

# Gendered Pandemic Impacts on Informal Food Vending in Kingston, Jamaica

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## Abstract

This paper examines the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on informal food vendors in Kingston, Jamaica, using a feminist political economy framework. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, the study analyses survey data collected between March and September 2025 from 786 women and 152 men who own informal food businesses. The paper examines how pandemic containment measures such as curfews, restricted market hours, and mobility controls affected business profitability, operations, and coping strategies. Although women dominate the informal food vending sector and reported increased unpaid care responsibilities during the pandemic, male vendors were significantly more likely to report severe declines in profits, reduced sales, and broader business disruption. Both experienced sharp contractions in demand, indicative of a demand-side shock within Jamaica's urban food system. At the same time, women demonstrated greater adaptive capacity, reporting significantly higher use of coping strategies, including negotiating with suppliers and adopting digital tools. The paper argues for gender-responsive disaster risk management policies, including improved vendor registration, targeted social protection mechanisms, and support for adaptive capacity in the informal food economy.

## Keywords

COVID-19, urban food systems, feminist political economy, gender, informal vendors, disaster risk management, small island developing state, resilience

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## Cover Image

Woman vendor's stall in Coronation Market, Kingston, Jamaica. Photo credit: Jonathan Crush



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## Introduction

The emerging literature on the impact of COVID-19 on urban food systems, particularly on informal food vendors, has filled a critical gap identified by Meyer (2020). Understandably, research has focused on the gendered impacts of the pandemic, as women constitute the majority of workers in urban food systems (Chen et al., 2021; ILO, 2020). Within this literature, there is consensus that women were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (Kabeer et al., 2021). This is especially true in Global South countries where much of the urban poor reside (Martinez & Young, 2022; Mwakyusa et al., 2024; Sinyolo et al., 2022; Thanh & Bao Duong, 2024). There is also recognition that women and men informal food vendors had differential outcomes, with their experiences reflecting intersectional and social capital dynamics (Dery & Amoah, 2024; Kawarazuka et al., 2018). Although diverse in their methodological and theoretical approaches and in scope, this body of research affirms the need for nuanced gendered analyses.

This paper, therefore, contributes empirically to COVID-19 pandemic scholarship by employing a gendered analysis. Specifically, it adopts a feminist political economy lens to a case study of informal food vendors in the city of Kingston, Jamaica. Feminist political economy moves beyond classical political economy, which is concerned with the dynamics of the market and the state, and beyond positivist feminist approaches that merely integrate women as an analytical category of research (Kabeer et al., 2021; Peterson, 2006). It concerns how androcentric and/or gender-blind policies differently affect men and women (Smith et al., 2021). The feminist political economy approach examines how the linkages between social, economic, and political domains shape the lived realities of men and women. It also involves intersectional research, as it brings together analyses of gender with other relevant identities and forms of exclusion (Sinyolo et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021).

In keeping with a feminist political economy approach, the paper centres its analysis on the impact of COVID-19 response measures implemented by municipal and national governments on women and men informal food vendors (Matamanda et al., 2022; Skinner & Watson, 2021). Using descriptive and inferential statistics, the paper examines how COVID-19 measures affected the business outcomes of men- and women-owned informal food businesses, as well as the coping strategies employed by men and women. This research, therefore, builds on previous studies of food systems and small-scale food retailers in Kingston (Kinlocke & Thomas Hope, 2019; Thomas Hope et al., 2017).

Emerging scholarship on the pandemic's effects in Jamaica addresses multiple dimensions of COVID-19. These include its impact on: the agricultural sector (Saha & Thorpe, 2020; World Bank, 2022); dimensions of food security (Stanberry & Flecher-Paul, 2024); distribution, retail and consumption components of national food systems (Daley et al., 2022); household livelihoods and food security (WFP/CARICOM, 2020a, 2020b; 2021; 2022); medium, small and micro-enterprises in the form of corner shops (Crick & Nicholson, 2024);

and informal food vendors in a rural community (Brooks, 2021). To varying degrees, these studies provide insight into the impact of COVID-19 on informal food vendors. However, a more in-depth analysis of the informal food sector, which is predominantly female-led, is needed, given its centrality to the local food system.

The data indicate that, despite women's overrepresentation in the informal food vending sector, men reported greater pandemic-related impacts on business operations and income. However, women reported greater capacity to cope with the pandemic's impact. Notwithstanding, the findings also indicate that there is consistency with other studies, which show that women bore a disproportionate share of the pandemic's burdens, including increased caregiving responsibilities. The findings suggest the need for a nuanced approach to gender-inclusive disaster policy planning.

## Contextualizing Informal Food Vending

Informal food vending in Jamaica's urban areas dates back to the late eighteenth century (Jalloul, 1988). The foundations of informal food vending lie in Jamaica's economic trajectory, shaped by its place in global food systems as a former British sugar colony. Within this economy, the importation of food and other goods was essential due to monoculture and the absence of industrialization. The concentration of labourers in forced agricultural production, therefore, required middle persons to distribute and sell commodities in rural and urban spaces. 'Higglering' as it is referred to in local parlance, emerged with the distribution and sale of goods by enslaved people on behalf of their masters and mistresses. As Jalloul, citing Simmonds, notes, by the 1820's the informal sector was "a deeply embedded social and economic institution and laws became regulatory rather than suppressive" (Simmonds, 1987, p. 38). The same cannot be said of present government policies toward the informal sector, which are suppressive and control-oriented, such as "forced movement of informal sector businesses to markets" (Jalloul, 1988, p. 47).

Higglering would take on increased prominence in the post-emancipation period, as formerly enslaved peoples, with limited employment options, grew foodstuffs for subsistence and sold surpluses for income (Thomas Hope et al., 2017). Indeed, the ascendance of higglering in the post-emancipation context was critical to establishing a network for distributing locally grown food from rural areas to urban centres (Eyre, 1972; Harrison, 1988). It is this internal marketing system that survives today (Beckford & Campbell, 2013). Despite its informality, it is a key dimension of the country's food system. Its relevance is further underscored by the absence of a (centralized) system organized by the state to manage the distribution of agricultural produce to communities throughout the country.

The Kingston and Saint Andrew Municipal Corporation (KSAMC) currently regulates 17 market sites, 10 of which are dedicated to food vending (Table 1). In total, the 10

**Table 1: Municipal Markets in Kingston and St Andrew**

| Name of market                  | Types of goods   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Coronation Market               | Wholesale and retail ground provisions; fruit and vegetables; grocery                        |
| Red Rose Fish Market            | Wholesale and retail fish  |
| Half-Way Tree                   | Beverages; snacks; fruits  |
| Darling Street Transport Centre | Prepared foods; snacks; beverages  |
| Pechon Street                   | Prepared foods; snacks; beverages  |
| Queens Market                   | Wholesale and retail ground provisions; fruits and vegetables; grocery; meat                 |
| Cross Roads Market              | Wholesale and retail ground provisions; fruits and vegetables; meat and fish; prepared foods |
| Papine Market                   | Wholesale and retail ground provisions; fruits and vegetables; meat and fish; prepared foods |
| Constant Spring                 | Wholesale and retail ground provisions; fruits and vegetables; meat and fish; prepared foods |
| Stony Hill                      | Wholesale and retail ground provisions; fruits and vegetables; meat and fish; prepared foods |

*Source: Adapted from KSAMC (2024a)*

markets accommodate 3,100 vending spaces. The Coronation Market is the largest, accounting for approximately 56% of market capacity (KSAMC, 2024a). In addition to officially designated market spaces, food vending occurs in the immediate environs of these municipal markets and in clusters along highly trafficked areas such as schools, offices, and transportation centres (Thomas-Hope et al., 2017). Street vending is also allowed in four specially designated zones in the downtown area (KSAMC, 2024a, 2024b).

In 2015, the KSAMC initiated an exercise to register vendors, to facilitate the formalization of activities and revenue generation. However, only 226 vendors registered with the KSAMC. Estimation of the size of the informal food vending economy is therefore difficult due to vendors’ failure to register with the KSAMC; the number of unofficial sites operating in parallel with vending sites and zones designated by the municipality; as well as fluctuations in the number of vendors, which ebbs and flows in response to economic realities. Despite the lack of data on the number of vendors, vending is a gendered activity dominated by women. While men are typically farmers who sell produce from their own farms, women are more likely to sell agricultural produce grown by their spouses or to resell food they have bought from other farmers or intermediaries (Beckford & Campbell, 2013).

Women informal food vendors in Jamaica are characterized by socio-economic vulnerabilities which include the absence of social protection (Anderson, 1987); limited access to capital and/or financial exclusion (Jalloul, 1988); and work safety issues arising from long work hours and extensive commute for those who travel from rural areas to sell in Kingston (Beckford & Campbell, 2013). The vulnerability of informal workers is recognized in the 2011 National Policy for Gender Equality. The policy envisions reduced vulnerability by formalizing workers (BWA, 2011). However, no specifics are provided for the various sectors which constitute the informal economy.

The precarity of women operating in the informal food vending economy is heightened by other political and governance factors. For example, market registration fees do not

include insurance of goods, which is problematic as there have been regular instances of fire affecting municipal markets in Kingston (St Thomas Municipal Corporation, 2016). In addition, urbanization and development have affected the sector, highlighting tensions between the state and its regulation of public goods. For example, in 2017, to facilitate the widening of a major thoroughfare, one municipal market was sold (Linton, 2017). Finally, intense competition within the informal food vending economy has led to clashes between municipal police and street vendors who circumvent municipal regulations by vending on the street (JIS, 2012; Patterson, 2023). Women informal food vendors are therefore at risk of displacement, due to force majeure, political exigencies and/or state regulation. This physical displacement has ripple effects in a context dominated by female-headed households and where the size of the informal economy is estimated to exceed 30% of GDP (STATIN & PIOJ, 2023).

## Jamaica’s COVID-19 Pandemic

Jamaica recorded its first COVID-19 case on March 10, 2020 (MoH, 2020). As is the case elsewhere, COVID-19 continues to affect population health. However, the period between March 2020 and 2022 corresponds to the introduction and removal of laws governing pandemic management. On 13 March 2020, the Government of Jamaica, under Section 26 (2) of the Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Act, declared the entire country a disaster area (Government of Jamaica, 2020a; Office of the Prime Minister, 2020). On March 18, 2022, the DRM Act Order was revoked and substituted by the Public Health Enforcement Measures (MoH, 2022a). During this period, there were 128,500 COVID-19 cases in Jamaica (MoH, 2020). Official data indicates that 73,800 women contracted the disease. Kingston and Saint Andrew were the two most affected parishes, accounting for approximately 27% of cases (MoH, 2022b).

The declaration of the DRM Act Order in March 2020 followed the implementation of travel bans, first introduced in January 2020. The earliest of these bans restricted international travel from select countries (Dietrich Jones, 2025). While borders were closed to people, they remained

open to the movement of commercial goods, including personal protective equipment (PPE) and food. Maintaining the flow of goods into the country was an important step in securing food supply, given the country's high dependence on imported foods (FAO, EU & CIRAD, 2022; Stanberry & Fletcher-Paul, 2024).

Global travel restrictions reduced international travel, which put an immediate and subsequently protracted halt to tourism to the island. In addition to the decline in tourism exports and the contraction in GDP (Mulder, 2020), the Government of Jamaica faced food security concerns. These concerns arose, on the one hand, from disruption to the agricultural linkages programme, a programme created to directly connect farmers with operators in the hotel and tourism sector. The sudden availability of fruits and vegetables usually sold on to the hotel and tourism sectors, demanded innovation in storage, processing, marketing, distribution and sales (Hutchinson, 2020). On the other hand, the war in Ukraine has compounded global supply chain issues that emerged with the onset of COVID-19. The government was therefore also faced with resolving agri-food import-replacement issues (World Bank, 2022). Thus, whilst COVID-19 had the least impact on agriculture than other productive sectors of the economy, the government was moved to tailor specific initiatives to address national food security.

The COVID-19 measures most pertinent to the informal food sector concerned market management and curfews. Curfews were introduced to regulate movement around the country, with restrictions on mobility in the evenings into early morning, as well as on weekends. The government introduced restricted market operating times in sequential disaster management orders issued by the Prime Minister. In the initial stages, the usual closing hours were amended from 9:00PM to 2:00PM, with the opening hours maintained at 6:00AM (Government of Jamaica, 2020b). Social distancing was also encouraged among patrons. These opening times, together with the waiver of the maximum number of persons allowed at public gatherings, both accommodated market culture and balanced public health interests. Thus, markets were ordered closed on select days, such as Sundays and public holidays, where peak traffic was anticipated. There was flexibility in opening times during the pandemic, with later closing times on specified days of the week and, eventually, from Monday through Saturday (Government of Jamaica, 2021). Other health and safety measures, such as sanitization of markets, provision of PPE and other sanitization equipment (such as portable wash basins), and increased policing and monitoring of market sites and zones, were also utilized to manage the spread of the disease (Henry, 2020). It should be noted, however, that municipal corporations' approaches to market management varied across the country. Thus, while the KSAMC allowed grand market activities to take place during December 2020, the St James Municipal Corporation did not (Daley, 2020).

Newspaper reports indicate that these containment measures discouraged commerce in the early stages of the pandemic, thereby reducing demand for goods. Patrons

feared contracting the disease and struggled to shop during operating hours (Murphy, 2020). However, there is no available government data regarding the economic impact of the pandemic on the informal food sector. Indeed, no government policies directly addressed reduced demand, although social protection schemes were introduced for vendors in other sectors of the informal economy, as well as registered medium, small and micro enterprises, through the COVID Allocation of Resources for Employees (CARE) programme. For example, craft vendors were integrated into cash transfer programmes and one-off business grants due to reduced incomes associated with the tourism fallout (Morris, 2020). However, Jamaica's support for the informal sector is comparable with that of other Commonwealth Caribbean countries. In one study, Jamaica achieved a score of 41.9 %, based on an assessment of its support to the informal sector in four areas: (i) social protection; (ii) finance and credit; (iii) waiver of taxes and fees; and (iv) structural policies to support adoption of digital tools. This placed it in the middle of the twelve countries assessed (Saha & Thorpe, 2020).

## Study Methodology

The research team adopted a mixed-method approach to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women informal vendors. Two research questions motivated the research design and approach:

- What were the effects of these containment measures on the informal food sector's female workers in Kingston?; and
- What challenges, vulnerabilities, barriers and well-being effects were experienced by women during the COVID-19 pandemic?

To answer these questions, a quantitative (face-to-face) survey of informal vendors was completed in the city of Kingston. In addition, a smaller cohort of employees was surveyed. The survey instrument, commonly designed for application across all eight cities involved in the WFC project, included six modules: (i) owner demographics; (ii) enterprise structure and practices; (iii) food security; (iv) impact of the pandemic on business; (v) gender; and (vi) health. Men and women participants responded to all modules except for the gender module, which explored the impact of COVID-19 on women's caring and household responsibilities and experience with gender-based violence.

The sampling methodology oversampled for female entrepreneurs due to the interest in the pandemic's impact on women. Thus, 786 women owners of food vending establishments were surveyed between March and September 2025. A control group of 152 men was also surveyed. For both samples, data collectors utilized a combination of non-random purposive and convenience sampling. This was necessary due to the absence of a sampling frame for informal vendors and to ensure diversity in responses by vendor location and product offerings. Thus, surveyors interviewed

women and men food vendors who congregated in and around municipal markets, along food corridors, and in popular vending locations, such as transportation centres, and who sold fresh produce, dry foods, snacks and beverages, as well as prepared foods (Figure 1). Data was collected in the communities of Liguanea, Mona, Half-Way-Tree, Downtown, and Red Hills.

Qualitative data collection included a desk review of policies and legislation related to the management of COVID-19, especially in areas designated for food vending by the KSAMC, and, more generally, those that address the agricultural and informal sectors in Jamaica. The research team also conducted interviews with stakeholders through a joint participant engagement workshop with government officials in Kingston, as well as key expert interviews. These individuals directly played a role in the COVID-19 response through their responsibilities in public health and management, local government, gender affairs, and social protection. Research plans also included conducting focus groups and in-depth interviews with women informal food vendors; however, the landfall of a Category 5 hurricane in late October 2025 affected the completion of these activities. This paper, therefore, reports on the quantitative dimension of the study, focusing on women and men business owners.

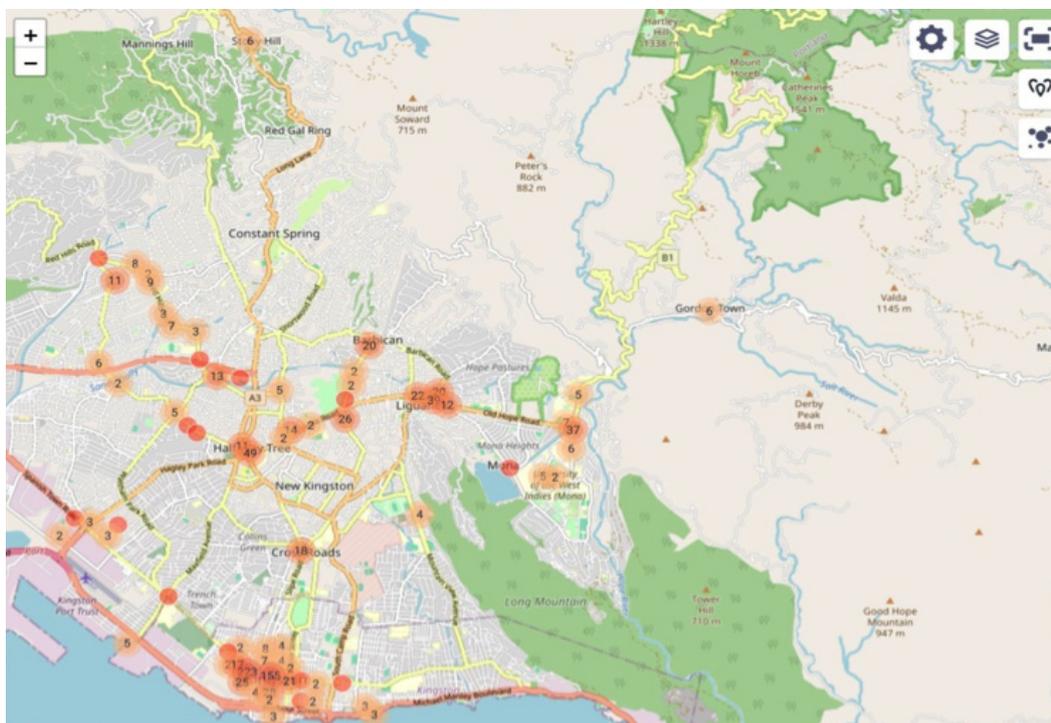
To determine the gendered impact of the pandemic on informal food vendors in Kingston, inferential statistics – chi-squared ( $\chi^2$ ) analysis and t-tests were computed using four variables: gender (independent), income/profit (dependent),

impact on business (dependent), and coping strategies (dependent). The latter two variables were generated by creating scales of multiple indicator questions related to impact on business and coping strategies, respectively, included in the survey instrument. Chi-square tests assessed the strength of association between gender and income, gender and impact on business and gender and coping strategies. T-tests assessed overall mean differences in income, perceived impact and coping strategies for men and women.

A primary limitation of the study was the reliance on vendor recall. As the study was conducted three years after the DRMA Order was revoked in 2022, surveyors noted challenges with vendors' ability to recall their experiences during the pandemic. Multiple indicator questions were used to attenuate this concern. In addition, the impact of other exogenous shocks, such as Hurricane Beryl in 2024, may have affected responses to some questions, such as whether the business was better off today than during the pandemic. Data analysis of post-pandemic experiences was therefore guided by knowledge of the impact of these other externalities on informal food vendors.

The use of purposive sampling limits generalization to the broader population of informal food vendors and, more generally, to informal vendors. Moreover, research in a second Jamaican city, Montego Bay (to be elaborated in a separate paper), already points to distinctions in vendors' pandemic experiences relative to those in Kingston. This underscores the importance of city-focused analyses.

**Figure 1: Data Collection Sites**



## Food Vendor Profile

Among those surveyed, 97% were over 25, with 22% belonging to the elderly population (Table 2). Although educational attainment varied, consistent with earlier studies of informal vendors, almost 50% had completed high school. A higher percentage of male respondents than of women completed education through the high school level. However, a larger percentage of women than men had some university or college education or had completed university. There was a 4-percentage-point difference between those who had worked before starting their business, with 48% indicating they had previously had another occupation. However, disaggregated data show that men were more likely than women to have worked elsewhere. A total of 25% of women and 28% of men started their business four years prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, 39% of women and 36% of men had operated their businesses for more than 15 years. It is unclear to what extent migration influenced the decision to participate in informal food vending. Two-thirds of the vendors surveyed were born in Kingston. However, Kingston was the place of birth for more men than women surveyed.

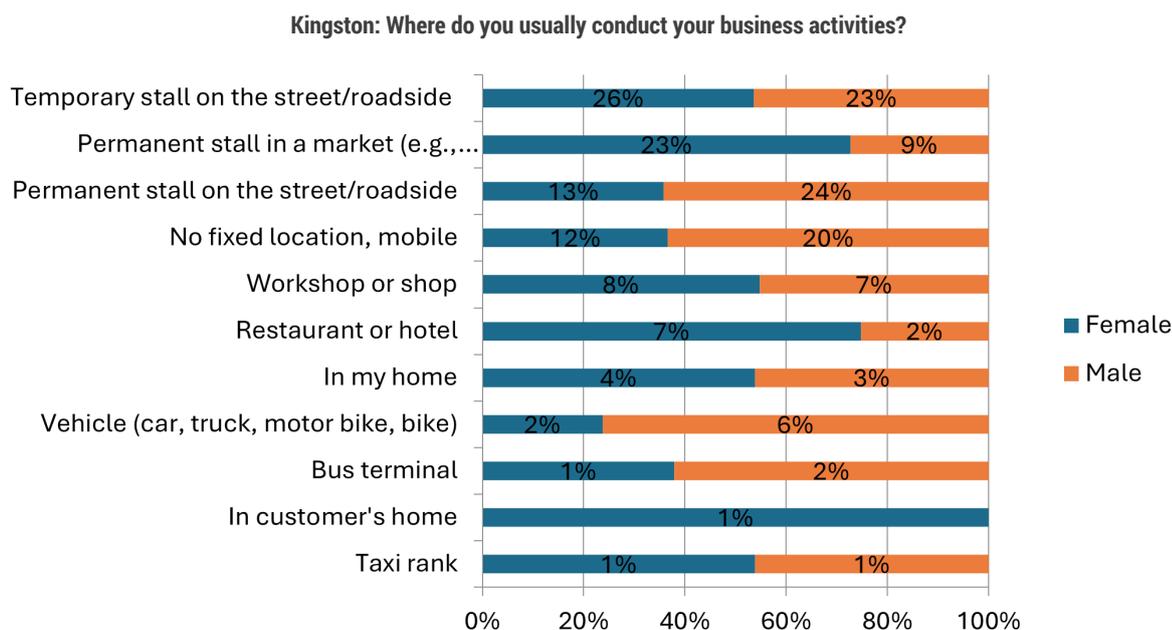
Finally, most respondents operated from stalls; however, women were more likely than men to operate at fixed locations in markets (Figure 2). This reflects gendered concerns about the safety of street vending for women. For those who operated at markets, the majority operated at municipal markets (20.9%) or other markets (62.6%), likely street markets.

## Changes in Business Profitability

Table 3 shows the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic reduced respondents' business net profits in Kingston. There is a statistically significant association between gender and reported changes in net profit. Male respondents were more likely than females to report substantial declines in business profitability, with 56.7% of males indicating that the pandemic reduced their net profit by more than 20%, compared to 42.0% of females. In contrast, female respondents were more likely to report no negative impact or increased profits: 32.8% reported that their net profit either stayed the same or increased, compared with 14.6% of male respondents.

| Attributes  | Categories               | Women | Men  |
|---|--------------------------|-------|------|
|   |                          | %     | %    |
| Age   | Youth (<25)              | 3.6   | 2.0  |
|   | Young adult (25-39)      | 20.2  | 23.7 |
|   | Adult (40-59)            | 55.7  | 48.0 |
|   | Elderly (60+)            | 20.5  | 26.3 |
| Place of birth                                      | Kingston                 | 64.0  | 74.3 |
|   | Another city             | 10.0  | 6.6  |
|   | A rural area             | 25.0  | 17.8 |
|   | A foreign country        | 1.0   | 1.3  |
| Level of education                                  | No formal education      | 0.6   | 0.7  |
|   | Some primary school      | 2.0   | 4.6  |
|   | Primary school completed | 11.2  | 13.8 |
|   | Some high school         | 27.3  | 26.3 |
|   | High school complete     | 46.8  | 51.3 |
|   | Some university/college  | 8.2   | 2.0  |
|   | University completed     | 3.4   | 1.3  |
| Had a main occupation before starting this business | Yes                      | 45.2  | 59.9 |
|   | No                       | 54.2  | 40.1 |
| Year started business                               | Before 2005              | 38.7  | 35.8 |
|   | 2006-2010                | 15.7  | 14.9 |
|   | 2011-2015                | 20.8  | 20.9 |
|   | 2016-2020                | 24.7  | 28.4 |

**Figure 2: Location of Food Vending Businesses**



**Table 3: Profitability Impacts**

| Impacts   | Men % | Women % | $\chi^2$ (p value) |
|---|-------|---------|--------------------|
| Net profit has stayed the same                        | 7.3   | 17.3    | .086               |
| Net profit has increased                              | 7.3   | 15.5    |                    |
| Net profit reduced by less than 10%                   | 5.3   | 3.4     |                    |
| Net profit reduced by more than 10% but less than 20% | 11.3  | 8.1     |                    |
| Net profit reduced by more than 20%                   | 56.7  | 42.0    |                    |
| Do not know   | 12.0  | 13.8    |                    |

## Impact on Business Operations

There is a significant and gendered negative impact of the pandemic on business in Kingston, with women disproportionately affected. A strong majority of respondents reported reduced customer counts and monthly sales, but female business owners agreed with these statements at notably lower rates (61%) than their male counterparts (78-79%), a difference that is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This pattern persists in the face of supply disruptions and perceived reductions in business value, with significantly more men than women reporting adverse effects. The data suggested that while both genders faced severe challenges, men were more likely to strongly affirm the pandemic's direct commercial damage. Conversely, no significant gender differences were found in operational costs, competition, or structural changes such as relocation or business type. Notably, both genders disagreed that the pandemic increased rents and forced them out of business entirely, indicating some resilience. Overall, the pandemic's primary impact was a sharp contraction in trade, perceived more acutely by male respondents, while systemic operational changes were felt similarly across genders.

## Business Coping Strategies

Most coping strategies did not significantly differ between male and female respondents (Table 5). The most common strategies across both genders were reducing business hours (male = 80.6%, female = 78.8%) and temporarily closing the business (male = 20.9%, female = 21.9%). These actions indicate a broad, gender-neutral trend of scaling back operations due to reduced demand or operational restrictions. None of the differences in these categories was statistically significant. Offering online services, taking online orders, and providing delivery services were significantly more common among female respondents (8.2%) than males (1.5%). This suggests that female entrepreneurs may have been more likely to pivot toward digital platforms and e-commerce models during the pandemic.

Negotiating with suppliers or seeking more affordable suppliers was also significantly more common among women (6.2%) than men (2.6%). This reflects a more proactive cost-reduction strategy among female business owners, potentially indicating higher sensitivity to price margins or supply chain constraints. Other strategies, such as using mobile phones for coordination, adjusting staff numbers or salaries, changing product lines, or extending operational hours, did not yield statistically significant gender differences. Notably, low percentages were observed across

both genders for strategies such as changing business location, offering discounts or credit, or stopping the business entirely, which may reflect constraints in capacity or risk tolerance among these business owners.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in coping strategies and perceived pandemic impact among respondents in Kingston. As shown in Table 6, male respondents reported a higher mean pandemic impact score (M = 26.09, SD = 5.46) than female respondents (M = 24.86, SD = 6.60). The mean difference of 1.23 points (95% CI [0.21, 2.25]) indicates that males experienced significantly greater pandemic-related impacts than females.

A significant difference was also observed in coping strategies utilized by men and women. Results indicated a statistically significant difference in coping strategies between males (M = 1.68, SD = 1.01) and females (M = 1.88, SD = 1.17). Female respondents reported significantly higher levels of coping strategy use than male respondents, although the magnitude of the difference was modest (mean difference = -0.20, 95% CI [-0.39, -0.02]). For both outcomes, Levene's tests indicated unequal variances; therefore, Welch's t tests were used. Overall, the findings suggest meaningful gender based differences in both coping responses and perceived pandemic impacts within the Kingston sample.

**Table 4: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Business Operations**

| Impacts   | Men % | Women % | $\chi^2$ (p value) |
|---|-------|---------|--------------------|
| Reduced monthly sales                                   | 79.9  | 61.4    | 0.00***            |
| Reduced the number of customers                         | 78.3  | 61.3    | 0.00***            |
| Reduced the business hours                              | 74.8  | 70.5    | 0.47               |
| Increased the cost of food supply and ingredients       | 61.5  | 57.0    | 0.13               |
| Disrupted the supply of goods                           | 57.3  | 47.9    | 0.04*              |
| Increased the competition from other vendors            | 45.5  | 43.8    | 0.46               |
| Increased the transportation costs                      | 44.8  | 46.2    | 0.94               |
| Reduced the value of my business                        | 44.1  | 32.1    | 0.01**             |
| Increased the number of customers buying food on credit | 35.7  | 28.3    | 0.19               |
| Forced me to relocate my business                       | 16.1  | 13.3    | 0.66               |
| Pushed me out of business                               | 12.7  | 16.1    | 0.53               |
| Changed the type of business I operate                  | 12.6  | 12.7    | 0.46               |
| Resulted in a rent increase                             | 7.3   | 12.1    | 0.24               |

\*\*\*0.000 \*\*0.01 \*0.05

**Table 5: Coping with Pandemic Challenges**

| Coping strategies   | Men % | Women % | $\chi^2$ (p value) |
|---|-------|---------|--------------------|
| I reduced the business hours  | 80.6  | 78.8    | 0.58               |
| I temporarily closed the business   | 20.9  | 21.9    | 0.76               |
| I extended my hours of operation  | 13.3  | 14.3    | 0.69               |
| I reduced the amount of food purchased and prepared                               | 11.7  | 13.6    | 0.48               |
| I use mobile phones to take orders, receive payments or coordinate with suppliers | 5.1   | 6.9     | 0.35               |
| I offered additional discounts  | 5.1   | 3.1     | 0.17               |
| I purchase stock in bulk  | 3.6   | 4.9     | 0.426              |
| I sell goods at lower prices than my competitors                                  | 3.1   | 2.8     | 0.86               |
| I tried to negotiate prices with my suppliers or find more affordable suppliers   | 2.6   | 6.2     | 0.044*             |
| I increased the price of my goods   | 2.6   | 1.2     | 0.13               |
| I offered credit to some of my customers  | 2.6   | 2.2     | 0.76               |
| I changed the location of my business   | 1.5   | 0.8     | 0.36               |
| I offered online services, took online orders and provided delivery services      | 1.5   | 8.2     | 0.001**            |
| I changed the kinds of food I sell  | 1.0   | 1.4     | 0.70               |
| I reduced the number of employees hired in this business                          | 1.0   | 2.8     | 0.14               |
| I reduced the salary of my employees  | 1.0   | 2.3     | 0.25               |
| I stopped doing business  | 0.5   | 1.9     | 0.17               |

\*\*0.01 \*0.05

Table 6: Gender Differences in Perceived Pandemic Impact and Coping Strategies

| Variable          | Sex   | Mean  | SD   | t     | df     | p    | Mean Diff. | 95% CI         |
|-------------------|-------|-------|------|-------|--------|------|------------|----------------|
| Coping strategies | Men   | 1.68  | 1.01 |       |        |      |            |                |
| Coping strategies | Women | 1.88  | 1.17 | -2.21 | 234.69 | .028 | -0.20      | [-0.39, -0.02] |
| Pandemic impact   | Men   | 26.09 | 5.46 |       |        |      |            |                |
| Pandemic impact   | Women | 24.86 | 6.60 | 2.38  | 231.24 | .018 | 1.23       | [0.21, 2.25]   |

## Impact of Gender-Blind COVID-19 Policy

Analysis of the COVID-19 response measures highlights the struggle of the municipal and national governments to balance political economy with public health concerns. There is no evidence that the measure's design regarding market business operations was deliberately gender inclusive. However, the DRM provision, which indirectly allowed markets to remain open, responded to the gendered nature of the informal food economy by accommodating the livelihood concerns of informal vendors. If this measure was influenced by gendered analysis, lockdown and curfew protocols eroded its effect. This was due to changes in consumer behaviour during the pandemic.

The vulnerability of the informal food economy was most visibly seen in reductions in sales and customers for both women and men food vendors. Inconsistent sales are a challenge which routinely affects food vendors in Jamaica. However, COVID-19 further exacerbated vulnerability by undermining vendors' profitability, as lockdowns and curfews were key contributors to declining sales. Market surpluses also complicated the pandemic's impact on Jamaica's local food system. It created demand- and supply-side shocks, notwithstanding global supply chain issues stemming from the pandemic and, later, the war in Ukraine. The impact of COVID-19 thus differed from that of natural disasters, which frequently affect the country (CSGM, 2021).

These hazards (hurricanes and other weather-related phenomena) disrupt local agricultural production and supply, leading to shortages of seasonal crops. It is important to understand this distinction, given the implications for policy design. The absence of cold storage facilities ultimately led the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Mining to launch initiatives to encourage the sale of agricultural produce through pop-up farmers' markets. The vulnerability of informal food vendors was therefore heightened by increased competition from pop-up farmers' markets. Entry into the informal food vending economy by those displaced from formal employment also posed competition challenges.

While COVID-19 affected the operations of both male and female food vendors, men's perceptions of its impact were greater than women's. In other contexts, male vendors' age and the stage of business explain livelihood challenges in the informal vending profession. Dery & Amoah (2024, p. 892), for example, indicate that "young men whose vending businesses were in the first few years of operation were seemingly the worst affected." Given the similarities in the profiles of male and female vendors, socio-economic

factors do not appear to account for this difference. Overall, the findings affirm that informal food vending is vulnerable to shocks, although it is a practice utilized to manage risk and respond to an unfavourable economic climate (Brooks, 2021; Schoburgh, 2009).

## Gender and Coping among Informal Food Businesses

Sarkar et al. (2025) argue that internal vulnerabilities can hinder resilience in small business retailers. Of the four dimensions of internal vulnerabilities discussed, three are most relevant here: lack of social capital; the ability to cope with stressors and address direct and immediate impacts; and the ability to adjust and learn from past experiences for long-term transformation. In this spectrum, transformation is the most fundamental shift that enables sustained, positive outcomes in the long term.

Based on the lifespan of businesses among the informal vendors sampled, both men and women would have experienced multiple disaster-related shocks. However, as mentioned above, these would have been distinct from the multiple economic shocks generated by COVID-19. The findings, therefore, reveal propensity for absorptive capacity based on actions taken to address the immediate impacts of the pandemic. These include reduced business hours, extended hours of operation, and temporary closure of the business. Adaptive capacity is more aligned with innovative business practices, such as the use of digital technologies or shifting business location (Sutcliffe et al., 2025). The findings suggest that women informal food vendors were able to better cope due to their reliance on digital technologies and negotiation of the price of supplies. Negotiation is evidence of women's social capital; it demonstrates adaptive capacity built on social relations (Kawarazuka et al., 2018; Sarkar et al., 2025). Men's reliance on cost-containment as an adaptation may explain their weaker adaptive capacity.

Further research is needed to examine gender disparities in the use of mobile technology as a coping strategy, as studies show that the digital divide is greater for women than for men in Jamaica (World Bank, n.d.). Moreover, despite the increased utilization of e-commerce platforms in food distribution and sales during the pandemic, only a few vendors relied on mobile technologies to enhance sales. Limited use of digital technologies also highlights disparities between formal and informal food businesses. E-commerce food distribution platforms mushroomed during the pandemic, including one programme, the E-commerce National Delivery Solution (ENDS), introduced by the Government of Jamaica a year into the pandemic (JSEZA, 2020). ENDS was

conceived to facilitate the delivery of fresh and prepared foods during curfew hours. It thus maintained access to food for the local population, providing a critical lifeline that facilitated the continued operation of food operators and delivery services. However, due to registration requirements, ENDS did not integrate informal food vendors.

A growing body of research examining the impact of gender on climate resilience also provides insight into the gendered differences in the impact of and response to the pandemic. In Jamaica, women are more resilient to climate events because they bear the brunt of household preparation responsibilities. This includes tasks such as buying foodstuffs, caring for young children and the elderly, and cleaning up during and after disasters (CSGM, 2021). Among the vendors surveyed, very few reported a decrease in care and household responsibilities. Duties related to care of the sick and elderly increased less than cooking, cleaning, and childcare, which were reported to increase by 61%, 64% and 34%, respectively, among the women surveyed. Cocina-Díaz et al. (2025) analyze the impact of disasters in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Honduras, and note that these roles are usually ignored in post-disaster efforts, as support is channelled to productive activities. In this respect, informal women vendors in Kingston faced a double-edged exclusion. The state did not organize direct (economic) interventions to support informal food vendors facing declining sales, an issue which affected both genders. However, the state's social protection initiative also failed to account for women's increased reproductive and care responsibilities.

## Policy Recommendations

The above analysis suggests the need for an enhanced, comprehensive DRM approach at the municipal level, which is sensitive to the needs of workers within the informal economy, flexible to accommodate different categories of disasters, and which is also gender-responsive (Cocina-Díaz et al., 2025; Llorente-Marrón et al., 2024; Ransom, 2025; Ricketts, 2020). Gender-focused research into the impact of COVID-19 emphasizes financial exclusion as a constraint on the resilience of informal vendors (ILO, 2020). While limited access to capital in the pre- and post-COVID-19 contexts defined the lived experience of informal food vendors in Kingston, demand-driven dimensions of the pandemic suggest that cash support would not have been favourable for this city. At best, cash transfers to vendors would have provided merely a temporary buffer. A market-driven response, defined by less restrictive operating hours during the pandemic, is one option to be considered for future pandemic scenarios, provided public health priorities allow. This approach would be a state-based mechanism to foster adaptive capacity (Sarkar et al., 2025).

Targeted interventions for vendors operating in the informal food sector would have proved challenging due to the lack of licensing documentation to verify their existence. How would the state determine the size of the population to budget for such an initiative and transparently distribute resources? To cushion against the impact of future pandemics, the municipal government could explore vendor

registration, as the KSAMC attempted in 2015. According to Ricketts (2020), however, there is limited incentive for workers in Jamaica's informal sector to regularize. If successful, registration is one step towards formalizing the sector. Registration of informal vendors has long-term implications for the sustainability of the urban food system in Kingston and for the protection of the most vulnerable participants in the informal economy. These include effective monitoring of health and sanitation practices, a key concern during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other risk management strategies, such as index-based insurance, would also rely on registration (Béné, 2020).

The culture driving informality suggests that educating informal vendors and co-governance of the sector will also be essential (Ricketts, 2020). Training provides an opportunity to build resilience capacity by addressing the psychological and practical dimensions of anticipatory capacity (Béné, 2020; Sarkar et al., 2025). Registration of vendors would not only facilitate appropriate sector-focused interventions but also ensure the success of gender-focused initiatives. In the context of a future pandemic (or other disaster scenario), registration of informal food vendors would allow city and state governments to scale up interventions for those who require social protection and welfare support. Registration thus potentially allows a response to the public and private interests of informal vendors, in particular the women who constitute much of the informal food vendor population.

Jamaica is a country defined by its compound disaster context (CSGM, 2021; Dietrich Jones, 2025). During this study, the Jamaican economy continued to experience the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with two major hurricanes impacting the country in July 2024 and October 2025, respectively. Compound disasters create ripple effects within food systems (Béné, 2020; Mishra et al., 2021). Traditional food intermediaries, such as food vendors, are particularly vulnerable in post-hurricane settings due to disruptions in food supply and reduced consumption resulting from temporary or protracted job losses. While these experiences may enhance adaptive capacity, limited financial and social capital affect informal food vendors' resilience (Béné, 2020; Sarkar et al., 2025). Future research is therefore needed to understand the impact of negative (and positive) feedback loops resulting from compound disasters, and how the government's attempt at comprehensive disaster risk management may help or hinder the informal food economy.

## Conclusion

This paper underscores the value of gendered analysis in understanding the differential impacts of COVID-19 on women and men on informal food vendors in the city of Kingston. This is consistent with other studies, which show that women bore a disproportionate share of the pandemic's burdens, including job loss, increased caregiving responsibilities, and emotional strain. The findings affirm the need for a nuanced approach to gender-sensitive research and policy, since men adopted more abrupt or conservative responses to the economic shocks induced by COVID-19.

Notwithstanding the limitations of collecting data on pandemic experiences in a post-pandemic setting, the research yielded useful insights. The findings reveal that both women and men informal food vendors were impacted by the pandemic. The feedback loops generated by protracted disruption from lockdown measures, combined with increased supply due to disruption in the tourism sector, reduced demand in the informal food economy. The main impact of this was reduced sales and profits for women and men food vendors.

The data also reveals a paradox in responses vis-à-vis perceptions of impact and coping ability among men and women vendors. This finding distinguishes the city of Kingston from much of the global literature, which indicates that women informal vendors were more impacted by the pandemic. However, men appear less resilient than women in the informal food-vending sector. The reasons behind what appears to be a weaker absorptive capacity among men merit further analysis. In addition, although the unit of analysis was individuals, the research also yielded an important finding regarding the characterization of the pandemic as a demand-side shock in the Jamaican context. The paper affirms the need to craft gender-inclusive policy responses to mitigate the reproduction of inequalities in the informal economy and the private sphere.

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