

Canadian Support for Women in the Informal Food Sector in the Global South

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities faced by women in the informal food sector in the Global South, deepening existing gender inequalities and economic inequities. Women informal food vendors play a critical role in ensuring food security in urban areas, yet their contributions are often undervalued and unsupported by formal policy frameworks. This policy brief presents two case studies from Mexico City and Maputo, Mozambique, highlighting the challenges women face in this sector, including lack of legal security, financial instability, and limited access to social protection. In response to these challenges, there is a pressing need for targeted interventions to support women in the informal food sector. Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) offers a unique opportunity for Canada to align with global efforts, such as the UN Women Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice, to promote gender equality and economic empowerment in the post-pandemic recovery. This brief recommends short-term actions, including the enhancement of gender-sensitive pandemic response measures and the extension of development assistance to informal food enterprises. In the longer term, it calls for strengthening partnerships, addressing rural biases, and empowering women in rapidly urbanizing areas.



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted women in the Global South who work in the informal food sector, deepening food insecurity, gender inequality, and economic inequities in urban areas (Doss et al., 2020). Women informal food vendors in the Global South perform an important role in feeding the cities where they live and work. However, the pandemic has produced multiple negative gendered impacts on their lives and livelihoods, pushing women in the informal food sector into precarious situations. This policy brief presents two case studies to highlight the challenges that women face while working in the informal food sector and how these issues were exacerbated by COVID-19. The pandemic recovery context provides a historic opportunity for Canada to act on its strong commitment to promoting gender equality, as enacted by the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) (Office of the PM, 2021). Aligning with the UN Women Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice (2021), FIAP's priority area of 'Growth that Works for Everyone', will be

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particularly important to economically empowering women in the informal food sector. By supporting women-led informal enterprises in the food sector, recovery efforts and preparation for inevitable future food systems shocks can be supported.

Key Findings

Women's Role in the Informal Food Sector

- Women in the informal food sector, who operate outside of legal frameworks, are the backbone of local food systems and household food security in many parts of the world. They play important roles across the food supply chain and contribute to its stability by holding jobs in food production (availability), food distribution (access) and food utilization (consumption) (Chakraborty, 2020). Informal food vendors make cheaper-priced, diverse and nutritious foods available to marginal and poorer urban communities.
- Women are also largely responsible for care work and domestic duties. Before the pandemic, women spent 3.2 times as many hours as men on unpaid care and domestic work (UN Women, 2022). During the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns, these duties for women increased significantly (Chakraborty, 2020), limiting their time to focus on their informal businesses and thus having negative impacts on their earnings. However, women's work inside the home is unpaid—rendering it invisible.
- Women's participation in the informal economy is due to the ease of entry into informal work (McCordic & Raimundo, 2019). However, across cities, workers in the informal economy have lacked social protection, access to credit, and government pandemic relief measures needed to prevent themselves from slipping into poverty (UN, 2020). Drawing on evidence-based research from the Hungry Cities Partnership (HCP), this brief provides two case urban studies to identify the crucial roles women food workers play in contributing to urban household food security and challenges they faced prior to the pandemic.

Case Study 1: Mexico City, Mexico

In Mexico City, approximately 51% of total employment constitutes informal work, with women making up 44.5% of informal workers in the city (Capron et al., 2017). Informal workers participate as street food vendors or operate food stalls in one of the city's 300 markets (Capron et al., 2017), supplying diverse food products for their neighborhoods. More than 60% of urban households frequent these small shops on a weekly basis (Capron et al., 2018), making informal food vendors a critical source of food in Mexico City. Despite their key role in food provisioning, numerous policies have been put in place to restrict their activities, including heavy police presence to displace the activities of informal workers (Capron et al., 2017). This lack of legal security puts informal workers in a vulnerable situation. Considering that the average income earned from informal work in Mexico City was only about \$308 USD before COVID-19 (Capron et al., 2018), women working in this sector are left living hand-to-mouth.

Case Study 2: Maputo, Mozambique

Women dominate the informal sector in Maputo. More than four million women are involved in the city's informal economy, constituting 59% of total informal employment (Chikanda & Raimundo, 2016). Many women rely on the informal food sector as a main source of their household income and food security. Like Mexico City, most urban households regularly obtain food from these informal vendors. Small informal shops were the most widely used source to buy food for 75% of Maputo's households (Raimundo et al., 2018). Most urban residents depend on these informal vendors for household food supply. Yet, informal workers face legal challenges as "unplanned" informal marketplaces are considered illegal in Maputo (Chikanda & Raimundo, 2016). Women food vendors often start their informal businesses with their own savings or from family loans (Raimundo et al., 2020). They survive on an average income of about \$290 USD (Raimundo et al., 2018), leaving many without the ability to reinvest or grow their businesses. This lack of financial security is an indication of the survivalist, rather than opportunistic, strategy orientation of many informal food workers (Crush et al., 2023).

Impact of COVID-19

- The pandemic has exacerbated the financial risk and social security challenges faced by women in the informal food sector. Lockdowns, containment measures, disrupted supply chains, and increased food prices have disproportionately impacted women in this sector. UN Women reported that globally, women lost over 54 million jobs in 2019 and 2020, leading to a “Shecession.” Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) confirms that women experienced higher job losses than men in 2020 and 2021, particularly in the informal sector. This trend was observed in countries such as Mexico and Mozambique (ILO, 2023).
- During the pandemic, many women dropped out of the labour force to provide at-home care during lockdowns and school closures (Karkee & Sodergren, 2021). As a result, much of the progress made under Sustainable Development Goal #8 of Decent Work and Economic Growth as well as Goal #5 of Gender Equality threatens to have been rolled back.
- In countries like Mexico and Mozambique where millions of women are working in the informal sector, lockdown measures during the pandemic had crippling effects on women’s livelihoods and has increased food insecurity for their families (Nyabeze & Chikoko, 2021). The pandemic compounded existing vulnerabilities and pushed women into survivalist strategies. In a WIEGO-led survey, 35% of respondents reported drawing on already meager savings, while 23% were forced to reduce spending on food items (Reed et al., 2021). Consequently, many women vendors faced the dilemma of “dying from hunger” or “dying from the virus” during the pandemic.

Policy Recommendations

- There is an urgent need to address the challenges women face in the informal food sector – or food insecurity, gender inequality, and economic inequities will continue to be felt by millions of people in urban areas.
- On the one hand, gender mainstreaming in policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has been insufficient. Out of 4,968 global response measures, only 1,506 (32.30%) were found to be gender-sensitive, indicating a lack of prioritization of women’s needs by governments (UNDP, 2021). Measures addressing women’s economic security, violence against women, unpaid care, and informal sectors were notably lacking worldwide (UNDP,

2021). Inadequate attention to gender dynamics by many governments has resulted in weak policy reactions to the challenges faced by women in the informal food sector.

- On the other hand, even if governments have taken action in the social and economic protection of women when carrying out COVID-19 response measures, those engaged in informal work do not benefit from government stimulus measures because support often does not extend to informal enterprises (UN, 2020). For instance, the Government of Canada’s international development assistance focuses heavily on supporting formally registered women-led small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) (Government of Canada, 2018) and fails to specifically mention informal food businesses or vendors.
- Moreover, there is a strong rural bias, in which assistance measures mitigating food insecurity and empowering workers seem disproportionately geared to rural areas in the Global South (Crush & Riley, 2017). Although Canada has prioritized food security (Government of Canada, 2018), its international development assistance is mainly productivist or food production centred, rather than on strengthening local food systems. With rapid urbanization and many informal workers operating in urban centres, these existing initiatives do not address the needs of informal workers in urban areas.

Short-Term Recommendations

Support countries to take adequate action in the social and economic protection of women when carrying out COVID-19 gender response measures:

Gender-disaggregated data on informal employment and social protection measures should be improved to identify evidence-based weaknesses so that progress can be assessed, and decision-makers made accountable to these gaps. Improving the global response to COVID-19 can be achieved by providing resources to develop gender-sensitive pandemic response measures – such as the expansion of family leave, emergency childcare services or cash-for-care – and ensuring that gender is mainstreamed into all COVID-19 response activities. This will ensure that the pandemic response is effective and inclusive, leaving no one behind.

Target the informal sector specifically within Canada’s Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development:

Aligning with the recommendation by the UN Women Feminist Plan for Sustainability and Social Justice (2021), livelihoods-led interventions, especially for workers in the informal sector, should be a central aspect of post-COVID

recovery. Canada should expand its existing development assistance initiatives regarding financing or entrepreneurial training to include women working in the informal food sector. This will promote a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to achieving the SDGs by Canada.

Use innovative and blended finance

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) should pursue gender-responsive design practices in blended finance initiatives. Through The Equality Fund, Canada can fund women's organizations in developing countries through predictable and flexible funding, along with technical assistance. Canada can use these funds to address new pandemic-related challenges for women food vendors, as well as future protracted crises. Canada should focus specifically on taking a feminist and intersectional pandemic recovery approach when financing women in the informal food sector to overcome challenges and build more resilient communities to maintain growth that works for everyone.

Longer-Term Recommendations

Strengthen partnerships and empower women:

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) needs to be broadened its focus to build diverse multi-stakeholder partnerships in the Global South across informal vendors' organizations, women's civil society organizations, and government institutions – especially at local levels. There is an opportunity for Canada to use its rich experience in fostering women's entrepreneurship by leveraging the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (WES) to create a triangular cooperation model with urban women working in informal food sectors across cities in the Global South. By drawing on WES's established knowledge hubs, Canada can transfer knowledge and capacity building training to women in the Global South, while building strong alliances and empowering women.

Address the rural bias and support women in rapidly growing urban areas:

Although food security is already a priority within Canada's international development assistance initiatives, the focus needs to be broadened from rural areas to include support for urban areas. Since women are the largest constituents of urban food environments, support for their activities in local informal food systems will contribute to gender equality and local food security in the rapidly growing urban areas across the Global South.

Conclusion

The pandemic laid bare the critical role women in the informal food sector play in sustaining urban food security in the Global South, while simultaneously exposing the severe vulnerabilities they face. Without targeted interventions, these women will continue to bear the brunt of future shocks, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. The recommendations outlined in this policy brief underscore the need for a concerted effort to integrate gender-sensitive approaches into pandemic recovery strategies. By expanding support to informal food enterprises and leveraging Canada's international development assistance, there is an opportunity to build more resilient and inclusive food systems that recognize and empower women as key actors in the fight against food insecurity.

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