 1 percentage point for men) (Afridi et al., 2021).

In a review of academic papers and news reports across six low and middle income countries, Chackalackal et al. determine that those most vulnerable to negative indirect impacts of lockdown measures were those in the informal sector, migrant workers, small business owners, women, and the elderly (Chackalackal et al., 2020).

4.2. Agriculture

A study of farm owners in rural China found that because women were more likely to own smaller plots of land and have less diversified crops, they were at a greater risk of negative impacts of crisis, though the study did not find gender differences in sales revenue or volume as of February, 2020. Women farm owners were, however, more likely to report shocks to resource allocations than men, which could manifest in revenue losses in the longer-term

(Du, et al., 2021). Evidence from India and Nepal suggests that women farm owners have been negatively impacted by the pandemic because they rely more on social interactions for knowledge dissemination (Alvi, et al., 2021). In Uganda, women-headed households saw a smaller decrease in crop sales and enterprise profits than men-headed households, but the authors note that women's profits were already so much smaller than men's they could not have dropped a comparable amount (Mahmud and Riley, 2021). This paper also presented findings regarding huge drops in income, food expenditure, and savings, but none of these results are disaggregated beyond the household level.

4.3. Unpaid care work

In Turkey, two studies found that 65–67 percent of women respondents reported increased household work burden because of the pandemic, compared to 41 percent of men in one of the studies (Adibelli et al., 2021; Ilkkaracan and Memis, 2020). Qualitative evidence from northern India and Nepal amongst a small sample of women also supports the overall finding that unpaid care work increased for women across different age groups during the lockdown (Nichols et al., 2020), and a study in Bangladesh found that young girls spent more time on unpaid care work than boys as a result of the pandemic (Makino et al., 2021).

The issues of care work and income generation are strongly linked. A survey of migrant workers in China found that women with young children were 23 percent less likely to return to the city for work than men with young children (Song et al., 2020). In Vietnam, women were found more likely than men to telework in an attempt to balance paid work and care responsibilities (Nguyen, 2021).

4.4. Poverty and food insecurity

There is also mounting evidence to support the findings in our original working paper that poverty and food insecurity have increased as a result of COVID-19 and that women and girls may be most severely impacted. Qualitative evidence from India and Nepal note substantially increased stress on women due to food insecurity (Nichols et al., 2020). A study in Kenya also noted that women who were divorced, widowed, or separated were more likely to skip a meal if they lost employment during COVID-19 than their married counterparts (Pinchoff et al., 2021).

4.5. Gender-based violence

A proliferating body of evidence demonstrates that gender-based violence has increased during the pandemic.³ In Iraq, there was a significant increase (6.6 percent) in intimate

³ For a full list of rigorous studies on violence against women and children in the COVID-19 context, see <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1w28pmDt-IOIcI9cvaUdAMVVDzftOi1-/edit#gid=269101278>.

partner violence against married women during the lockdown period (Mahmood et al., 2021). A study in South Africa notes a large increase (11 percent to 24–26 percent) in women seeking medical services for assault trauma (Zsilavec et al., 2020). Studies in India, Senegal, and Nigeria present qualitative evidence indicating increases in intimate partner violence (Maji et al., 2021; Sharma and Khokhar, 2021; Dione et al., 2021; Fawole et al., 2020). In Lebanon, women were more likely than men to experience abuse during the pandemic (Akel et al., 2021). A qualitative study found that lack of economic opportunities was one driver of increased transactional sex and gender-based violence among refugees living in Uganda (Logie et al., 2021).

A few studies documented trends in violence against pregnant women in particular. A study in Ethiopia found that 7 percent of pregnant women surveyed were experiencing intimate partner violence, predominantly emotional abuse, and a study in Jordan found that 50 percent of pregnant women surveyed were experiencing psychological violence (Teshome et al., 2021; Abujilban et al., 2021). Finally, a study in Iran found that over a third of pregnant women surveyed had experienced domestic violence, predominantly emotional violence (Naghizadeh et al., 2021).

There are exceptions, however, perhaps in some cases due to underreporting of GBV. In Turkey, the rate of women murdered by intimate partners decreased by 57 percent during the pandemic, and in Mexico, reporting on a variety of crimes against women, including domestic violence and sexual crimes, decreased during lockdown (Asik and Ozen, 2020; Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2021). Additionally, in China, men working as mental health professionals were more likely to experience workplace violence during the pandemic (Xie et al., 2021).

Several studies also note findings on the media coverage of gender-based violence during the pandemic. Broekaert et al. review media coverage of sexual and gender-based crimes in Kenya and found that coverage increased between June 2019 and July 2020 with a notable spike during the COVID-19 lockdown period (Broekaert et al., 2021). A study in India found that media coverage of domestic violence during the pandemic often cited unemployment and alcohol as associated factors (Krishnakumar and Verma, 2021). In Brazil, a qualitative study found that information on how to seek help related to domestic violence was disseminated via virtual campaigns and booklets and through support groups (Fomari et al., 2021).

4.6. Women's leadership

Three qualitative studies shed light on how women have worked to keep their communities safe during the pandemic. In northern India and Nepal, women noted that in addition to increased caregiving responsibilities, they were also expected to fulfill public roles in disease response (Nichols et al., 2020). A second study from India noted the responsibilities women took on through participation in self-help groups, including by monitoring community residents during quarantine and running community kitchens (Dutta et al., 2020). Ethnographic research from Sierra Leone suggested that women drew on experiences

they gained during the Ebola outbreak to provide community support during COVID-19 lockdowns (Jones, 2021). Finally, a study in Lima, Peru discussed the coping strategies and response measures used by transgender women to keep their community safe, including using social media to disseminate information, distributing food and cash, and organizing communal kitchens (Garcia-Rabines and Bencich, 2021).

However, at the level of national political leadership, an analysis of 197 countries found no statistically significant difference between reported COVID-19 fatality rates in countries led by men compared to women (Windsor et al., 2021). Similarly, no significant differences were found in a study of 132 countries seeking to determine whether having men or women in leadership positions led to differences in the timing of implementation of stay-at-home orders, school closures, or public information campaigns (Aldrich and Lotito, 2020). A study focused on political candidates in Brazil found no gender differences in changes to candidacy decisions as a result of COVID-19 (Gatto and Thome, 2020). The only study in this review finding significant differences in men and women's leadership style in response to the pandemic reported on differences in rhetoric. Women leaders were more likely to discuss small businesses and the importance of social protection measures, and less likely to use war metaphors (Dada et al., 2021).

4.7. Education

A study in Jordan finds no gender differences in whether boys and girls prefer in-person or virtual learning (Al Salman et al., 2021). A study in Bangladesh finds that girls, boys, and their family members had similar expectations of children, regardless of gender, returning to school after the pandemic (Makino et al., 2021). This study also found a reduced likelihood of girls being married, which the authors attribute to a reduction in family remittances.

5. Conclusion

This collection of evidence on the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, published roughly one year after the beginning of the pandemic, largely confirms previous findings that in many arenas, women are bearing the greatest burdens of the crisis. Evidence continues to mount that women have faced greater employment and income losses and have shouldered the majority of increases in unpaid care work due in large part to school closures. With this review comes further data to demonstrate that these two impacts are inextricably linked with one another; many women have lost their jobs because they work in more informal arrangements and sectors to accommodate unpaid care work, and now unpaid care work is making it more difficult for women to return to work. These coupled factors may be some of the longest lasting gendered impacts of the pandemic.

Furthermore, this review highlighted the deepening evidence base for an increase in violence against women during the pandemic, with several new studies reinforcing what global news headlines warned of in the early days of the crisis. More data continues to emerge showing

that instances and severity of violence against women have increased during the pandemic in contexts as varied as Iraq, South Africa, India, Nigeria, and Mexico.

This review, however, also presents important findings about the ways in which women have taken on leadership roles at various levels to fight the pandemic, both directly and indirectly. Several studies document women working in their communities to keep others safe and provide relief. This literature speaks simultaneously of women's increased care burdens and their resilience during the pandemic.

Despite new studies continuously being published, there are several areas of study where research is still lacking. This review of new evidence brought few new findings on the impacts of COVID-19 on women agricultural workers and entrepreneurs, though the studies reviewed here and in previous papers suggest that women have faced disproportionate negative impacts to their income in both areas. Data is also still lacking on the intrahousehold allocation of resources, limiting our ability to estimate any increases in poverty or food insecurity by gender.

Though data limitations still exist, overall these additions to the literature on the impacts of COVID-19 confirm the main point: the impacts of the pandemic have been gendered and women have been severely and negatively impacted. Any policy response efforts to the crisis must pay attention to these gender differences, lest we risk rolling back the clock on decades of progress toward gender equality and further deepening social and economic gender gaps.

Annex A. Search methodology

Databases searched: EconLit, PsycInfo, Pubmed, RePEc, NBER and Web of Science

Search terms:

(covid OR coronavirus OR SARS-CoV-2) AND

(gender OR women OR woman) AND

(freedom OR coercion OR agency OR empower OR marriage OR violence OR access OR media OR unpaid OR domestic OR household OR trafficking OR exploitation OR “digital inclusion” OR “gender norms” OR “gender roles” OR “child care” OR collective OR economy OR “financial inclusion” OR money OR “food insecurity” OR loan OR borrow OR asset OR bank OR saving OR poverty OR market OR “government scheme” OR “financial autonomy” OR enterprise OR business OR “informal work” OR leader OR manager OR supervisor OR elected OR collective OR “women’s group” OR “women’s collective” OR “participatory group”)

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