An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis of COVID-19 Control and Post-pandemic Recovery Policies: Gendered Experiences of Women Informal Food Vendors in Kisumu City, Kenya

By

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted economies worldwide as governments formulated policies to control the spread of coronavirus and support social and economic recovery from the pandemic. However, these policies did not incorporate gender considerations, hence deepening the gender and socio-economic inequalities especially for women vendors who are overrepresented in the informal food economy. In secondary cities in the Global South, women vendors play a significant role in supporting the urban household food needs and livelihoods, yet limited studies have explored the gender gaps in the COVID-19 control and recovery measure exists in these contexts.

This thesis implemented a cross-sectional study design, incorporating community-based participatory approaches to explore the gender gaps in the pandemic control measures and the post-pandemic recovery strategies in Kisumu City in Kenya. The study adopted qualitative methods to gather data through policy document reviews (n=6), key informant interviews (n=20), in-depth interviews (n=20), and focus group discussions (n=40) of 4 discussion groups with 10 people in each group. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and data management and analysis were undertaken in NVivo Version 15. Data were analyzed both deductively guided by the principles of the Intersectionality-based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework and inductively following Braun and Clarke's six step thematic analysis.

Based on the analysis of the data, two main papers emerged from this research work. The first paper, *An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis of the COVID-19 Control Measures and Experiences of Women Informal Food* Vendors *in Secondary Cities: A Case Study of Kisumu City, Kenya,* examined the extent to which control policies were gender-sensitive to the roles and needs of women vendors and whether their perspectives were incorporated into policy design.

The second paper, *An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) of post-pandemic recovery policies: Experiences of women informal food vendors in Kisumu City, Kenya*, explored the gender responsiveness of post-COVID-19 policies and their influence on resilience, recovery, and sustainability of female-led informal food businesses.

Findings from the first paper revealed a limited incorporation of relevant gender consideration for female vendors within the COVID-19 policy interventions. Consequently, women vendors were adversely impacted by curfews, mobility restrictions, and market closures, which curtailed their ability to earn livelihood and support the food needs of urban households. Existing socio-cultural norms compounded with the changing dynamics during the pandemic such as school closures and burdened health systems intensified care work and household duties for women vendors disproportionately impacting them. Findings from the second paper showed that post-pandemic policies prioritized formal sector recovery; hence, the informal food sector received minimal government and private sector support. Women vendors faced several barriers to accessing credit from financial entities such as banks and micro-finance agencies. Limited social protection mechanisms such as medical coverage, pension benefits, and business insurance, worsened vulnerability of female-led businesses to the effects of the pandemic, hence hindering recovery.

Collectively, both studies highlight the role of individual and collective agency, whereby the vendors devised coping mechanisms including reliance on community initiatives, informal saving groups, and social networks to survive and recover from the effects of the pandemic. Additionally, both the COVID-19 control and post-pandemic recovery policies ignored the existing gender inequalities shaped by multiple intersecting social locations of the women

informal food vendors, resulting in disproportionate impacts and unequal recovery from the pandemic.

This thesis demonstrates the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on female-led businesses in secondary cities of the Global South. Applying the IBPA framework illuminates how several intersecting social locations influenced women's experiences to the pandemic hence shaping the recovery of the businesses not only post-pandemic but also in times of current and future emergencies. Additionally, this thesis makes methodological and theoretical contributions as it advances the application of qualitative methods and the IBPA framework in the analysis of relevant policies and the lived experiences of the female informal food vendors in secondary cities of the Global South. The evidence from this work is critical for the sustenance of the informal food sector and the enhancement of women resilience to emergencies, hence supporting women's role in sustaining the urban household food security and livelihoods.

Preface

This thesis is original intellectual work by Joyce Kiplagat. Ethics approval was granted for this study by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board under the project title "A Gendered Analysis of the role of Women-led Informal Food Businesses in urban household food security and well-being of urban dwellers Kisumu City, Kenya". Approval was granted on May 16, 2024 (REB ID: Pro00138854).

This thesis follows a paper-based format and organized around two peer-reviewed manuscripts, each contributing to the overarching objectives of the study. Chapter 1 of the thesis provides a comprehensive introduction to the study, highlighting the research context, objectives and rationale. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology of the study detailing the guiding theoretical frameworks, specific research methods, and the processes for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3 presents the first manuscript which is under review under review in *PLOS ONE*, titled "An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis of the COVID-19 Control Measures and Experiences of Women Informal Food Vendors in Secondary Cities: A Case Study of Kisumu City, Kenya". I played an important role in conceiving the research design and methodology, while also undertaking data analysis, preparation of the initial manuscript draft and coordinated peer-review processes.

Chapter 4 presents the second manuscript which has been published in *Sustainability*: Kiplagat, J., Owuor, P. M., Gokiert, R., & Onyango, E. (2025). An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) of Post-Pandemic Recovery Policies: Experiences of Women Informal Food Vendors in Kisumu City, Kenya. *Sustainability*, *18*(1), 334. My contributions to this

manuscript included design conceptualization, leading the draft preparation process, reviewing, editing, data analysis and peer review.

Chapter 5 of this thesis integrates the findings from the study, presents curated recommendations and directions for future research. Findings from this research have been presented in conferences; the Society for Applied Anthropology Conference on Oregon, USA and the Canadian Conference on Global Health in Halifax. Mentorship, guidance and support throughout the research process was provided by my supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Onyango.

Acknowledgements

The successful completion of this thesis has been made possible through the unwavering support, mentorship, and encouragement of several individuals and institutions, which played an integral role in my academic journey.

First, I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Elizabeth Onyango for her insightful mentorship, guidance and constructive feedback throughout the research process. Her mastery of food systems, gender studies, policy analysis and community-engaged scholarship was very instrumental in sharpening my analytical experience and refining my ideas. I truly appreciate her sacrifice in time and resources to oversee this study to completion. I am also grateful for the guidance of my supervisory committee members, Dr. Rebecca Gokiert and Dr. Patrick Owuor. Their collective mentorship and diverse perspectives augmented the research process by continually challenging me to think critically and beyond.

Also deserving of acknowledgement is the Pamoja Community Based Organization for their invaluable partnership. I am specifically grateful to the research assistants who put in their time and dedication to engage the participants and support data collection. I owe special gratitude to the study participants whose lived experiences form the foundation of the study findings and the recommendation I put forward in this work.

This research would not be possible without the support and resources of the MiFOOD Network that provided a sub-grant through their SSHRC-Partnership grant at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, Canada. I also appreciate the funding received through the MSc Public Health Entrance Scholarship by the University of Alberta and the Graduate Students Travel Award, which facilitated this study and knowledge mobilization activities. I extend my gratitude to my colleagues at the ACRES Research Lab for their collaboration and valuable insights.

Lastly, I am deeply grateful to my family, who were my deep inspiration, Boaz, Kylan, Tendai and Ayana. Thank you for your prayers, emotional support, sacrifice, love, and patience. To my special cousin, Stanley Bett, your belief in me made me more confident in my endeavors. You were the beacon of my journey. To my siblings and support system, Timothy, Hillary, Sheila, Mercy and Charity, your presence and belief in me kept me grounded and sustained.

I dedicate this work to my late dad and mum. Every page of this work reflects the values you instilled in me and your dreams for me. Thank you for all the sacrifices!

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

AMREF	African Medical and Research Foundation
CBO	Community-Based Organization
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IBPA	Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis
IDI	In-Depth Interview
KII	Key Informant Interview
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
LMIC	Low- and Middle-Income Countries
WHO	World Health Organization

Researcher positionality

I enter into this study as a Kenyan researcher, a woman, and a mother whose family has relied on and benefited from the informal food businesses for household food supply. My origin equips me with familiarity with the local food practices and informal food vending activities. My lived experiences of having been raised in a patriarchal society similar to the women in Kisumu City, where women and girls are undervalued and rarely engaged in decision making, influences my sensitivity to the gendered challenges and inequalities that women vendors face. This perspective may influence how I approach the research. I also acknowledge my outsider position as a researcher currently based in Canada. However, I recognize that this might introduce bias to how I interpret participant perspectives, and to mitigate that, I engaged in continuous self-reflexivity throughout this research process. This ensured my interpretation of participant experiences and knowledge generation is centered on their lived experiences and voices, and not on my assumptions. To minimize possible researcher bias, I engaged with the Pamoja CBO in the review of research outcomes and validation of emerging themes to ensure that the interpretation of findings captured local realities.

Although I was not present during data collection, I maintained regular discussions with the research team, community partner organization and my supervisory committee. This open communication allowed me to share my assumptions and decisions and in turn gain the local community cultural insights that I would potentially overlook. This reflexive dialogue ensured that I captured participant perspectives accurately complementing their cultural norms.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic experienced globally was not merely a health crisis but a social and economic disaster that disproportionately impacted vulnerable groups and disrupted livelihoods (Panneer et al., 2022). Governments responded to the pandemic by formulating policy tools for mitigation and control of *coronavirus* as well as post-pandemic strategies for social and economic recovery (Capano et al., 2020). In the initial phase of the pandemic, governments interventions involved a combination of policy measures that focused on controlling and containing COVID-19, with varied responses across jurisdictions (Moon, 2020; Shi et al., 2022). According to Migone (2020a), containment policies have been widely used by many governments during pandemics and COVID-19 was no exception. In the later phase of the pandemic, governments rolled out a portfolio of post-pandemic recovery policies which were predominantly focused on socio-economic stabilization (Junfeng et al., 2022; Kivimaa et al., 2023; Onyango, 2024). Most of these interventions included monetary and fiscal measures that were intended to revive businesses and support economic growth (Junfeng et al., 2022).

In Kenya for example, the national government formulated the Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022, designed "to mitigate the adverse socio-economic effects of the pandemic and facilitate opening up of the economy, accelerate economic recovery and attainment of higher and sustained economic growth" (Republic of Kenya, 2020). In Kisumu City, the mitigation directives were augmented by county-specific regulations such as funeral protocols, community monitoring, designation isolation facilities, and nutritional support initiatives (Kisumu County Government, 2020). Furthermore, the Kisumu County Government, through the Council of Governors, developed the Kisumu County COVID-19 Social Economic

Re-Engineering and Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23. This was aimed at enhancing the resilience of the main sectors of the county's economy such as trade, tourism, health, agriculture, education and manufacturing, etc. (Kisumu County Government, 2020). Despite their proven effectiveness in curbing the spread of *coronavirus* (Krishnamachari et al., 2021; Mehtar et al., 2020; Migone, 2020b), COVID-19 policies had negative impacts on the socio-cultural and economic spheres (Mishra et al., 2020; Mwakisha et al., 2024; Romero et al., 2025).

For instance, COVID-19 control policies resulted in closure of markets, disruption of supply chains, heightened household and caregiving work, and loss of employment and income. (Anwar et al., 2023; Capano et al., 2020; Mwakisha et al., 2024; Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2022). Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders caused extensive business disruption and a rise in the rate of unemployment especially in the informal sector (Kabeer et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2023). Specifically, the informal food sector was more vulnerable due to the precarious nature of the businesses and the limited availability of social protection schemes (Crush & Tawodzera, 2024; Torm, 2023).

According to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 2007), the informal food sector consists of small-scale producers, traders, processors and service providers engaged in both recognized and unregulated food-related activities. The vendors are typically self-employed and rely on social support networks and informal credit facilities for business recovery especially during emergencies (Guo et al., 2022).

Matinga et al. (2018) affirms that the informal food sector, particularly in Africa, has surpassed the formal economy in employment creation (Roever & Skinner, 2016; Skinner & Haysom, G, 2017; Young & Crush, 2019). For instance in Kenya, almost three-quarters (70%) of the country's labor force is employed in the informal sector, of whom approximately two-thirds

(66%) are women (International Center for Research on Women, 2022). Existing evidence has shown that informal food vending significantly enhances urban household food needs particularly for low-income populations (Crush & Young, 2019; Donga & Chimucheka, 2024; FAO, 2019; *FAO Framework for the Urban Food Agenda*, 2019; Skinner & Haysom, G, 2017). Nonetheless, the COVID-19 control measures significantly hindered the informal food sector's capacity to sustain livelihoods and ensure urban food provisioning (Bandauko, 2025; Donga & Chimucheka, 2024; Guo et al., 2022; Iwu et al., 2022; Martínez & Young, 2022; Pinchoff et al., 2021; Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2022). Notably, the most affected were the female informal food vendors who were already vulnerable to the economic shocks and social burdens arising from pandemic policies and the socio-cultural context factors (Donga & Chimucheka, 2024; Khan, 2024a; Odhiambo et al., 2025).

COVID-19 altered gender roles and worsened pre-existing gender inequalities (Afifu et al., 2021; Morandi et al., 2025). As espoused by Lafrenière et al. (2019), the pandemic intensified the burden of unpaid care work for women due to the closure of learning institutions and daycare centers, a scenario further exacerbated by existing cultural norms that traditionally assign household duties (UN Women, 2020; Wandera et al., 2023). This was further compounded by containment strategies that did not consider women's heightened burden of domestic duties and caregiving responsibilities (Van Daalen et al., 2020), resulting in time poverty from unpaid work (Morandi et al., 2025). As a result, female-led households in urban informal settlements experienced food insecurity and declined household income compared to those headed by males (Bau et al., 2022; Makate & Makate, 2023; Modirwa & Oladele, 2012; Odhiambo et al., 2025; Onyango et al., 2021; Pinchoff et al., 2021). Furthermore, extensive research across the Global South including in Kenya (Pinchoff et al., 2021), South Africa

(Mbokodo et al., 2025), Zimbabwe (Magwegwe, 2024), and Malawi (Ostadtaghizadeh et al., 2023) showed a significant increase in violence against women and heightened insecurity stemming from COVID-19-related stay-at-home orders and curfews.

Existing studies have largely explored the general impacts of COVID-19 on health, economic and social aspects of populations (Afifu et al., 2021; Donga & Chimucheka, 2024; Kimani-Murage et al., 2022; Meru & Kinoti, 2021; Mwanga et al., 2024; Onyango et al., 2021; Onyango, 2024; Pinchoff et al., 2021; Wandera et al., 2023). Furthermore, much of this research has been concentrated on major urban centers overlooking the lived realities of populations in secondary cities often marginalized in development and policy agendas. While some scholars have analyzed the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on urban informal workers in Kenya, their scope emphasized overall implications of the pandemic (Afifu et al., 2021; Pinchoff et al., 2021; Suubi et al., 2022). However, the gender-responsiveness of COVID-19 control and post-pandemic recovery policies and their impact women informal food vendors in secondary cities remains underexplored.

This thesis addresses the knowledge gap through a gendered analysis of the COVID-19 policies, exploring the gender gaps and their implications for women informal food vendors in Kisumu City. The analysis was guided by the intersectionality-based policy analysis (IBPA) framework, designed for critical policy analysis (Hankivsky et al., 2012). Aligned with the core objectives, this research explored: (i) how COVID-19 control policies addressed the roles and needs of women informal food vendors, (ii) the representation of women's voices in policy processes, and (iii) the gender-responsiveness of post-pandemic recovery strategies. By examining the gender-responsiveness of national and county level COVID-19 policies in Kisumu City, this study contributes valuable insights into how women vendors' social identities

intersected with informality and pandemic policy processes to shape their experiences with the pandemic. Evidence from this work highlights the relevance of gender responsive policies in time of emergencies and in creating post-emergency recovery strategies that are cognizant of the diverse identities and experiences.

CHAPTER 2: Research Methodology and Methods

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis Framework

Grounded in intersectionality, the IBPA framework guided the study's methodological approach to highlight how multiple intersecting social locations interact with structures of power to determine individual and community participation in policy processes (Andersson Nystedt et al., 2025; Hankivsky et al., 2012). The framework asserts that policy decisions determine who is included or marginalized, revealing structures of privilege and inequality within society (Hankivsky et al., 2014). The IBPA broadly recognizes that governments formulate policies intended to address societal needs while advocating for healthy public policies (Hankivsky et al., 2014). Specifically, the eight guiding principles of the IBPA framework were applied to this gendered analysis.

The IBPA framework is based on 8 principles that include – the principles of intersecting categories, power, time and space, multi-level analysis, reflexivity, diverse knowledges, social justice and equity as highlighted by Hankivsky et al. (2012). Intersecting categories emphasize that a person's lived experiences are determined by varied overlapping social locations that go beyond singular categories of age and gender to include indigeneity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity among other identities. Power refers to the creation of systems of privilege and marginalization by those bestowed with authority. Time and space views power and marginalization as dynamic whereby individuals could experience privilege at a given point and discrimination in the same setting. The multi-level perspective recognizes the different governance, organizational, and individual levels that exist within a society and the varying influence of policy at each stage. Reflexivity acknowledges the influence of one's positionality on knowledge generation and interpretation of findings. The framework also considers the

diverse forms of knowledge borne by individuals and communities that are often ignored by policymakers. Lastly, the framework's main goal is to foster social justice and equity through prioritizing and amplifying the needs of those who are marginalized within society. These principles are the foundational tenets of intersectionality (Hankivsky et al., 2012).

Using the intersectionality lens, this gendered analysis recognized that women vendors in Kisumu City experienced the pandemic differently due to the multifaceted interconnections among their social positions. This includes their level of education, class, gender expression, economic status, age, ability, marital status, religion, and sexual orientation. The framework was utilized to examine how COVID-19 policies considered or failed to recognize the intersecting identities of women informal food vendors. This provided a nuanced understanding of how varied social locations intersected with power and COVID-19 policies to determine women's vulnerability, decision-making abilities, coping and adaptation mechanisms, participation in policy processes and access to recovery mechanisms.

Previous studies have utilized the IBPA framework to study the impacts of policies on marginalized groups such as individuals living with human immunodeficiency virus, women's reproductive health, and individuals experiencing substance abuse challenges (Fagrell Trygg et al., 2022; Ferlatte, 2012; Haintz et al., 2023; Hunting, 2012). For example, in the study on how the Victorian State Government policies influenced women's reproductive decision making in Australia, the use of the IBPA framework emphasized the need for meaningful engagement of women with diverse and intersecting social identities to ensure inclusivity (Haints et al., 2023). In the current study, the IBPA framework allowed us to uncover how COVID-19 policies reinforced power and privileges that influenced women vendors' social and economic status.

Overall, the negative impacts of the pandemic influenced women's ability to sustain their food-provisioning role in the midst of the pandemic and their overall health and wellbeing.

Study location

This study was conducted in Kisumu City, which serves as the main administrative and commercial hub of Kisumu County, located in the Western part of Kenya near Lake Victoria. The lake provides a lifeline for most of the city residents as it supports varied economic activities such as transportation, farming and fishing (Opiyo et al., 2018). Kisumu City is the third largest city in Kenya, hosting an estimated population of about 600,000 residents (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), 2019). Over the years, the city has experienced a proliferation of informal settlements largely driven by rapid urbanization and rural-urban migration (Mwangangi et al., 2023; Simiyu et al., 2019).

Due to the ready market for goods and services within these informal settlements, most of the residents have engaged in informal food vending as a primary source of income (Kiaka et al., 2021). As hinted by Opiyo et al. (2018), a majority of the urban residents in Kisumu City obtain their food from the informal food sector. The vibrancy of the informal food economy has been more pronounced in the recent years with statistics showing that approximately 60% of the informal business operators in the Kisumu City are women (Opiyo & Agong, 2018). Communities living in the study area are characterized by prevailing patriarchal and cultural norms that largely influence gender roles. Therefore, women have been assigned household duties and caregiving work, while simultaneously undertaking informal food businesses (Wandera et al., 2023). These dynamics make the study area an appropriate context for exploring the intersection of gender dimensions, informality and policy impacts.

Study design

This study utilized a cross-sectional design, integrating policy document review and qualitative data collection. This study design allowed the exploration of gender gaps in policies and women vendors lived experiences, simultaneously, at a specific point in time. Primary data were collected using key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussion (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Study population and sampling procedures

Policy document sampling

National and county level COVID-19 control and post-pandemic policy documents reviewed in this study were selected purposefully. Purposeful selection of policy documents was adopted to guarantee inclusion of government policy interventions relating to the control and containment of the spread of *coronavirus* and informal food sector recovery. The study analyzed n=6 policies including (i) Public Health (COVID-19 General Public Safety) Rules, 2020, (ii) Public Order (State Curfew) Order, No. 36 of 2020, (iii) Public Health (COVID-19 Restriction of Movement of Persons and Related Measures) Rules, 2020, (iv) Control and Suppression Of COVID-19) Rules, 2020, (v) National Post COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022, and (vi) Kisumu County COVID-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering and Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23.

Participant sampling

This research leveraged the community-based participatory research approach and partnered with the Pamoja Community Based Organization. The organisation had existing connections with the local community and were actively involved in identifying eligible participants. Participants were then selected using purposive and snowballing sampling

techniques to ensure adequate representation of the target population (Etikan, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Participant recruitment

Eligibility for participation in the study was based on the criteria that participants (i) were involved in food-related trade and had resided in Kisumu City for over 5 years (ii) were proprietors of informal food enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic period (iii) were actively participating in the sale of food items in markets, on the streets or any other kind of small scale food production at the time of data collection. Participants were recruited through in-person engagements and telephone correspondence with support from Pamoja Community Based Organization (CBO).

Data collection methods

Policy document reviews n=6

Research has recommended the need to carefully evaluate intersectional and gendered vulnerabilities of health policies for effective interventions (Bali et al., 2020). To explore the gender gaps in COVID-19 policies, the six selected policy documents were reviewed. The review was focused on identifying measures implemented by the government that touched on the women in the informal food sector. This was undertaken to provide a comprehensive understanding of policy intentions to facilitate triangulation with actual lived experiences of the women vendors collected through primary data methods (Crush & Tawodzera, 2024; Pinchoff et al., 2021).

Key informant interviews n=20

Key informants in qualitative research are equipped with expertise and insider information which is essential for exploring experiences of participants (Luetke Lanfer et al.,

2024). A total of 20 interviews were conducted to capture expert perspectives on the impacts of policy measures on women vendors. Participants held leadership positions in government departments, markets, private entities and community-based organizations that had associations with women informal food vendors. Their first-hand interaction with women vendors provided rich data on business operations, resilience strategies, coping mechanisms, government interventions during and after the pandemic. They also had insights into the setbacks and supports that women vendors experienced due to government directives. These one-on-one interviews were 30-60 minutes long.

In-depth interviews n=20

This research engaged 20 participants in semi-structured interviews to explore their personal experiences with the pandemic. IDIs are useful for collecting rich and personal narratives and allows researchers to gain deeper insights into individual perspectives (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Interview guides were used to probe policy measures, business operations, gender dynamics of interventions, impacts on health and wellbeing, barriers to accessing credit facilities, social safety nets, individual and communal agencies, etc. The in-person interviews lasted 30-45 minutes.

Focus groups discussions (4)

Female participants were organized into four focus groups of 10 people, to explore challenges of undertaking businesses during and after COVID-19, balancing paid and unpaid work, and coping strategies. Group modalities encourage participants to collectively exchange perspectives and elicit data that would not emerge in individual interviews (Zenari, 2015). The discussions provided a platform for participants to safely discuss sensitive experiences that caused them harm like gender-based violence, insecurity and sexual exploitation. The use of

semi-structured discussions elicited collective perspectives and comparison of experiences regarding policy enforcement practices, community support and building back after the pandemic, etc.

Data analysis and Triangulation

Data analysis

Key informant interviews, in depth interviews and focus group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed word-for-word from *Dholuo* and Kiswahili to English depending on the preferred language of interview by the participants. The transcripts were imported into NVivo version 15 for a structured analysis. Both policy documents and qualitative data were analyzed using the intersectionality lens of the IBPA framework (Hankivsky et al., 2012) and Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis(Braun & Clarke, 2006a). The steps included (i) familiarizing with the data (ii) generating initial codes (iii) searching for themes (iv) reviewing themes (v) defining and naming themes (vi) report production (Braun & Clarke, 2006b). I undertook an iterative analysis of the data involving line-by-line coding and continuously compared outcomes from the analysis to maintain interpretive reliability (Neale, 2016; Tracy, 2018). The research team facilitated a peer review and peer debriefing of the potential themes to ensure rigor and critical reflexivity (Mayan, 2016; Morse & Field, 1996). Direct quotes from participants were presented alongside excerpts from policy documents in the results section.

Triangulation

This study integrated data from KIIs, IDIs, FGDs, and policy document analysis. Data triangulation was undertaken to maintain the trustworthiness of the research (Carter et al., 2014; Denzin, 2012). Verifying findings across the different data sources fostered a nuanced understanding of existing gender gaps within the policies by examining policy intentions and

actual lived experiences of the women informal food vendors. Multiple sources of data highlight converging and diverging participant standpoints providing a contextualized understanding of the research problem (Denzin, 2012).

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Review Board (Protocol: Pro00138854) and African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) Kenya Research Ethics Board (ESRC P1670/2024). The study participants were provided with detailed descriptions of the aims of the study for an informed decision to engage in the study. All the participants provided written informed consent. Participation was voluntary and participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the interviews and discussions at any stage without loss of benefits including honorarium ($10) for participation. The participants were assured that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. We ensured this by using pseudonyms and unique identifiers during transcription and removing any personal identifiers. The data was stored securely in a password protected google drive and in accordance with the University of Alberta data management protocols and is accessible only to the research team.

In the subsequent chapters, I present the findings of this study in 2 journal articles that I took the lead on writing the first drafts of and with the mentorship of my supervisory committee (who are co-authors in the papers. Paper 1 is under review in *PLOS ONE* with the title "An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis of the COVID-19 Control Measures and Experiences of Women Informal Food Vendors in Secondary Cities: A Case Study of Kisumu City, Kenya". Paper 2 has been published in *Sustainability* as Kiplagat, J., Owuor, P. M., Gokiert, R., & Onyango, E. (2025). An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) of Post-Pandemic

Recovery Policies: Experiences of Women Informal Food Vendors in Kisumu City, Kenya. *Sustainability*, *18*(1), 334.

CHAPTER 3: Paper 1: Title: An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis Of The COVID-19 Control Measures And Experiences Of Women Informal Food Vendors In Secondary Cities: A Case Study Of Kisumu City, Kenya

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Abstract

Introduction: Women informal food vendors in Kisumu operated in precarious working conditions that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic control measures. Yet, the pandemic control measures inadequately incorporated the unique needs and challenges experienced by the women vendors. Additionally, the women vendors were insufficiently engaged in the formulation and decision-making processes, which was a reserve of technical experts and government officers at the national level.

Methods: Guided by the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework, this study explored the gender gaps in the COVID-19 control and containment policies. The study was conducted between July 10, 2024, and October 15, 2024, and we employed qualitative methods of data collection including key informant interviews (n=20), focus group discussions (n=4), and in-depth interviews (n=20) to gather primary data on the experiences of women vendors to the pandemic policies. We also reviewed four policy documents. Participants were purposively recruited in collaboration with a community partner organization, Pamoja Community Based Organisation. The principles of the IBPA framework guided our thematic data analysis.

Results: We found that women vendors were excluded from policy decision-making, resulting in gender-insensitive policies that widened the inequality gap. The COVID-19 policymaking process ignored the varied and intersecting social identities of women vendors. The study further revealed that implementation of COVID-19 policies was fragmented, exposing women vendors to physical assault, harassment, and extortion, heightening existing gendered vulnerabilities.

Discussion: In the event of future emergencies, governments should develop inclusive and gender-sensitive policies while centering the voices of women informal food vendors for a sustainable urban food system. This research builds on the concept of intersectional policy

analysis in health research to advance the principles of equity and social justice for better health outcomes.

Keywords: Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis; Gender-responsive policies; COVID-19 Control Measure; Informal Food Vendors; Secondary Cities; Global South

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects on global trade and markets, which affected both the formal and informal economies (Alon et al., 2022; Alon, Kim, et al., 2020; Mishra & Rampal, 2020). Following the World Health Organization declaration of the global pandemic, governments across the world imposed mandatory containment measures such as lockdowns and curfews (Koh, 2020). Additionally, safety protocols like the use of face masks, handwashing, sanitizing, and physical distancing were introduced to curb the spread of coronavirus (Mwakisha et al., 2024). As a result, women food vendors experienced varied challenges including reduced market hours, restricted movement, disruption of food supply chains, increased household and caregiving responsibilities, loss of income, and food insecurity (Afifu et al., 2021; Kimani-Murage et al., 2022). Hence, these policies triggered events that shaped social and economic outcomes differently for men and women engaged in the informal economy (Kabeer et al., 2021). This is despite the substantial role of women vendors in household food security provisioning (Battersby & Watson, 2018; Crush & Young, 2019; Onyango et al., 2021).

According to previous research, COVID-19 policy measures deepened existing inequalities due to the lack of consideration of socio-cultural and economic challenges faced by women (Odhiambo et al., 2025; Ukala et al., 2020b). Additionally, lack of consideration of gender inequities in policy responses presented unique problems for women during the pandemic (UN Women, 2024). Economically, women informal food vendors faced challenges in accessing financial support from government and financial institutions (Donga & Chimucheka, 2024; Sinyolo et al., 2022). In the African context, these were particularly pronounced due to embedded socio-cultural practices and the dominance of patriarchy, which undermined women's

possession and authority over assets that could act as collateral in financial access (Fletschner & Kenney, 2014). In most urban centers of the Global South, women are over-represented in the informal economy, particularly within the food sector (Donga & Chimucheka, 2024) Specifically, in Kisumu City, women make up to 60% of all the informal traders, majorly engaged in food vending (Kisumu County Government, 2020; Opiyo et al., 2018). Consequently, these women were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kiaka et al., 2021). The implementation of COVID-19 policy responses resulted in increased gender and intimate partner violence, hindering the contributions of women-led informal food businesses in supporting urban food needs and livelihoods (John et al., 2021). Simultaneously, increased unpaid care work and household responsibilities impeded women's full engagement in paid work (Wenham et al., 2020). Despite these direct impacts, women, particularly in the informal food sector, were less engaged in the formulation and implementation of policies (Afifu et al., 2021; Roever & Skinner, 2016; Smith, 2023).

Limited studies have explored gender-specific gaps in COVID-19 policies affecting women-led informal food businesses in secondary cities (Malou, 2024). Most existing studies have focused on the broader informal sector in major cities of the Global South, including Nairobi, Kampala, Karachi, West Bengal, and Johannesburg (Afifu et al., 2021; Anwar et al., 2023; Mondal & Chakraborty, 2022; Pinchoff et al., 2021; Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2022; Suubi et al., 2022b). Policy analyses on COVID-19 in Durban, Nairobi and Kampala showed that women in the urban informal economy were excluded from COVID-19 policy processes (Afifu et al., 2021; Skinner et al., 2021; Suubi et al., 2022b). In Karachi, for instance, the findings of an intersectional analysis revealed that lockdowns resulted in gendered inequalities with women experiencing increased domestic violence and care responsibilities while also maintaining

provisioning role to their households (Anwar et al., 2023). In West Benghal, Mondal and Chackraborty (2022) argued that women informal workers had limited influence on policy decisions during the pandemic. As Martínez and Young (2022) note, there is need for further research in the Global South on the participation of the informal food sector in the policy decision making process. This reveals a dearth of research in secondary cities on the impacts of pandemic-related policies on women in the informal food sector. Therefore, this study sought to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring the gender responsiveness of the COVID-19 policies to the roles and needs of women informal food vendors in Kisumu City.

Secondary cities have unique roles in fostering urban-rural linkages within the social, economic, and cultural spheres. In terms of policy development, these cities are often marginalized, especially during emergencies. In the case of Kisumu, COVID-19 policies were formulated at the national government level in Nairobi, a primary city, excluding the lived realities of vulnerable populations in secondary cities, particularly women. This study enabled our understanding of the extent to which the perspectives of women business-owners were considered in the formulation and implementation of the pandemic control policies. By considering the experiences of female-led informal businesses in secondary cities, this study addresses a critical in knowledge gap in such jurisdictions where research is limited. Understanding the gendered dimensions of the COVID-19 policies on women informal food vendors is key in recommending inclusive policy responses that supports the food security needs and livelihoods of urban households in times of emergencies.

This research applied the intersectionality-based policy analysis framework (IBPA) (Hankivsky et al., 2014). The IBPA framework goes beyond the traditional gender analysis frameworks and approaches to foreground the overlap of gender and other social identities such

as marital status, level of education, economic ability, among others, while centering power, social justice, equity, time and space, intersecting categories, diverse knowledges and multi-level analysis of policy outcomes. Specifically, this study explored the following objectives: (i) how COVID-19 control policies addressed the roles and needs of women informal food vendors, (ii) the representation of women's voices in policy processes.

Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis Framework

The IBPA framework, which draws on the paradigm of intersectionality, was developed through a participatory process by key stakeholders in academia, governance and community engagement, and designed for critical health policy analysis (Hankivsky et al., 2014). This study utilized the seven principles of the IBPA framework including equity, power, intersecting categories, multi-level analysis, reflexivity, social justice, and diverse knowledges (Hankivsky et al., 2014). These guided the analysis of the COVID-19-related policies, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and in-depth interview transcripts, as well as the interpretation of the findings.

While COVID-19 policies in Kisumu City regarded women as a homogenous group, we applied the principle of intersecting categories to explore their various overlapping social identities, such as gender, age, and marital status, level of education, cultural orientation, and socio-economic status etc. The intersectional lens was meant to identify how the social locations influenced the women experiences with the policies and understand how inequalities are shaped by how policies are designed, disseminated and understood (Kanenberg & Leal, 2019).

Considering the principle of power and multi-level analysis, we sought to highlight how overlapping power structures fostered inclusion or reinforced inequality for the informal women food vendors. The gender equity lens and the principle of social justice was also applied to

understand the gender inclusivity of the COVID-19 policies while considering the overlapping layers of power in policy processes. Furthermore, by applying the principle of diverse knowledge, the framework enabled us to interrogate whether the voices of women in informal food vending were integrated in policy development and how power dynamics shaped the inclusion or exclusion of their diverse perspectives in policy decision making. Whilst studies in other jurisdictions showed that governments overlooked gender-specific needs of women in COVID-19 policy responses (Chitando, 2020), the IBPA framework allowed for the advancing of the principle of social justice. The principles were applied to the analysis by the authors while acknowledging self-reflexivity. However, the IBPA principle of time and space, which analyses the dynamics of policy inequalities over time and across historical and geographical spaces, was not utilized in the study. This is because the research focussed on the gendered COVID-19 policy dynamics at a specified time and place.

Methods

Study setting

This study was conducted in Kisumu City, located within the county of Kisumu in western Kenya. It's proximity to the Lake Victoria, world's second largest freshwater lake, provides economic benefits of fishing resources, trade, and transport (Opiyo et al., 2018). Kenya has a devolved system of government comprising 47 counties, which was established after the promulgation of the constitution in 2010 (Chau, 2021). In the health sector, the national government oversees policy formulation while the county governments manage the delivery of health services (Chau, 2021). The dominant economic activities carried out in Kisumu include crop and livestock farming, fisheries, trade, manufacturing, construction, and mining (Kisumu., 2020). Kisumu City has an approximate population of 600,000 inhabitants (KNBS, 2020) and

has experienced an influx of people from the neighboring rural areas due to its rapidly urbanizing potential (Simiyu et al., 2019a). Approximately 64% of the city's inhabitants reside within the informal settlements (UN-Habitat, 2020), which experience high levels of poverty (Opiyo et al., 2018). These informal settlements include Manyatta A, Manyatta B, Obunga, Bandani, Kaloleni, Nyalenda A, Nyalenda B and Kibos (Simiyu et al., 2019a). Additionally, the informal food sector thrives within the city, with a majority of the residents relying on the sector for food provision, with formal supermarkets being utilized less frequently (Kiaka et al., 2021; Opiyo et al., 2018).

We selected Kisumu City due to its vibrant informal food sector and the overrepresentation of women vendors in the urban food space. This makes it a relevant case study area to understand the gendered implications of COVID-19-related policies in regards to secondary cities of the Global South (Opiyo et al., 2018). This study particularly focused on the markets, which are located within informal settlements in the municipality, including Manyatta, Nyalenda, Obunga, Nyawita, and Bandani.

Study design

This cross-sectional study was implemented from July 10, 2024 to October 15, 2024 utilizing a combination of qualitative data through policy document analysis and primary data generation approaches including key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussion (FGDs), and in-depth interviews (IDIs) to gather primary data from purposively selected participants. The design allowed for a deeper understanding of the nuanced lived experiences of the vendors, highlighting the gendered aspects of COVID-19 policy responses.

Study population, sample, and sampling of procedures

Policy document sampling

Policy documents analyzed in this study were purposively sampled based on the following criteria: (1) policies had to be related to government interventions to control and contain COVID-19 in Kisumu City, either formulated at the national or county level, (2) policies that were implemented within Kisumu County, (3) policies that had impacts on the informal food businesses particularly those run by women. A total of n=4 policies were selected as shown below:

Table 1: ***Selected COVID-19 policy documents for review***

Policy document	**Relevance to the study**
Public Health (COVID-19 General Public Safety) Rules, 2020 (Laws of Kenya, 2020a)	Contained specific health protocols such as physical distancing, wearing of masks, sanitation procedures, COVID-19 screening and prohibition of public gatherings, which impacted business operations for informal food vendors.
Public Order (State Curfew) Order, No. 36 of 2020 (Laws of Kenya, 2020d)	Imposition of a 7:00pm to 5:00am curfew, which affected business-operating hours.
Public Health (COVID-19 Restriction of Movement of Persons and Related Measures) Rules, 2020 (Laws of Kenya, 2020b)	Set restriction of movement of people into and out of an infected area, curtailing the supply of goods, traders and customers into markets.

Public Health (Prevention, Control and Suppression Of COVID-19) Rules, 2020 (Laws of Kenya, 2020c)	Outlined the powers of medical and clinical officers in relation to COVID-19 control and enforcement including search, inspection and decontamination, and closure of premises, with specified penalties for non-compliance. These led to a quarantine, decline in business profitability and closure of some premises where women vendors operated.

Participant sampling

For the primary data collection, participants were purposively sampled, in collaboration with the Pamoja CBO, a local entity that undertakes community-based initiatives in Kisumu. The organisation's well-established networks were critical for identifying the potential participants for the study using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. A total of 80 participants were recruited between July 10, 2024 and October 15, 2024 to participate in this cross-sectional study and they were drawn from the five key markets identified. The participants sampled included: (1) key informant interviews (n=20), (2) focus group discussions (n= 4) 10 women-only participants across four focus groups, and (3) in-depth interview participants (n=20, four men and 16 women).

Participants for key informant interviews were selected based on their expert knowledge, lived and work experience with informal food traders, public and community health, microfinancing, community leadership, and government policy mandates during and after the pandemic.

The eligibility criteria for focus group discussions and in-depth interviews required that the participants (1) had been actively operating food businesses in and had lived in Kisumu City

for over five years, (2) owned or operated informal food businesses during the pandemic, and (3) were actively involved in informal food vending including selling street food, trading in markets, producing food on a small scale, or similar ventures, at the time of the study.

Data collection techniques

Policy document analysis

Policy reviews. A total of four (n=4) policy documents obtained from the Kenya Law Reports website were reviewed. This review was guided by the principles of the IBPA framework. Using the intersectionality lens, in combination with the other guiding principles of the framework, we explored how the intersecting social locations of the women informal food vendors and other sociocultural factors were considered in the policy process. This was intended to explore the gender-responsiveness of the policy interventions and identify gaps within the policies, and their implications to women-led in informal food businesses.

Primary data collection

Primary data was collected from the purposively sampled participants between July 10, 2024 and October 15, 2024 by research assistants trained in qualitative research techniques. The objectives of the study were explained to the participants, and informed consent was sought before the interviews commenced. We developed semi-structured interview guides for KIIs, FGDs and IDIs that were intended to elicit discussions about specific key topics relevant to the experiences of the women during and after implementation of COVID-19 pandemic policies. We explored the gendered considerations in the policies and their engagement in the formulation and implementation of such policies:

Key informant interviews. We conducted 20 face-to-face interviews with key informants, including 11 female and 9 male participants, selected based on their expert knowledge and roles

during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were drawn from the County Government of Kisumu (head of compliance, ward revenue manager, revenue officer, enforcement officer, city manager, and county nursing officer), market leaders, and women group leaders, loans officers from microfinance institutions, community health promoters, public health officers and disease surveillance officers. KIIs were intended to gather in-depth insights into the policy formulation and implementation as well as the implications of policy regulations to women informal food vendors. We also sought to gather information on the interaction of the different entities/organizations and their supports to women informal food vendors during and after the pandemic. The interviews lasted 30-45 minutes each.

Focus group discussions. Forty women were engaged in four, one-on-one focus group discussions (10 participants per focus group), which facilitated a participatory space for the women vendors to reflect as a collective on the impact of COVID-19 policies on their social and economic spheres. This allowed them to share their experiences with the enforcement and compliance of curfews, physical-distancing, movement restrictions, market closures, and the health and safety protocols that were imposed after the implementation of the COVID-19 policies. This allowed for the exploration of the gendered effects of the policies while allowing the participants to articulate their proposed recommendations towards future policy reforms.

In-depth interviews. A purposive sample of 20 participants (16 female and 4 male) were interviewed to understand the impacts of COVID-19-related policies on their business and household responsibilities, caregiving duties, interaction with customers and authority, food supply, physical and mental well-being, food security status, and the coping mechanisms they adopted. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and all the selected individuals participated in the study.

Data analysis

Policy document analysis

The four policies were analyzed guided by the core principles of the IBPA framework including equity, power, intersecting categories, multi-level analysis, reflexivity, time and space, social justice, and diverse knowledges (Hankivsky et al., 2014). This framework was suitable for our study because the concept of intersectionality allowed us to evaluate how the policies considered complex relationships in the context of gender and informal food vending. This included how various social identities of the women informal food vendors like ethnicity, age, marital status, cultural beliefs, socio-economic status, power dynamics, intersected with gender to create unique experiences with the pandemic policies. Utilizing the concept of intersectionality into health policy analysis enables the assessment of complexities that result in health inequity (Hankivsky et al., 2014).

Primary data analysis

KII, FGD and IDI sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim, from *Dholuo* and *Kiswahili* to English by two research assistants conversant with the local languages and with English. The interview transcripts were uploaded onto NVIvo 15, a qualitative data analysis tool, where we coded the transcripts iteratively. The verbatim transcriptions were analyzed both deductively and inductively. Through a deductive process, the data was coded theoretically guided by the seven principles of the IBPA theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hankivsky et al., 2014). Afterwards, the data was then reviewed, and that which did not fit within the seven principles was coded inductively using Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2019) six step thematic analysis process. This prolonged immersion in the data through reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and assigning codes to parts of the transcripts allowed

new themes to emerge from the participant narratives. Key codes were then collated into potential themes and sub-themes, which were then refined to produce the final themes. Participant quotes and excerpts from the policies were used to convey the themes and to accurately present the participant perspectives (Tong et al., 2007).

Quality & Rigor

We adopted different approaches to achieve rigor in this study. First, we used various sources of data including policy document analysis and primary sources of KIIs, FGDs and IDIs to allow for data triangulation to make accurate and informed conclusions about the intended meaning of the participants. We adopted a two-phase inductive-deductive approach during data analysis, which triangulated theoretical and lived experience perspectives. The outcome of policy analysis was triangulated with the findings from primary data analysis and this approach enhanced dependability, credibility, and confirmability of the findings. The use of purposive and snowball sampling techniques also ensured that we selected the most suitable respondents to the study, who had the relevant lived experience and expertise (Johnson et al., 2020) with COVID-19 policies, community leadership, governance and informal food vending. We were then able to obtain varied perceptions and views from the diversity of the participants that enriched our study. We engaged local research assistants through Pamoja CBO who were part of the data collection team and engaged in peer review, peer debrief, and member checking to ensure consistency in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This included verifying information from some of the transcripts as accurate participant accounts.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Review Board (Protocol: Pro00138854) and AMREF Research Ethics Board (ESRC

P1670/2024). Participants were fully informed of the objectives of the study, benefits and likely risks of participation. Participants were encouraged to share information that they felt comfortable sharing. We also obtained written consent from all the participants engaged in the study. Participants were also advised that participation was voluntary, and that they could decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any point. Confidentiality was ensured through encouraging participants not to disclose any personal information, and use of pseudonyms and unique identifiers for the participants. All participants received an honorarium of CAD $10 (KES 1000), to honor their time and contributions to the study.

Findings

In this paper, we reviewed four COVID-19 control and containment measures that were formulated and implemented to prevent the spread of coronavirus among communities. Guided by the IBPA framework (Hankivsky et al., 2012), we identified the gender gaps within the policies and their impacts on the women informal food vendors. We also engaged 80 participants in primary qualitative data collection and analyzed the data using the eight principles of the IBPA framework. The results are organized into socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants, followed by the thematic presentation of the policy document review and qualitative data findings.

Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants: The qualitative study participants comprised 67 (83.8%) women and 13 (16.2%) men food vendors. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 65 years, with a mean age of 40.3 years (SD = 8.5). Over half (52.5%) of the participants had below primary (less than Grade 1-7) or primary-level education (completion of Grade 1-8), with at least one in four (25.3%) possessing tertiary-level education (college, diploma and university). Most participants (61.2%) were married, had at least one child,

and lived with extended family members, suggesting additional care responsibilities during the pandemic. For most of the participants, their main source of income was informal trading, highlighting their dependence on informal food vending for livelihood and household needs sustenance (Table 2).

The study participants conducted various types of food business including selling fresh fruits and vegetables, cereals (maize, sorghum, rice), fresh cooked food, meat products (beef, pork, fish, chicken), a variety of drinks (sodas, fresh juice, preserved juices, milk), and a wide range of food items in kiosks and small hotels. The business structures varied from makeshift platforms, permanent structures, open-air market stalls, to hand-driven carts. Most vendors did not have the prerequisite licences and permits required to operate but paid daily fees to the county government. Additionally, a good number of the participants belonged to market groups, and some were part of informal saving groups (*chamas*), where they accessed credit to support their businesses.

Table 1: ***Demographic Characteristics Of Study Participants***

Characteristics	**All (n=80)** **Frequency (%)**	**KIIs (n=20)** **Frequency (%)**	**IDIs (n=20)** **Frequency (%)**	**4 FGD (n=40)** **Frequency (%)**
Education				
Primary or less	42 (52.5)	2 (10)	14 (70)	26 (65)
Secondary	17 (21.2)	3 (15)	4 (20)	10 (25)
Tertiary	21 (26.3)	15 (75)	2 (10)	4 (10)
Marital status				
Single	10 (12.5)	0	5 (25)	5 (12.5)

Married	49 (61.2)	14 (70)	12 (60)	23 (57.5)
Divorced/separated/widowed	21 (26.3)	6 (30)	3 (15)	12 (30)
Age categories				
18-29 years	8 (10)	0	4 (20)	4 (10)
30-49 years	58 (72.5)	14 (70)	14 (70)	30 (75)
50+ years	14 (17.5)	6 (30)	2 (10)	6 (15)
Gender				
Female	67 (83.8)	11 (55)	16 (80)	40 (100)
Male	13 (16.2)	9 (45)	4 (20)	0

Key Thematic Areas

Our analysis of the COVID-19 control policies and the qualitative data revealed four main themes relevant to understanding the experiences of informal food vendors of the COVID-19 control measures, and gender gaps. The themes identified included: (1) Engagement of informal food vendors in policy decision making; (2) inequities in policy enforcement; (3) policy blind spots to intersecting identities of the informal food vendors; and (4) policy fragmentation. In the subsequent section, we discuss each of these themes in detail and use illustrative participant quotes and policy excerpts:

Lack of engagement of informal food vendors in policy decision making

Our analysis of the policy documents and the qualitative data revealed both perceived exclusion of informal food vendors in policy decision-making processes and structural omission of the vendors' voices and experiences in the decision and policy-making processes. The women informal food vendors felt that they were excluded from decision-making in policy processes.

The health and hygiene protocols of masking, handwashing and sanitizing, curfews, social distancing and market closures were implemented without prior consultation due to time limitations and the urgency to respond to the pandemic. A considerable number of participants interviewed narrated how the policies were "forced" on them, and they incurred additional expenses that they did not anticipate. Some of the vendors articulated that:

"According to me since it [COVID-19] caught us unaware, we were forced and remember more expenses came with it because you must buy a mask and a sanitizer. When your water was used up you must go and buy some so that your clients would wash their hands, so we never did it because of flexibility, but we were forced to them." ***(FGD-01-P3).***

"We were also forced to put on masks and without the masks, we could not come to the market, there were times when we were told to close our shops and stay at home yet most of us depended on business, so it was so hard and us business people of (Okony Welo)." ***(KII-05).***

Women traders were not engaged in policy discussions despite belonging to organized market associations and informal saving groups. These are community groups that are formed by women by contributing a certain amount of money on daily, weekly or monthly basis to a kitty. These serve as money pooling (saving) and lending groups which are vital because most informal traders lack access to or do not meet the criteria for formal lending institutions. Despite being focussed on business growth and recovery, these women groups possess the local knowledge of informal food vending, financial maneuvers, food access, mobility, and caregiving, which could influence and ensure their roles are considered and their needs are met during policy formulation. Majority of the participants mentioned being part of market groups:

"We saw to it that being together is good. Even if you own a business, it will not be enough and there was a need for a group, where we have a merry-go-round and welfare, among other things,

since we also have children that need to go to school as well. Together we can achieve a lot. So, we have such things in our project, merry-go-round, welfare, and table banking." ***(KII-01).***

The lack of participation in policy decision making was evident as many of the women were unprepared to implement some of the policy requirements. For instance, the requirement for 1.5m physical distancing in public spaces affected the carrying capacity of most businesses including the informal food businesses. The vendors had to adjust the sitting and standing spaces in their premises to fit a certain number of customers as required by the social distancing regulations as stated by the KIIs and the vendors themselves.

"First, you know, the informal or the small-scale businesses, you find that somebody even has just a small table and maybe they are able to accommodate even only four people at a time in their business... Because of the COVID-19 regulations, they could not even hold four at a go because of the spacing." ***(KII-15_County Nursing Officer).***

Similarly, the vendors also narrated how the county government of Kisumu increased the market licensing fees during the pandemic without consulting the traders:

"As for the abrupt increase in 500 shillings' payment, they should consult with the public before rushing to a decision. Whenever they want to implement something in the market, they should first come to talk to our leaders … and a decision to be made. There ought to be an agreement." ***(FGD-02).***

In depicting a top-down approach often adopted in the development and enforcement of public health orders, our review of the policy environment during the pandemic revealed systemic barriers to the engagement of informal food vendors, particularly the women-business owners. Technical experts and government officials, with no consultation of women vendors, formulated the policies at the national government level. The policies and regulations were then

implemented at the county level. The excerpt below shows how power structures shaped policy processes:

"The Cabinet Secretary may, by notice in the Gazette and in a newspaper with a wide circulation, put in place such measures as may from time to time become necessary to contain and curb the further spread of COVID-19." ***Public Health Act Public Health (Prevention, Control and Suppression of Covid-19) Rules, 2020, Rule 14.***

Inequities in policy enforcement

Drawing from the IBPA principle of *equity and social justice*, our results indicate how gendered power imbalances were reinforced through the enforcement of curfews and movement restrictions. The most vulnerable groups disproportionately bore the enforcement burden. The enforcement of the rules involved actors from both the national and county governments, which included the police, municipal officers, and public health officers. Women vendors narrated their lived experiences of unfair treatment, extortion, assault and coercion from the enforcement authorities during the pandemic, revealing unequal power relations. The participants described how the police asked for bribes without which one would be arrested as narrated by one of the participants:

"Concerning the police too, there were times when I used to go to the lake early in the morning, the police caught me on the road, and they arrested me and ordered me to pay five thousand shillings (5 dollars). I told them to take me to court, but they insisted that they need money, but I just told them to take me to the court of which when they did, I was only fined five hundred shillings (5 dollars)." ***(1D1-09)***

Women vendors recounted how they faced abuse at their places of businesses from the municipal officers and the police, who ate, confiscated or destroyed their food items. Some women reported being physically abused from trying to escape arrest, while others shared how the police took food items from their stalls without paying.

*"At that time, I would make sales as someone would come and make a purchase in a hurry when police would find that you have food items, they consume and on that particular day that they ate my pineapples, they also took carrier bags which I sold and carried some pineapples in them."**(IDI-10).***

Additionally, there was strict enforcement of the rules using a top-down approach, with the penalties stipulated within the policies being very punitive. Coupled with the labelling of such businesses as being informal, the selling environment became quite a contested space as the cost on non-compliance was too harsh for the women vendors who undertake these businesses for their daily livelihood and as a means to contribute to the urban household food security.

*"Police kept throwing teargas at us and there was I day I fell in a terrace that was flooded since it had rained and the water swept away my fingerlings together with the cash that I had wrapped in a polythene paper. It was not easy but too hard." **(FGD-02).***

The punitive nature of the control measures and the regulations are also reflected within the regulations as the fines could push small-scale businesses such as the food vendors out of business.

*"Except as otherwise provided in these Rules, any person who contravenes the provisions of these Rules shall be liable to a fine not exceeding twenty thousand shillings (200 dollars), or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months, or to both." — **Public Health Act Public Health (Prevention, Control and Suppression of Covid-19) Rules, 2020, Rule 15 (1).***

Policy blind spots to intersecting identities of the informal food vendors

Drawing from the IBPA principle of *intersecting categories*, which posits that human experiences are shaped by multiple overlapping factors and that effective policies should focus on the whole (Hankivsky et al., 2012), our analysis of the pandemic control measures reveal some unique experiences to the women informal food vendors. We established that the policy measures put in place did not consider the different social identities of women informal vendors, who varied by age, socio-economic status, level of education, ability, marital status, cultural orientation and others. The policies were framed in a manner that assumed informal food traders were a homogenous group as depicted in the policy language and in the experiences of the informal food vendors.

"Every person who is in a Public Place shall—(b) wear a facemask that covers the mouth and nose."— ***The Public Health (Covid-19 General Public Safety) Rules, 2020, Rule 3 (1) (b).***

"Every organisation, business entity or any other trader, whether in an open-air market, enclosed premises or any public place shall—(a) provide a handwashing station with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer approved by the Kenya Bureau of Standards for use at the entrance of its premises." ***The Public Health (Covid-19 General Public Safety) Rules, 2020, Rule 3(2) (a).***

In the case of health safety protocols like masking and handwashing, these interventions assumed that people across genders had equal physical and economic abilities to afford compliance. Women gave an account of how they had to purchase new masks, water and sanitizing products for each business day without support from the government. The policies ignored the realities of financial struggles among informal women vendors who also faced few

working hours and disrupted business activities that reduced their ability to operate the businesses optimally and maximize the income. The women vendors narrated that:

"We were forced to ... buy hand-washing items so it forced us leaders to buy water tanks for people to wash their hands when they came to shop/market. We were also forced to put on masks and without the masks, we could not come to the market, there were times when we were told to close down our shops and stay at home yet most of us depended on business, ..it was hard." ***(KII-05).***

Additionally, the policy measures did not consider the prevailing social aspects within households. A considerable number of women vendors interviewed indicated that they were solely responsible for running their households. The loss of businesses profitability impeded their ability to provide their daily basic needs and for their households. From the IBPA perspective, gender intersected with other social locations such as marital status, informality, ability, and economic status to compound the inequalities faced by the informal women vendors as shown in the KII narrative below:

"...either they are selling greens, they are selling tomatoes, they are selling the onions, some of them are doing the chips/fries business, some of them are doing the fish business... So, when COVID came about, all these businesses ceased. You find these are young women, they are mostly eighteen to twenty-four years of age, pregnant, parenting, and they did not have any other source of income. ...They live hand to mouth through these businesses." ***(KII-11).***

Our analysis revealed that the prevailing societal norms in our study area assigned women household and caregiving roles, with the men offering minimal support. However, the policies did not account for the extra responsibilities borne by women vendors. The women vendors indicated that the burden of care was even worse for those who were single and/or

unmarried and had children and sick family members to take care of. In that case, most women reported that they had to slow down their businesses and adjust their working hours to cater for the extra-unpaid domestic responsibilities.

"During corona for someone like me who have kids and had no one to help, it forced me to wake up early ...to wash and clean the house in the morning. ...There are things that I have in the house like chicken and other domestic animals that I have to take care of as well." ***(IDI-09).***

Additionally, climate-related events compounded the risks for the women in the informal food sector during the pandemic. For instance, in Kisumu, the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with climate risk of flooding, with vendors losing their goods amidst the lockdowns, adding to their psychological burden.

"So, when water got into my house, I recently had taken a loan and stocked some items, water then got into my house with the items in there; wheat flour, charcoal in bulk. Flood got in when I was not around and it even covered the seats." ***(FGD-01).***

Policy fragmentation

The IBPA principle of *power* and *multi-level analysis* was applied here to analyze how governance played a role in the policy processes and their implications to the population of study. Policies developed at the national government level in Nairobi were required to be implemented in counties. From our analysis, we established that the county government of Kisumu implemented directives for the closure of markets while the national police service officers enforced curfews. There were inconsistencies in the enforcement process, with the county enforcement officers and the police separately enforcing the directives.

"During COVID, the police were enforcing the law, and the traders were not coping with them because of things like curfew. They felt like they were being denied a right and means of generating their earnings." ***(KII-03).***

The overlapping policy interventions created an avenue for extortion and harassment of the women vendors:

"The police too knew that when they go to a certain place, traders did not have a license so they would come and harass me a bit and I would be forced to give them something for them to leave because you also have your target." ***(KII-06).***

Additionally, the curfew rules required business not to operate after 7:00 PM, while the restriction of movement rules allowed for the transportation of food commodities outside curfew hours.

"This Order shall apply during the hours of darkness between seven o'clock in the evening and five o'clock in the morning with effect from the 27th of March 2020 and shall remain in effect for a period of thirty days thereof." ***The Public Order (State Curfew) Order, 2020, Order 3***

"During the restriction period, there shall be no movement of persons into or out of an infected area, either by road, rail or air, unless the movement into or out of an infected area is for the purpose of — (a) transportation of food and farm produce for commercial purposes including rice, beans, maize, potatoes, cassava, cabbages, kale, spinach, tomatoes, onions, bananas, eggs." ***Public Health (Covid-19 Restriction of Movement of Persons and Related Measures) Rules, 2020, Rule 4 (1) (a).***

Discussion

The influence of overlapping social identities on the experiences of women vendors to COVID-19 policies has been explored in this study using an intersectional lens. The findings

provide important insights into the experiences of women informal food vendors during the COVID-19 pandemic in secondary cities. Even though the policy measures were created to protect the population from the spread of the coronavirus, they had differential gender impacts in informal food businesses.

Our analysis of the data uncovered that women informal food vendors in Kisumu City did not participate in the formulation and implementation of the COVID-19 policies. This demonstrates how existing power relations shaped the exclusion of women vendors in policy processes. Women vendor narratives alluded to this exclusion, while using the term "forced on us" to show non-participation and lack of prior information of COVID-19 policy processes. This contravenes the provision of the Constitution of Kenya Article 174 (c) which gives powers of self-governance to the people to enhance their participation in making decisions of issues affecting them (Kenya., 2013). Previous research has shown that political empowerment of women and their participation in COVID-19 policy processes produced better gendered outcomes in the health and economic spheres (Abras et al., 2021; Huang & Lin, 2022). However, in the case of Kisumu City and many other cities in the Global South, such as Rangpur in Bangladesh and Rusizi and Rubavu in Rwanda (Barth-Jaeggi et al., 2023), policy formulation during the pandemic was undertaken at the national government through the Ministry of Health and in collaboration with technical experts and government officials. From our qualitative research, the policy texts did not allude to any community engagement mechanisms and gender considerations. Neither was there any kind of feedback channels provided for the public, and especially women, specifically those in informal food vending. Other secondary cities in Kenya have demonstrated similar experiences to Kisumu. For example, in Nakuru City, traders in the

urban informal economy have faced exclusion from formal policy processes hence impacting their livelihoods (Tevera, 2023).

We identified several key barriers to the limited engagement of women in COVID-19 policy process in Kisumu, such as time limitations and the urgency of response to the crisis, unavailability of information on the need to participate, and the use of technocrats specialized in health, governance and policy matters. Our findings align with previous work by Martínez and Young (2022), who noted that the use of technical expertise in policy development by governments limited the participation of street vendors in decision-making. Another barrier to participation was the societal culture of patriarchy that impeded women participation in politics and key decision-making roles. Although Kenya's constitution stipulates an affirmative action and creates the position of County Women Representatives, men often dominate the policy discussion tables and community level leadership (Kenyatta, 2023). These structural barriers have consistently fostered women exclusion and gender hierarchies in policy formulation and decision-making both at different levels of government and at societal level (Kenyatta, 2023). It is worth noting that this exclusion affected the responsiveness of the policies to the lived realities of women informal food vendors, worsening the existing social and economic inequalities (Women. & Work., 2023).

Furthermore, our study findings indicate that power dynamics influenced the enforcement of the COVID-19 policies. In that regard, women vendors expressed their experiences with assault, harassment and extortion by law enforcement officers. Similarly, (Solymári et al., 2022) indicated that the brutality that came with COVID-19 policy enforcement in Kenyan slum dwellings infringed on fundamental human rights. This comes against the backdrop of another study conducted in Kisumu City, where outcomes indicated that the county enforcement team

was male-dominated, contributing to a biased enforcement of regulations (Loo et al., 2021). The male-dominance in enforcement predisposes women to violence and physical abuse at their places of business, which is a health and safety risk.

Similarly, in Nairobi, Wandera and colleagues (2023) indicated that women informal workers faced physical abuse from police and municipal officers during curfew implementation. This shows a commonality of the COVID-19 policy experiences by women vendors in major cities and secondary cities. This exposure to harassment and assault curtailed women's agency in undertaking urban household food provision and fending for their families during a pandemic. Our study also provides evidence of the lack of an intersectional approach in the design of the COVID-19 policies. As in the case of the City of Cali, Colombia (Martínez & Young, 2022), informal traders in Kisumu are a heterogeneous group, of different genders, ages, socio-economic status, cultural backgrounds, religion, marital status, abilities, sexual orientation, among others. However, the policies employed a blanket policy approach and failed to consider the different settings and intersecting social identities of the vendors. This was found by Dutta et al. (Dutta et al., 2021) in India, where COVID-19 lockdown policies adopted a one-size-fits-all approach and overlooked existing gender differences.

Other findings suggest that there is need to enhance social protection mechanisms for women in the informal sector to safeguard them from gender-related exploitations (Wandera et al., 2023). The use of excessive force to enforce policies reveal how structures of power impacted the gendered experiences of women informal food vendors. Our research therefore corroborates the findings of Kiaka and colleagues (Kiaka et al., 2021) who highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified bribery and harassment in cities in the Global South.

The intersecting social locations of the women food vendors in our study highlight the diversity in ways that our study participants experienced the pandemic. The policy interventions did not consider the contextual factors such as the prevailing socio-economic situation in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), and the pre-existing inequalities faced by women informal workers. Women vendors were already facing compounded challenges, including the precarity of their businesses and work, gender-based violence, discrimination, economic marginalization, and sexual harassment before the occurrence COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of gendered considerations in the policies worsened the prevailing inequalities creating an additional burden to the women vendors and influencing their resilience post-pandemic.

Women faced societal expectations to take up extra caregiving roles at the expense of paid work. Notably, findings from this study raise key questions regarding the value of unpaid household and caregiving duties undertaken by women. According to the United Nation's Development Program-UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, fewer than a third of the COVID-19 policy measures implemented in Kenya applied a gender perspective, with none accounting for unpaid care work (UN Women, 2021, 2022). Our findings extend this work by uncovering the experiences of women to the gender gaps in policies in localized settings of secondary cities.

This study established that governance structures in policy formulation and implementation continued to worsen the existing gender inequalities during and post pandemic. The policies were formulated at the national government level and implemented at the county and city levels. This did not take into account the lived realities that existed in the local level of governance. In the context of IBPA principle of equity, this scenario reveals how power hierarchies shape policy decision making. We noted that women were organized into groups at

the market level for collective bargaining, psychosocial and mental wellbeing, and networks for financial support. However, the representatives of these women groups were not engaged in policy processes. In their own words, the women vendors felt that the policies were "forced" on them, and they incurred additional costs in complying while also experiencing reduced business profitability. The cost of purchasing masks and sanitizers, cost of licensing and permits, compounded with the punitive penalties and fines for non-compliance further strained the women vendors economically.

Additionally, the COVID-19 policy measures added to the long list of regulations that the traders needed to comply with, and this had the possibility to cause "compliance fatigue" among the vendors, considering the strict enforcement and use of force by the enforcement officers. This is congruent to the findings of Martínez and Young (2022) that revealed that the exclusion of vulnerable groups in policy formulation and implementation hinders the effectiveness of policies and exacerbates marginalization. This evidence could benefit future policy decisions regarding the meaningful engagement of all stakeholders for inclusive and more equitable policy options, particularly during emergencies. As Cattapan et al., (2020) states, collaborative policy development should be guided by the principle of "nothing for us without us", which fosters the meaningful participation of vulnerable groups in policy design and implementation.

Conclusion

This study advances the application of the IBPA framework in secondary cities of the Global South, specifically in the African context. We highlight how overlapping social identities influenced how women informal food vendors experienced the pandemic. This by centering their lived experiences integrated with the perspectives of key experts. Essentially, the key findings demonstrate exclusion of women informal food vendors in policymaking processes. The gender

gaps in policy show the value of utilizing participatory strategies and designing gender responsive and inclusive policies. The current study recommends the balancing of urgency with inclusive and equitable engagement of women by governments in public policy decision-making in times of emergencies. This enhances the gender responsiveness of the interventions and minimizes inequalities (Wenham et al., 2020). Governments should ensure meaningful engagement and participation of informal food vendors in the design and implementation, through existing market associations and women groups. Policy interventions should be developed with the involvement of marginalized groups to account for the existing diversities and respond to their unique needs. In the case of women informal food vendors, future emergency policies should be designed guided by a gendered lens to recognize their unique roles and needs and ensure they continue to play the vital role of urban household food security.

This study had several limitations. The choice of a cross-sectional study design meant that data was collected at a specific point in time, between July 10, 2024, and October 15, 2024. This was several years after the COVID-19 pandemic, and had a potential to introduce recall bias, as participants recollections could omit important details that could enrich the study. To mitigate this bias, we triangulated data from different sources such as policy document analysis, key informant interviews, in depth interviews and focus group discussions. Additionally, this study only focused on one county in Kenya, and this limits the generalizability to other counties and sectors of the economy. Additionally, this study focused specifically on the informal food economy limiting the generalizability of the findings to other sectors of the informal economy. However, it is important to note that this study makes important contributions to research on gendered dynamics of the informal food sector in secondary cities of the Global South.

CHAPTER 4: Paper 2: An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) Of Post-Pandemic Recovery Policies: Experiences Of Women Informal Food Vendors In Kisumu City, Kenya

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Abstract

Introduction: The informal food sector in Kisumu City, largely run by women vendors, plays a crucial role in the urban food system. However, these female-led businesses faced disproportionate risks stemming from COVID-19-related policies, exacerbating gendered vulnerabilities. This paper explores the gender gaps of post-pandemic recovery strategies and their implications for resilience, recovery, and sustainability of women-led informal food businesses. **Methods**: This cross-sectional study was guided by the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework. In collaboration with the Pamoja Community-Based Organization, we employed qualitative methods grounded in community-based participatory approaches. Data were collected through key informant interviews (n = 20), focus group discussions (n = 4), in-depth interviews (n = 20), and a review of policy documents (n = 2). Data was analyzed guided by the eight principles of the IBPA framework alongside Braun and Clarke's six-phased thematic analysis approach. **Results:** Findings indicated that power dynamics in the formulation of the post-pandemic policies and top-down implementation approaches excluded women vendors from meaningfully participating in policy processes. For example, female vendors were excluded in the recovery priorities as the strategies adopted had limited to no targeted gender-responsive interventions. As such, women vendors faced several challenges during recovery, including limited government support, barriers in accessing credit facilities, heightened household and unpaid care work, gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and insecurity. The female vendors employed both individual agency and collective action to facilitate recovery. **Discussion**: Gender-responsive COVID-19 policies were critical to addressing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women-led informal food businesses. Moving forward, a comprehensive understanding of existing gender inequalities is crucial for

designing post-pandemic strategies that are gender-inclusive and promote equitable recovery. Such an approach would enhance women vendors' resilience to emergencies and their contribution to urban household food security.

Key words: COVID-19; Post-pandemic recovery; Policies; Gender; Intersectionality; Food security; Informality

Introduction

Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic had severe social and economic impacts (WIEGO, 2021). In the Global South, the effects were not different (Alon, Doepke, et al., 2020; Mondal & Chakraborty, 2022; WIEGO, 2023). An International Labour Organization assessment suggests that the pandemic led to the loss of about 2 billion jobs in the informal economy and disruption of small businesses (ILO., 2020). In response to the pandemic, governments enacted various policies intended to control the spread of coronavirus (Mondal & Chakraborty, 2022; Mwakisha et al., 2024; Uzhenyu, 2020). Some of the policy interventions included lockdowns and curfews, which resulted in restricted movement of people and goods, and in turn led to social and economic costs for the informal food sector (Mwakisha et al., 2024; Uzhenyu, 2020).

The Food & Agriculture Organization (2007, p. 3) of the United Nations defines the informal food sector as "including small producers, manufacturing enterprises, traders and service providers, involved in legal as well as unrecognized activities related to food". The informal food sector suffered severe consequences from the pandemic (Oliveira & David, 2024; Pinchoff et al., 2021), largely due to the absence of social protection services such as business insurance, medical benefits, leave of absence from work, compensation, pension benefits, and maternity leave (Ghani & Jan, 2025; Suubi et al., 2022). However, the contribution of informal food businesses to urban household food security cannot be underestimated (Crush & Young, 2019; Nickanor et al., 2019).

Various studies conducted within cities of the Global South including Nairobi, Ahmedabad, Windhoek, Lima, and Cape Town, demonstrates a heavy reliance on the informal food sector for food supply by low-income urban households (Donga & Chimucheka, 2024; Nickanor et al., 2019; Owuor, 2020; Roever & Skinner, 2016; Skinner et al., 2021). Similarly,

the informal economy in sub-Saharan Africa contributes significantly to gross domestic product and employment creation, with women being overrepresented, especially in the food sector (Gebremichael et al., 2023). Consistent with trends in the Global South, the informal food sector in Kenya is female dominated, and women-led businesses continue to receive attention due to their valuable contribution to household food security (Crush & Young, 2019; Onyango et al., 2023; Opiyo et al., 2018). Studies have shown that despite the sector's crucial role in food provision, women-led businesses received limited government support to aid recovery from the pandemic (Ezimma et al., 2020; Ghani & Jan, 2025).

To support economic recovery during and after the pandemic, several strategies were implemented by governments (Ghani & Jan, 2025; Meru & Kinoti, 2022; Mhlana et al., 2023; Romero et al., 2025). In Kenya for instance, policies, programs, monetary and fiscal measures including credit guarantee schemes, cash transfers, tax relief interventions, and social protection services were utilized (Afifu et al., 2021; County Government of Kisumu, 2020; Republic of Kenya, 2020; Roever & Skinner, 2016). In particular, the National Treasury developed the Post COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022, which entrenched measures to mitigate the adverse socioeconomic effects of the pandemic and re-position the economy on a steady and sustainable growth trajectory (Republic of Kenya, 2020). Guided by the post-pandemic recovery strategy, the government launched an 8-point COVID-19 economic stimulus package of Ksh. 6.9 billion (US$ 537 million) to shield communities and businesses from recession and promote economic recovery (Meru & Kinoti, 2022).

At the County government levels, there were additional recovery strategies. Kisumu County, for instance, developed the Kisumu County COVID-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering and Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 (County Government of Kisumu, 2020).

This policy was aimed at programs and interventions to support business recovery after the pandemic through provision of grants, cash transfers, supporting access to credit, and stimulating private sector support. The intention of implementing the policies were to address social and economic impacts of the pandemic, however, there is limited knowledge of the extent to which these recovery strategies entrenched gender considerations.

Existing literature on the post-pandemic recovery for women-led businesses has focused primarily on the formal sector, women street vendors of non-food items, and homebased and domestic workers, with limited attention on the informal food sector (Afifu et al., 2021; Donga & Chimucheka, 2024; Ismail et al., 2022; Meru & Kinoti, 2021; E. O. Onyango et al., 2021; Pinchoff et al., 2021; Skinner et al., 2021; Suubi et al., 2022; Wandera et al., 2023). A gender assessment report conducted in all the 47 counties in Kenya during the pandemic showed that more women than men lost their businesses worsening their economic insecurity (UNFPA Kenya et al., 2020). Previous studies conducted in Bangladesh, Kenya and Thailand after the pandemic revealed that national recovery plans failed to outline specific interventions to support women in the informal economy (Mhlana et al., 2023). Research has also shown that the financial support policies implemented by African governments during and post-COVID-19 to cushion businesses ignored the entrenched gender inequalities and intersecting identities that limited women-led business growth and recovery (Ukala et al., 2020). Such policies reinforced the marginalization agenda of governments in cities in the global South which has consistently depicted the informal sector as being disorderly, undesirable, and disruptive of urban life (Bandauko & Arku, 2025)

Despite increasing evidence of the pandemic's uneven impacts and recovery challenges faced by women informal food vendors, there is still limited understanding of the gender gaps within post-pandemic recovery strategies in secondary cities. In this study, we sought to fill this

knowledge gap by undertaking a gendered analysis of Kenya's post-pandemic recovery strategies, with a focus on the experiences of women-led informal food businesses in Kisumu City, the administrative headquarters of Kisumu County. Using the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework (Hankivsky et al., 2012), this study examined the gender-responsiveness of post-pandemic recovery strategies, highlighting gender gaps and their implications for the resilience and recovery of women-led informal food businesses. Utilizing an intersectional lens, this study addresses a key research gap by providing context-specific COVID-19 policy analyses that demonstrates how overlapping social identities shaped women informal vendors' participation in policy processes, access to resources and capacity to bounce back after the pandemic. This intersectionality-basis analysis provides evidence for the need for gender-inclusive policy responses that safeguard women-led informal food businesses in future emergencies while preserving their vital role in urban household food security. By examining the gaps in post-pandemic recovery policies, this study contributes to the literature on how socio-cultural identity gaps in policies impact women in the informal sector and the food security of urban households in secondary cities.

Methodology and Methods

Theoretical framework: Intersectionality Based Policy Analysis (IBPA)

This study draws on the eight guiding principles of the IBPA framework (Hankivsky et al., 2012; Hankivsky et al., 2014)to provide a comprehensive analysis of post-pandemic recovery strategies for women informal food vendors in Kisumu City. The IBPA framework is relevant to our study given its regular application in policy analysis that aim to explore the gender-responsiveness of new and/or existing policy interventions. Due to its grounding in intersectionality, the framework allows for an understanding of the engagement of populations,

issues of power and dynamics, and the intersecting identities that may impact how policy measures are experienced differently in populations.

The intersectional lens applied to this study goes beyond examining how women were disproportionately affected by pandemic policies to highlight the role of power structures influenced policy decisions and resulted in marginalization. Identifying the intersecting social locations stretches our analysis to examine gendered and uneven im-pacts women informal food vendors had with the pandemic and beyond. The IBPA principles of power, multi-level analysis, diverse knowledge, intersecting categories, equity, reflexivity, social justice, and time and space (Hankivsky et al., 2014) to make sense of the data. Applying the intersectionality lens allowed for the exploration of women informal food vendors experiences of discrimination based on their gender, marital status, level of education, class, ability, and economic status. In particular, how these intersecting identities shaped their lived experiences of the pandemic and revealed gender gaps within post-pandemic recovery strategies.

The principle of intersecting categories allowed for the exploration of how various overlapping social identities of the women food vendors shaped their post-COVID-19 recovery pathways. Using the principles of power and equity, we explored how systemic inequalities such as lack of social protection schemes and exclusion from policy processes influenced recovery processes for women vendors. We then applied the principle of diverse knowledge, combining women lived experiences with insights from experts in various fields of governance, health, finance, private sector, and community leadership with policy highlights for an informed analysis. Social justice was considered by exploring whether the recovery strategies accounted for existing inequalities faced by the women vendors. Multi-level analysis enabled comparison of policies from the national and county levels of government foregrounding gender gaps in their

responsiveness. This was undertaken while acknowledging the evolution of strategies adopted during the post-pandemic period as per the principle of time and space. The researchers remained reflexive throughout the analysis process, acknowledging the influence of their positionalities, lived experiences, perspectives and backgrounds on the study design, interaction with participants, data analysis, and interpretation of findings.

Study context

Kisumu City is located within the larger county of Kisumu, one of Kenya's 47 counties and located between Latitude: 0° 14' 60.00" N and Longitude: 34° 54' 59.99" E, in the western part of the country (See Figure 1). According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) (KNBS, 2020), Kisumu City had a population of approximately 397,957 people with the larger metropolitan area – that is Kisumu County having over 1,155,000 people that also rely on the city's informal economy. Kisumu City is characterized by sprawling urban informal settlements where more than half of the urban population resides (Mwangangi et al., 2023). The informal settlements in the city include Obunga, Manyatta, Nyalenda A, Nyalenda B, Manyatta A, Manyatta B, Bandani and Nyawita (Simiyu et al., 2019). These settlements are densely populated, at 6,686 people per sq. km (Simiyu et al., 2019b). The population living in the informal settlement areas face congestion, climate-induced floods, dilapidated housing conditions, poor hygiene and sanitation, and inadequate water and sewer infrastructure leading to an increased risk of the spread of infectious diseases (Mwangangi et al., 2023; Othoo et al., 2020; Simiyu et al., 2019).

Kisumu City is an important economic hub due to its location along the shores of Lake Victoria (Opiyo et al., 2018). The economy is largely trade-driven, with a dominant informal sector that comprises of varied small-scale enterprises predominantly food businesses (Hayombe

et al., 2018; Opiyo et al., 2018). Approximately 60% of the informal business operators in Kisumu city are female (KNBS, 2021), most of whom identify as either from the Luo or Luhya speaking communities in western Kenya. These communities are known to be patriarchal where females (women and girls) are less valued and with well-defined gender roles relegating house chores and care work to the females. The care burden negatively impacted women's business performance especially during the pandemic (Crush & Tawodzera, 2024; Onyango et al., 2023), affecting their health outcomes and financial resilience (Adeola, 2022). The study area provides an ideal space to research gendered dynamics of post-pandemic recovery strategies for women in informal food vending.



Figure 1: Map of the study area showing five urban informal settlements of Nyalenda A, Nyalenda B, Manyatta A and Manyatta B and Obunga, and the two peri-urban settlements of Kogony and Korando.

This research employed a cross-sectional study design guided by the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis framework. A cross-sectional study design was deemed appropriate to critically review the post-pandemic recovery policies and to explore and interpret experiences of women food vendors of the recovery strategies and to identify potential gaps in the policies with reference to the unique needs of the women food vendors in secondary cities. We conducted a review of post-pandemic policies and collected primary qualitative data. The 2 main post-pandemic recovery policies that were formulated and implemented in Kisumu City and that were critically reviewed in this study include - Kenya's National Post Covid-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022 and the Kisumu County COVID-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering and Recovery Strategy. The qualitative data included key informant interviews (KIIs) with experts and market leaders, focus group discussion (FGDs) with female vendors, and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with both female and male participants. This design was deemed appropriate for exploring and interpreting gendered perspectives on the post-pandemic recovery strategies adopted by women food vendors as well as identifying gaps in post-pandemic recovery policies.

Sampling procedures

Policy document sampling

A total of two policy documents (n=2) were purposefully selected for review; Kenya's National Post Covid-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022, and the Kisumu County COVID-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering and Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 (County Government of Kisumu, 2020; Republic of Kenya, 2020). These documents were chosen because (1) they outlined measures to mitigate adverse socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) they addressed socio-economic recovery for the informal sector; and (3) they

represented both tiers of government (national and county levels), enabling a multi-level analysis in line with the IBPA principles.

Participant sampling

The study used purposeful and snowball sampling techniques to select participants to share their experiences in KIIs, FGDs and IDIs. We focused on markets within the informal settlements of Kisumu City, including Manyatta, Nyalenda, Obunga, Nyawita, and Bandani. These were selected due to their primary role of food supply to urban households and the diversity of informal food businesses. These settlements were also picked due to the high concentration of markets and informal food businesses, influenced by the high population density (Simiyu et al., 2019). Participants were recruited through verbal engagements and telephone conversations.

Key Informant Interviews. The inclusion criteria for KII participants were as follows: (1) have lived and working experience with informal food vendors at various levels and not limited to community leadership, market representation, government mandates, public and community health, non-governmental organization, community based support, and private sector support; (2) actively engaged in informal food vending during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and possess knowledge of their varied challenges post-pandemic; and (3) consent to a one-on-one interview lasting 30-60 minutes. Unwilling participants and those who did not meet the criteria were excluded.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Participants selected to participate in-depth interviews and focus group discussions met the following criteria: (1) had been actively operating food businesses in and had lived in Kisumu City for over five years; (2) were owners or operators of informal food businesses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) had lived

experiences in adapting recovery strategies as a result of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; and (4) willing to consent to participate in a group discussion. Participants who did not operate their businesses before the pandemic and those unwilling to give consent were excluded.

Data collection procedures

Policy document review

Kenya's National Post Covid-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022 (national level), and the Kisumu County COVID-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering and Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 (county level) were retrieved from the Kenya Law Reports portal and Kisumu County government website, respectively (County Government of Kisumu, 2020; Republic of Kenya, 2020). The review aimed to assess whether the strategies adopted gender-sensitive measures to support women informal food vendors' recovery from the pandemic. The national strategy was examined to understand broad government measures to safeguard the informal sector from pandemic impacts, particularly interventions benefiting vulnerable groups such as fiscal measures, access to finance, and economic stimulus programs. The county strategy was reviewed to identify local interventions, including policy and institutional reforms, aimed at mitigating socio-economic impacts, supporting informal sector business recovery, and spurring post-pandemic economic growth. This multi-level analysis enabled an exploration of the whether national and county policies captured the lived realities of individuals and community groups, highlighting gender gaps and disparities between policy provisions and on-the-ground experiences.

Primary data collection procedures

Two research assistants trained in qualitative data techniques and fluent in English, Kiswahili and *Dholuo* engaged in the recruitment of participants, information session with the

potential participants, and in the facilitation of primary data collections through face-to-face inter-views. The choice of language used was determined by participants' preferences with most of the key informants preferring English. A majority of the IDIs and FGDs participants preferring either Swahili and/or Luo. All interviews and the group discussions were audio recorded with the informed consent of the participants with those conducted in English transcribed verbatim and the ones in Swahili and Luo, translated to English as they were being transcribed. The transcripts were then reviewed by the research assistants and the authors (PO, and EO) who are fluent in Luo, Swahili, and English to ensure accuracy of the translation and the transcription.

To facilitate data collection, we developed semi-structured interview guidelines for KIIs, FGDs and IDIs with a focus on the experiences of the women informal food vendors of the post-pandemic recovery strategies. We probed for the impacts of the pandemic on their businesses, as well as their perspectives on the challenges of post-pandemic recovery, and prospects on the future of their businesses. The partici-pants were asked to describe the role of governance mechanisms including policies and institutions, as well as private sector and social networks that they relied upon, and how these played a role in recovery from the pandemic. Participants gave recom-mendations of the best practise for business recovery from the pandemic. Data collec-tion was undertaken until saturation – that is the point at which there were no new themes emerging from the interviews. Throughout the research process, the researchers remained reflexive and the research assistants while in the field also kept a journal and gather fieldnotes that were included in the data analysis. After every interview, the research assistants also summarized the key highlights from each interview.

Key informant interviews. (n=20) included experts in compliance, enforcement, revenue collection, municipal and city management at the County Government of Kisumu, disease surveillance, ministry of health, public health, microfinance, women group leadership, and market administration. Based on the expertise of the government officials from various departments, we obtained insider information regarding governance and the formulation and implementation of the policies, as well the rationale for post-pandemic recovery strategies. Interviewing market and women group leaders explored the gap between the interventions stipulated within the policies and the actual support that the vendors obtained from the policy interventions. Participants engaged in one-on-one to-interviews which lasted for approximately 30-60 minutes per individual.

Focus group discussions. (n=4). We conducted four focus group discussions, each comprising 10 informal women food vendors. The FGDs provided a platform for participants to share the collective and individual mechanisms that shaped their recovery from the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment of the FGDs participants was facilitated by the market women group leaders who organized the information session with the potential participants. The women informal food vendors who met the inclusion criteria and gave informed con-sent were then invited to a centralized location close to the various markets with most of the group discussions being held in the nearby community halls close to the markets. The FGDs provided a platform for participants to share the collective and individual mechanisms that shaped their recovery from the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interactive discussions elicited narratives on how women vendors leveraged on formal and informal social support networks such as financial institutions and microfinance agencies,

informal saving groups, market associations, as well as government and private sector entities, to shape recovery.

In-depth interviews. (n=20) participants were both male and female informal food vendors who operated their food businesses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment of these par-ticipant was facilitated through our community partner and by the market leaders in each of the five markets. The market leader invited the potential participants to an in-formation session and interested vendors who gave informed consent and were inter-ested participating in a one-on-one interview were invited to a face-to-face interview at a convenient place of their choice. Participants were interviewed to obtain first-hand information regarding individual perspectives of recovering from the negative effects of the pandemic and narratives on support mechanisms that existed (or lack thereof). The participants gave personal experiences of with the post-pandemic recovery interventions, the barriers to accessing government support, and the role of the informal social support networks in the recovery and resilience of the informal food vendors. These set the tone for the adoption of coping and recovery strategies. We were able to document the gender-specific challenges that they faced in the recovery process.

Data analysis

All primary qualitative data (KIIs, IDIs, and FGDs) were audio recorded with the consent of the participants to allow for verbatim translation and transcription. Most of the KIIs were conducted in English and audio recorded to allow for verbatim transcription. The IDIs and FGDs were mostly conducted in Swahili and/or Luo and were audio recorded to allow for translation and transcription. The translation and transcriptions were conducted by the research assistants who facilitated the interviews and the discussions and were reviewed by authors PO and EO who are fluent in English, Swahili, and Luo. The data – transcripts, the policy documents, and field

notes were then imported into NVivo QSR International, version 15 for analysis, coding, and management.

Policy document analysis

The analysis of policy documents was guided by the 8 principles of the IBPA framework alongside Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006b). This involved reading and re-reading the two policies documents to familiarize with the key provisions including the objectives, key pillars to the recovery strategies, and support services to the informal food sector. Using both deductive (informed by the IBPA framework) and inductive analysis, we developed a thematic code set, allowing for predefined and new themes to emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2025). The predefined themes were based on the IBPA principles of power and power dynamics, intersecting identities, social justice, equity, multi-level analysis, reflexivity, and time and space. The theme codes, transcripts, field notes, interview summaries, and the post-pandemic recovery policies were then imported and organized in NVivo QSR International, version 15, and the data code line by line. To validate the theme code sets and the coding and analysis process, an independent peer researcher per-formed an independent analysis and cross-checked the analysis for consistency and accuracy. This process of peer checking allowed for multiple interpretations and understanding of the experiences of women informal food vendors and the identification of gaps within the policy documents. To ensure rigour and trustworthiness of the evidence, we triangulated evidence from the policy documents, the narratives from the key informants, and the informal food vendors.

Data analysis procedures for KIIs, IDIs, and FGDs

Following a similar process as with the analysis of the policy documents, the primary data collected through KIIs, FGDs, and IDIs was analyzed guided by the IBPA

framework and using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis approach. The research team engaged immersed themselves in the data through reading and re-reading transcripts and listened to the audio recording to familiarize themselves with the data, generated the initial codes through deductive and inductive analysis, searched and named the themes within the data, and developed a theme code set. The theme codes, transcripts, field notes, and interview summaries, together with the post-pandemic recovery policies were then imported and organized in NVivo QSR International, version 15, and the data code line by line. To ensure rigour, we engaged in peer checking of the theme codes and the line-byline coding of the qualitative data. The codes and the evidence from the interviews and the group discussions were also triangulated with the data from the policy document reviews. Integrating outcomes of policy review with actual participant perspectives ensured credibility of our findings.

Rigor

To enhance the credibility of findings, we triangulated and compared findings from the document reviews with primary data from KIIs, FGDs, and IDIs. Additionally, to enhance data quality, adequate and appropriate sampling was undertaken. Study participants were selected through purposive sampling, where individuals believed to hold relevant lived and work experiences to the focus of the study (Johnson et al., 2020; Mayan, 2016) – that is people who operated or owned informal food businesses during and post-pandemic and those who implemented the post-pandemic recovery strategies in Kisumu City.

To achieve analytical rigor, we ensured that intercoder reliability was realized in the data analysis process through peer checking in the data analysis process. The research team including the research assistants and the first author (JK) undertook coding of the data, identified initial themes, and collated the codes into broader themes. Afterwards, the initial codes and emergent

themes were reviewed a peer researcher (a graduate student) and by the authors. The coders also maintained reflexivity to ensure trustworthiness in the analysis process by acknowledging the influence of their backgrounds and positionalities on their interpretation of meanings of data (Berger, 2015). Also, peer review was achieved through regular consultations with the research team (EO), (RG) and (PO).

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was received by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Review Board (Protocol: Pro00138854) and the Research Ethics Board of the in African Medical and Research Foundation in Kenya (ESRC P1670/2024). Through our local community partner – Pamoja CBO provided, connection with the market leaders and other administrative authorities in Kisumu City that facilitated our data collection. Potential participants were invited into an information session about the study and were issued with information sheets detailing the research process, the research objectives, expectations, and the pros and cons of participation. We obtained informed consent in written form from all the participants after explaining the purpose of the study. The participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the interviews and discussions at any stage without any penalties. The data was anonymized by removing any personal identifying information with participants being assigned ID numbers based on the data collection methods. All the data were downloaded from the audio recorders at the end of the day of data collec-tion and uploaded onto the University of Alberta shared google drive and protected following the University of Alberta data management procedures and only the re-search team including the local community partner in Kenya had access. To honor participants' time and contribution to the research, each participant received an honorarium of CAD $10 (KES 1000).

Study Findings

In this study, we reviewed two post-pandemic recovery strategies that were implemented in Kisumu City to facilitate rebuilding of communities after the COVID-19 pandemic (See Table 3: Reviewed post-pandemic policy documents). Additionally, we engaged in primary data collection with 80 participants in KIIs, IDIs, and FGDs to capture the lived experiences of the informal female food vendors of the recovery strategies. Our analysis of the policy documents and the primary data was guided by the IBPA framework (Hankivsky et al., 2012; Hankivsky et al., 2014). The qualitative study participants included women (83.8%) and men (16.2%) of the age range 25-65 years. Male participants were included in the study to capture the male perspectives of the gendered gaps within the post-pandemic recovery strategies. Their perspectives illuminated the gendered patterns of male privileges based on the sociocultural context and female exclusion in decision-making, policy formulation, and the implementation of interventions in secondary cities and remote communities. Most of the participants had below primary level of education (52.5%) with about 26.3% having college or university level of education, especially the key informants. Over 90% of the participants were informal food vendors who operated different types of small-scale food businesses such as selling fresh fruits and vegetables, cereals (maize, sorghum, rice), fresh cooked food, meat products (beef, pork, fish, chicken), a variety of drinks (sodas, fresh juice, preserved juices, milk), and a wide range of food items in kiosks and small hotels. The participants belonged to market groups, and some were part of informal saving groups (*chamas*), where they accessed credit to support their businesses. Most participants reported that they did not receive any government support during or post-pandemic and they mostly relied on their social connections to rebuild their businesses post pandemic.

Table 2: ***Reviewed Post-Pandemic Policy Documents (n=2)***

Policy document	Policy document key highlights
1. National Post COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022 (Republic of Kenya, 2020)	Outlined financing mechanisms for the informal sector, recommendations for adaptation of digital technology such as cashless transactions and online vending, social safety net programs for the vulnerable groups including food and cash transfers, contingency plans and disaster response to emergencies, economic resilience to food supply shocks, economic management and governance, economic stimulus programme, and recovery programs for micro, small and medium enterprises including those in the informal sector
2. Kisumu County COVID-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering and Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 (County Government of Kisumu, 2020)	Embeds the principles of response, recovery and thriving to mitigate socio-economic effects of the pandemic through facilitating adoption of digital technology, social protection interventions for the marginalized populations, measures to address emerging gender issues, food security programs such formation of County Food Security War Rooms and setting up emergency funds to aid in recovery

Key thematic areas

Our critical analysis of the data generated four main themes and eight sub-themes (two under each theme) (See Table 4: Key themes and sub-themes). The following section presents these findings, with relevant participant quotes to illustrate key insights.

Table 3: ***Key Themes and Sub-Themes***

Main themes	**Sub-themes**
Gender and power imbalances in policy design, decision making and recovery	Centralized decision-making and limited participation of women vendors in policy processes. Exclusion of women vendors from recovery priorities
Inequitable resource allocation and economic support to women-led businesses	Gender barriers in accessing financial recovery tools and government support. Gendered precarity of informal food vending
Intersecting gendered burdens in post-COVID-19 recovery	Unacknowledged extra household and caregiving responsibilities Exposure to gendered risks and vulnerabilities
Missed opportunities for gender-inclusive post-pandemic recovery	Limited targeted gender-responsive interventions Community-based coping, adaptation, and recovery mechanisms

Gender and power imbalances in policy design, decision making and recovery

Embracing the principles of intersecting identities, power and social justice, our analysis of the data revealed issues of power, power imbalance, and the lack of consideration of gender and gender representation in the design, formulation, and the governance and implementation of the post-pandemic recovery strategies. Two sub-themes emerge within this theme:

Centralized decision making and limited participation of women vendors in policy processes.

The formulation of the post-COVID-19 strategies was centralized at the Council of Governors level, whose legal mandate is to provide a forum for consultation amongst county governments. Although, the recovery strategies mention that the formulation process for the policies was collaborative – involving the Council of Governors, County Governments, researchers, development partners, and other stakeholders, the process was centralized at the national government with limited engagement of the lay community members such as the informal food vendors.

*"The Council of Governors through its .... provided a central point for coordination of County Governments' COVID-19 response measures… The development of this Strategy was a combined effort of Council of Governors, County Governments, researchers, development partners, and sector stakeholders.''—**Kisumu County Covid-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 p.ix***

While we acknowledge the environment within which the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded where decisions were made rapid and with uncertainty, it would have been beneficial to find ways to engage with and incorporate the needs of women informal food vendors given their significant role in supporting livelihoods and food needs of urban households, particularly in secondary cities. This could be achieved through contextualization of the national recovery strategies and intentionally engaging with the local communities in the cities.

Gender mainstreaming is also mentioned within the recovery strategy documents but there is limited evidence on how the unique needs of females were addressed within the recovery

strategies, particularly the needs of women informal food vendors in a city like Kisumu. The post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy states that:

"Gender Mainstreaming of Post Covid-19 Pandemic Initiatives: The programme will integrate a gender perspective in post Covid 19 interventions. —" ***Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022 p.27***

Our analysis of the participant narratives reaffirms the limited consideration of the intersecting identities and gender gaps in the implementation and in addressing the specific needs, particularly the needs of the female informal food vendors.

"...they should be offered spaces because women are vulnerable people in our society, right? I wish there were policies that were created to give them [women vendors] space to conduct their businesses without competition or the stronger gender." ***(KII_20)***

Exclusion of women vendors from recovery priorities.

Related to issues of power and power dynamics is the exclusion of women in the recovery priorities set post-pandemic. Our analysis of the recovery strategies showed that the interventions prioritized the formal sectors of the economy. The measures were biased towards the macro-economic environment, with a limited focus on the informal sector which is female dominated especially in small-to-medium cities such as Kisumu. This is seen from the emphasis on fiscal measures to support recovery including lowering of bank borrowing rates, restructuring of loans, and credit referencing, yet not considering the populations that are often excluded through such interventions because of the prevailing sociocultural factors.

"...the National Treasury was directed, through a Presidential Directive of 28th September 2020 to consider extending the VAT rate at 14 percent until 1st July 2021, PAYE Income tax rate and the Resident Income Tax (Corporation tax) rate at 25 percent until 1st January 2021 and

maintaining the 100 percent tax relief for persons earning gross monthly income of up to Kshs24,000 beyond the Sunset date of 31st December 2020. ***Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022 p.8***

Additionally, a review of the national strategy showed that the recovery priorities were centred around big sectors of the economy such as manufacturing, information and communication technology (ICT) and digital infrastructure, transport, energy, housing among others. At the county level, the economic stimulus package outlined infrastructure, agriculture, solid waste management, payment of pending bills as the key priority areas. These sectors are elite and male-dominated, while the women-led food businesses were given limited to no attention as reflected in the below section of the Post-Pandemic Economic Recovery Strategy of 2020-2022.

"The main sectors expected to lead the economic recovery are agriculture, wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, transport and storage, ICT, building and construction and services sector supported by the measures outlined in this ERS." ***Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022 p.14***

Mismatch in resource allocation and economic support to women-led businesses

Related to theme one above is the inequitable distribution of resources to support post-pandemic recovery and in adopting the IBPA principles of social justice and equity, our analysis identified a mismatch in resource allocation with reference to the prevailing gender barriers and the limited consideration of the diverse identities and experience of women informal food vendors in the post-pandemic recovery strategies. We identified 2 main sub-sub-themes:

Gender barriers in accessing financial recovery tools and government support.

Most of the participants shared their struggles with accessing government support and credit from banks and micro-finance institutions to support the recovery of their businesses. They highlighted the requirement for collateral as one of the main barriers. Respondents also indicated that the cash transfers rolled out through the government economic stimulus program was unavailable to most of the women vendors.

"Yes, I think there was money given by President Uhuru, it was one thousand every two weeks, some people got it, and others did not. ..... I doubt if they would give me money if I do not have anything to compensate or collateral to make them see my business growth and stability of the business." ***(IDI_10)***

Respondents who benefited from micro-finance organizations and government loans recounted the strict eligibility criteria, repayment conditions, and high interest rates.

"*I want to thank the office of the women's representative for allocating some funds that can be given to women to empower their businesses, but the only problem is that the interest rate is way too high."* ***(FGD_02).***

Due to the limited access to credit information and stringent collateral requirements, some vendors narrated how informal money lenders such as *Shylocks* took advantage of the situation and exploited women sexually and charged exorbitant interest for the loans.

"If you were to commission research on informal money lenders, like Shylocks, you will realize that the people that they give money ..... are the people that they exploit the most, ... women food vendors." ***(KII_16)***

"People were not able to access loans...did not know where to access them. I only know of shylock money ... They give you money and you have to return it with a daily interest. If you

don't pay, ... So, if you borrow Ksh. 3000 ($30) shillings from them, ..you return Ksh. 4,500 ($45) ..." ***(IDI_02)***

Participants highlighted that failure to repay loans came with profound consequences, with some of them being arrested while others lost their household property to loan recovery agencies. Most of them mentioned that the struggles with loan repayment due to COVID-19 related impacts caused them mental health-related challenges, citing stress and depression

"... But if you cannot pay and have some arrears you're told to pay up or they will come to your house and take something.... you just have stress." ***(IDI_12)***

The participants resoundingly acknowledged that lack of access to financial resources hampered the recovery process for the women vendors, while those who managed to restart their businesses struggled with instability.

"So up to now, some of them have not come back to businesses because they are not able to facilitate the credit facility that is secured from their financial providers, and those who had coped up, up to now, have not stabilized as well." ***(KII_19)***

Systemic redress and mismatch with the experiences of informal female food vendors.

There was limited availability of social protection services like medical insurance, pension benefits, maternity and sick leave benefits for workers in the informal food sector. The post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022 sought to address this gap by proposing pension benefits to workers in the informal sector. Our examination of the Kisumu County Covid-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 also showed that the county had proposed medical schemes that would benefit informal sector workers as part of the recovery interventions.

"Extend sickness benefit coverage to all, with attention given to reaching women and men in nonstandard and informal employment, the self-employed and vulnerable groups... Protect vulnerable groups in the population from health costs by enhancing NHIF coverage; improving knowledge of the existing insurance schemes to improve uptake; and subsidizing NHIF premiums for targeted vulnerable populations." ***Kisumu County Covid-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 p.31&32***

"...development of a National Retirement Benefits Policy to harmonize all pension laws. This will strengthen the legal and regulatory framework to achieve comprehensive pension coverage across the formal and informal sectors." ***Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022***

However, participants shared the limited on-the-ground access to medical coverage and how they had to pay for medical treatment out-of-pocket, despite making little profit margins from their businesses.

"Livelihood became difficult, for you to access services at the hospital, it required you to have money. You are required to have NHIF which I did not have." ***(FGD_03)***

The instability of the female-led businesses was further exacerbated by inflation and instances of political disruptions. Notably, the high cost of living fueled riots and demonstrations, in turn impacting business operations, hindering recovery. Several participants reported that high costs of doing business drained their profits, reduced customer demand and, in some instances, pushed traders out of business. As a result, they experienced slow recovery and were unable to repay their loans. Other compounding factors such as climate change related disasters including floods also disrupted business recovery.

Intersecting gendered burdens in post-COVID-19 recovery

Informed by the IBPA principles of intersecting categories, our analysis of the policy documents and the qualitative data revealed that the lack of acknowledgement of diverse identities such as being a single parent, in the lower socioeconomic status, and being a society with specified gender roles including the care responsibilities and other unpaid roles. The two subthemes related to the theme of intersecting gendered burdens of the pandemic are discussed below.

Unacknowledged extra household and caregiving responsibilities.

Both male and female participants acknowledged that women vendors shouldered extra responsibilities during and after the pandemic. They reflected on how the vendors managed house chores and caregiving duties while simultaneously running food stalls, which they described as "overwhelming." The situation was even worse for single mothers, widows and divorcees since they lacked spousal support.

"That one, I can say that ... actually women are overburdened. Sometimes I even wonder how they get that extra time to do the business. Because, okay, a woman wakes up at 5: 00A.M, they prepare the children for schooling. Then once they have done that, there are other house chores, which they also do, like washing the dishes and then preparing for the husband." ***(KII_10)****.*

The recovery strategies, however, did not explicitly mention or acknowledge these extra responsibilities that were borne by women vendors and neither did they acknowledge the unique socioeconomic conditions of the women vendors. Gender aspects within the strategies only focused on gender mainstreaming, promoting reproductive health and alleviating gender-based violence. The post-pandemic strategies acknowledged that women faced gender-based violence even before the occurrence of COVID-19 and that and that such experiences were exacerbated by the pandemic control measures. Coupled with other vulnerabilities such as being a single

parent, lower education level and socioeconomic status, there was a need for special interventions, particular for the women informal food vendor in small-to-medium cities such as Kisumu City. On the other hand, participants underscored the need to provide social and financial support to the women to lessen their care burden.

"...promote gender mainstreaming, protection and response against gender-based violence and involve women in all sectors." ***Kisumu County Covid-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 p.31-32***

Exposure to gendered risks and vulnerabilities.

Female vendors faced different forms of gender-related challenges that hampered their recovery from the pandemic, including gender-based violence, insecurity and sexual exploitation. Additionally, they were less likely to access government and microfinance loans due to lack of collaterals, limited information access, and the competing demand on their time, especially if they were less educated, were single parents, and had care responsibilities for their immediate and extended family members. Although the post-pandemic recovery strategies aimed to address issues related to violence against women and sought to build community resilience through prevention and implementation of government led interventions, the policy inadequately addressed the unique barriers experienced by women, particularly those in the informal food sector.

"Implementation of this programme will mitigate the incidences of gender-based violence. The National Gender-Based Violence Emergencies Working Group will be operationalized to implement the activities targeted to prevent gender-based violence." ***Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Strategy 2020-2022 p.27***

Despite the policy interventions, participants explained their experiences of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence during-and-post pandemic. Respondents indicated that due to the impact of COVID-19, some men lost their jobs and income, making them dependent on women to provide for the families. These financial challenges triggered tension and fights within households and in some instances, there were break-ups and separations. Similar violent experiences continue to be experienced even post-pandemic with limited to no support for the women in the market.

"As woman I observed that women had a lot of responsibilities to bear during that period…this led to the rise of gender-based violence cases which I had to step in and handle. As I told you, professional I'm a counselling psychologist (college trained) and my services were not limited to women in this market but also the community. I handled very many such cases and realised gender-based violence was majorly due to the additional responsibilities that women had after their spouses were laid off or had to stay at home without a source of income." ***(KII_04).***

Women vendors also expressed the fear and trauma they went through during protests, whereby their shops were targeted, vandalized and their goods looted. One participant recounted women's experience with attempted rape and physical defilement of their children. These instances, they mentioned, forced them to operate less hours or even shut their businesses for fear of lack of security, hence they lost income to support their families. Sexual exploitation emerged as one of the gendered risks that female vendors faced during post-pandemic recovery. A representative of a civil society organisation operating in Kisumu City expressed concerns of instances of sexual exploitation, whereby women were coerced to give sexual favors in exchange for financial assistance.

"They would not access any kind of finances to even start their businesses. So we found the

majority of the girls, they went back to looking for jobs, where majority of them again were now at risk of exploitation, because we found a lot of people, if you want any job, you want any monies, then there was the aspect of sexual exploitation and violence, so that they get to survive or they get to get up. ...." ***(KII_11)***

Since the County Government of Kisumu had not implemented any interventions to address the issue of insecurity, a market leader recounted community-driven initiatives to address insecurity.

"The county government does not provide security for the market currently; they have only deployed the revenue officers whose purpose is just to collect tax. You know where business is done is where thieves are equally, and so there is a need for security. In all the markets in the city, there is no security. This has been challenging for the businesswomen. .... we would contribute KSh. 10 daily per trader to pay security guards who volunteered to take charge of securing the commodities in the market." ***(KII_08).***

Missed opportunities for gender-inclusive post-pandemic recovery

A further analysis of the study data showed that the pandemic created opportunities for creation gender-responsive policies and moments to learn from communities, all of which were missed opportunities in rebuilding communities and cities post-COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by the principles of diverse knowledge and time and space, we identified 2 subthemes discussed below.

Limited targeted gender-responsive interventions.

Both the national and the county strategies outlined the various socio-economic challenges facing various sectors of the economy. Specifically, the medium, small, and micro enterprises where the informal food sector falls. A number of interventions were outlined for

implementation such as enhancing liquidity to business including medium small and micro enterprises (MSMEs), enhancement of social protection, investment in information and communication technology and digital infrastructure, credit schemes, among others. These are relevant to the informal food sector, however, there were gender neutral and did not consider the diverse identities reflected amongst the women informal food vendors. The policies spoke to:

"…establishing frameworks for micro-leasing for the MSMEs and utilization of the SMEs credit guarantee scheme which was launched in 2020 to cushion all SMEs across the country from the risks of high cost of credit for SMEs, which in most cases operate as informal businesses." ***Kisumu County Covid-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23 p.14***

Additionally, the strategies indicated specific social protection interventions to support vulnerable groups within the society such as orphaned and vulnerable children, people with disabilities and the elderly, but did not consider the unique vulnerabilities experienced by the women in the in-formal food economy.

"The County was also supporting and building capacities of individuals, vulnerable groups and communities for equity and self-reliance through training." ***Kisumu County Covid-19 Social Economic Re-Engineering Recovery Strategy 2020/21-2022/23***

Most of the recommendations shared by women illuminated the limited gendered support to informal food vendors. Participants underscored the need for capacity building and mentorship targeting businesswomen in the informal sector.

"The government should consider grants to women in business as opposed to loans. Loans are a bit cumbersome when it comes to repayments… grants from government and loan write offs can

be of help to us women in business. Unfortunately, that is not the case because if you are unable to pay, your guarantors will be asked to pay up." ***(IDI_14).***

Community-based coping, adaptation, and recovery mechanisms.

Due to the limited support from government and insufficient gender-inclusive interventions, women vendors adopted various strategies to survive the negative post-pandemic impacts. A key informant from the County Government of Kisumu acknowledged that they did not provide financial support to women vendors, but the women rely on existing social support networks.

"Okay, as a county, we do not, but they themselves have their own way of operation. They have their leaders with them that link them with the micro finances for loans, but as a county, no." ***(KII_02).***

As a consequence, a considerable number of participants highlighted their reliance on mobile money and informal money pooling groups (*chamas*) as a crucial post-COVID-19 recovery mechanism. They contributed specific amounts of money daily, weekly, or monthly that allowed them to access loans commensurate to total value of their shares. They added that the monies were utilized as business capital to support recovery after the pandemic.

"What boosted me were the chamas [women group] that I was part of. Whenever I was overwhelmed with something like rent, I could go take my shares to sort it out or take a loan then I pay it back later…" ***(IDI_01)***

Additionally, women vendors reported that they had to seek financial assistance from private entities such as shylocks to aid in recovery. Participants from micro-finance entities and community-based organizations (CBO) such as Kisumu Medical and Education Trust and Waridi corroborated this by articulating that they offered financial solutions and training to women food

vendors. Of relevance was how the participants reiterated the need for government initiatives to work alongside the community driven efforts to rebuild businesses post emergency such as the pandemic. They highlighted the key role of financing in business recovery post-COVID-19, noting that the businesses that benefited from funding had recovered from the negative effects of the pandemic. *"If possible if we can have microfinance with low interest rates and good payback period can help us recover."* ***(KII_04).***

Discussion

This cross-sectional study conducted a gendered analysis of policy documents and qualitative data to explore gender gaps and implications to informal female food vendors in Kisumu City. This section presents the gendered implications of post-pandemic policies on the women informal food vendors. The first theme delves into the gender exclusion and power imbalances in policy design and decision-making processes. The second theme highlights inequities in allocation of resources meant to support recovery from the pandemic. Then, the intersecting burdens including caregiving and household work during post-pandemic recovery are discussed in the third theme. Lastly, the fourth theme examines the missed opportunities for gender-inclusive post-pandemic recovery.

The analysis identified gender gaps within the post-pandemic policies and explored the lived experiences of women vendors in the informal food sector in Kisumu City, Kenya. Aligned with IBPA principles of power, multi-level analysis and equity (Hankivsky et al., 2014), this study found that the perspectives of women vendors were not incorporated into the post-pandemic strategies. Notably, the formulation of the strategies was elite driven as it included the Council of Governors, County Governments, researchers, development partners, academia, and other relevant stakeholders (Republic of Kenya, 2020). These agencies and professional bodies

are mostly male dominated further curtailing the participation of women in policymaking. Power imbalances in decision-making excluded the population that was most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study aligns with findings from other researchers who found that the informal food sector did not receive adequate policy and institutional support despite its important role in cities of the Global South (Ezimma et al., 2020; Ghani & Jan, 2025; Onyango et al., 2023). As a result of the non-inclusion, female-led enterprises suffered worse consequences of the pandemic because the policies ignored gender-specific needs worsening the existing inequalities. Similar to a study on post-pandemic recovery policies in Tanzania, gender exclusion challenged the resilience and recovery of women-led business (Donga & Chimucheka, 2024).

Policy interventions prioritized formal sector recovery as the strategies were anchored on the Medium-term Plan and Kenya's Vision 2030. These development agendas are mostly focused on big sectors of the economy such as industrialization, manufacturing, transport and ICT which contribute significantly to gross domestic product. This is similar to findings from Thailand, Bangladesh and South Africa, where government plans prioritized private sector firms, overlooking the lived experiences of informal businesses especially those run by women, worsening inequality (Mhlana et al., 2023). As noted by Oliveira & David (Oliveira & David, 2024), the informal sector bore a disproportionate burden of the pandemic effects as compared to the formal sector due to the presence of varied support mechanisms that target the latter.

Guided by the IBPA principles of equity, power, diverse knowledges, and intersecting categories, our study also found that women food vendors faced several barriers in accessing government support mechanisms meant for recovery. The support was in the form of an Economic Stimulus Programme whereby, the government set aside Kshs. 53.7 billion (US$537 million) to be disbursed as cash transfers to vulnerable populations. However, women vendors

had to fulfil certain conditions to qualify for and access the monies. For instance, they were required to provide identification cards and mobile numbers for one specific network provider (Safaricom) registered under their names. This requirement sidelined many women vendors who were using other providers like Airtel from accessing the cash transfers. This also meant that those who had lost their identity cards were ineligible to receive the cash. Additionally, there was lack of information to the women vendors on the availability of government support since the modes used included digital media which was inaccessible to them due to low literacy levels. Elsewhere, researchers found that economic stimulus programs are more effective if support is channeled through existing community groups (Ezimma et al., 2020). The funds aimed to support recovery were distributed through existing community organizations were seen to benefit the vulnerable groups more efficiently (ILO., 2011). In Zimbabwe, government support to the informal sector during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to business recovery success rates (ILO., 2011; Uzhenyu, 2020). However, in Kisumu City, the economic precarity of female-led businesses was deepened due to the inefficiency of support mechanisms and the limited government support for the community-based initiatives for post-pandemic recovery. Similar to the government schemes in Delhi (WIEGO, 2023), women informal vendors in Kisumu City termed the cash transfers as inadequate to meet their unique needs. This limited allocation of resources by the government inhibited recovery efforts for female-led enterprises.

Our study described the barriers to accessing support from private financial entities such as banks and savings and credits cooperative societies by informal food vendors and from informal microfinance initiatives such as shylocks. These financing institutions had strict collateral requirements, yet the women had limited access to assets such as land or property that could act as security during borrowing. In the African context, existing cultural norms restrict

ownership of property to the men, sidelining women (Fletschner & Kenney, 2014). Therefore, men have been seen to recover faster than women during emergencies because of the ease in accessing financing (The Africa Report, 2020). At the same time, there were severe consequences for those who received the loans and defaulted repayments. For example, women vendors faced arrests, and their household goods were confiscated by loan recovery agencies due to non-payment. Hence, research has shown that post-pandemic recovery processes differed for men and women due to the unequal impacts faced by the genders (Adeola, 2022). Despite the difficult experiences, women vendors demonstrated unique strategies to cope with pandemic effects and respond to livelihood challenges through individual and community agency. These systemic barriers forced women vendors to rely on informal money lending to support such as *Chamas and Shylocks* to boost their businesses. However, these informal networks we faced with different challenges including limited funds to loan to the women, gender-related violence, and high interest rates that negatively impacted the informal food vendors.

The application of IBPA principles of intersecting categories and equity to our analysis enhanced the visibility of women's double burden during and after the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, women in urban informal settlements in Kenya spent more time on domestic tasks than men (Maina et al., 2019). Our findings show that women vendors in Kisumu City faced heightened unpaid care work like household chores and caregiving responsibilities after the pandemic, while simultaneously running businesses with minimal spousal support. These findings concur with other studies conducted in Nairobi and Kampala where women in the informal food sector faced increased household and caregiving roles which were reinforced by cultural norms (Afifu et al., 2021; Suubi et al., 2022a). As a result of the burden of care, women suffered mental and physical fatigue hence hampering their business performance. The impact of

care work on the income and profitability of women-led enterprises has been documented in South Africa and India (WIEGO, 2023). In some instances, women were forced to close their shops to attend to house duties and this lowered household income impacting on food security. These important aspects were left out of both national and county recovery strategies. There were no provisions to targeting women to support with unpaid care work such as daycare centres or medical coverage for that would include palliative care for the elderly. Unlike the case of Durban, South Africa, where women received cash grants to support with childcare, women in Kisumu City were left to bear the responsibilities with minimal social support and without policy provisions on unpaid care work (WIEGO, 2021; WIEGO & Street Vendor Project, 2021).

We also note that women vendors faced gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, job losses and financial constraints that perpetuated violence against women. Additionally, failure by men to undertake financial duties led to the reliance on their spouses resulting in disagreements and fights. Also, women vendors also experienced a lack of security measures at their places of work, which exacerbated their vulnerability to violence. Due to the precarity of their businesses, they were unable to afford storage facilities and installation of security measures. This reveals the intersectionality of informality, with gender and lack of government support to compound the vulnerabilities faced by women vendors impacting their business stability. Sexual exploitation was also highlighted as gendered risk and a barrier to recovery for women vendors. The power imbalances in resource allocation and marginalization of women exposed them to exploitation by patriarchal systems. The presence of sexual abuse depicts gender gaps in policies that were meant to safeguard the rights of all people equally and depicts lack of gender-sensitive interventions to protect women. Despite the mental toll caused by these challenges, there was lack of government mechanisms such as counselling and psychosocial interventions to help

women recover from the trauma if they face abuse. This depicts the lack of integration of mental health considerations into recovery strategies. An intersectional approach to formulation of post-emergency recovery strategies is essential to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable populations in the recovery plans (Marks & Toye, 2020).

Our analysis also revealed the various mechanisms that women vendors explored to cope with the aftermath of the pandemic and support recovery. The women vendors demonstrated unique strategies to cope with pandemic effects and respond to livelihood challenges through individual and community agency. For example, they leveraged on community-based networks like market associations, saving groups and family support. Studies have demonstrated the vital role of social support in times of emergencies, with businesses that benefited from such support mechanisms showing quicker recovery and more resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic (Oliveira & David, 2024; Uzhenyu, 2020). Through these coping strategies vendors were able to collate financial resources to keep their businesses running and support their families. This demonstrates women's agency and resilience against the backdrop of limited government support. Findings from our study concur with other studies that have demonstrated that personal resilience of women vendors was vital to navigating the challenges of the pandemic in the wake of implementation of non-gender responsive policies (Banerjee & Wilks, 2024; Mondal & Chakraborty, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, women vendors navigated the challenges of post-pandemic recovery with limited government support, and with policies that were not gender responsive. Policy design adopted a top-down approach, with women vendors being excluded from decision-making. Additionally, women faced barriers in accessing government support mechanisms and securing

credit from financial institutions. This, compounded with women's intersecting social locations, sexual exploitation, insecurity and the double burden of care, deepened their gendered vulnerabilities resulting in economic marginalization and poor health outcomes. However, despite these structures of oppression, women vendors devised coping mechanisms to keep their businesses running and continued the significant role of urban household food provision. Additionally, women vendors demonstrated agency by leveraging on networks and social supports like informal saving groups and market associations to raise capital for recovery. We recommend that future responses to emergencies should integrate gender considerations since women informal food vendors are at the center of urban food systems. Their unique roles and needs should be incorporated into policies and programs to ensure their continued contribution to urban household food security.

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CHAPTER 5: Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter discusses the key findings of the two papers in this thesis. First, we highlight the key findings from each paper separately, then provide the common findings and lastly, indicate the differences. Guided by the IBPA framework, the discussion of the findings is centered on the experiences of women informal food vendors.

Overall, the findings indicate that women vendors were largely excluded from COVID-19 policy discussions, resulting in policy measures that disproportionately impacted female-led businesses. This is despite evidence from previous research that indicates incorporating women into decision-making enhances policy effectiveness (Sawadogo-Lewis et al., 2018). Limited participation in COVID-19 policy decisions was influenced by need for rapid crisis responses, existing power hierarchies, lack of information, and gender-gaps in education and other societal scopes. Consequently, their exclusion resulted in policies with limited gender considerations, consistent with findings from other cities in the Global South including cities in South Africa (Anwana & Aroba, 2022; Mahopo et al., 2022). Additionally, women vendors experienced intensified caregiving and household work, alongside heightened insecurity, harassment and sexual exploitation. Women demonstrated individual and collective agency, relying on their collective and individual agencies as coping strategies to survive the pandemic and rebuild their business enterprises. Also, enforcement of the containment measures was punitive, ignoring the precarity of informal food businesses, with women vendors facing sexual exploitation, harassment, forceful eviction, arrests, extortion and confiscation of goods by law enforcement officers. This aligns with evidence from other studies showing unequal power structures and women's vulnerability during the pandemic (Aborisade, 2024; Khan, 2024; Martínez & Young, 2022). This analysis further noted that closure of schools and daycares and overburdened

healthcare facilities heightened unpaid care work for women in the informal food sector. Studies have shown that extra care responsibilities constraints the engagement of women in paid work (Power, 2020). This outcome demonstrates how COVID-19 reinforced economic inequalities and deepened the vulnerability of women informal food vendors. Findings from other studies in the region corroborate this observation (Agarwal et al., 2022; Bhoola & Chetty, 2022; UN Women, 2020; WIEGO, 2022).

The second paper, which analyzed post-pandemic policies in Kisumu City and their implications on female-led businesses, revealed that the interventions had limited gender-responsive measures. Recovery measures prioritized formal sector stabilization with limited attention to the challenges faced by the informal economy, which is female dominated. Post-pandemic recovery policies were more inclined towards reviving formal enterprises, which were male dominated and lacked tailored support mechanisms. This is similar to the findings from across secondary cities that indicated how most policies ignored the informal economy (Aditya & Amri, 2023; Donga & Chimucheka, 2024; Ismail et al., 2022; Khan, 2024b). Additionally, women faced barriers in the acquisition of credit facilities from banks and other financial institutions to support recovery due to stringent collateral conditions. These findings affirms those in previous studies that revealed challenges faced by women informal vendors (Bayai et al., 2023; Tshuma et al., 2024). As noted by Ghani & Jan (2025), the absence of formal support programs during the pandemic compelled informal sector workers to rely on social support from family, peers and community organizations. In that regard, women vendors in Kisumu City demonstrated agency and resilience by leveraging existing informal supports and their social capital.

Both papers indicate that the formulation and implementation of COVID-19 control and post-pandemic policies lacked gender considerations. The unique roles and needs of women vendors were not incorporated into design of interventions. By adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, the policies did not account for pre-existing inequalities, further reinforcing women's vulnerabilities. The challenges faced by women such as limited social protection mechanisms, unpaid care work, barriers to financing, etc., were not factored into recovery plans. These findings align with evidence from other contexts that showed intersectional inequalities among female-dominated enterprises (Bello et al., 2023; UN Women, 2020; UNFPA Kenya et al., 2020). Additionally, in both studies, women displayed acts of resilience coupled with individual and collective agency. Participants described their reliance on social support from community networks and informal credit, product diversification, and changes in business strategies to survive and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar conclusions were reached by studies conducted in South Africa showing how women informal food vendors leveraged on informal mechanisms (Crush & Tawodzera, 2024; Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2022; Wegerif, 2024) This was occasioned by the limited support they received from government and other key players such as the private sector and non-governmental organizations. Comparable outcomes were reached by researchers examining the role of social capital to women informal businesses during the pandemic (Ghani & Jan, 2025; Rajapakshe et al., 2020; Tiwari & Shastri, 2023).

While both papers explored the gender responsiveness of COVID-19 policies and their impacts on women informal food vendors in Kisumu City, each paper had a distinct policy focus and emerging themes. The first paper analyzed COVID-19 control and containment policies which instituted interventions including curfews, lockdowns, movement restrictions, health and safety protocols, and closure of markets and schools, among others. The dominant themes from

policy analysis were central to vendor exclusion from policy processes, unequal enforcement of policies, limited recognition of intersecting social locations and fragmentation of policies. Contrastingly, the second paper examined the gendered dimensions of national and county level post-pandemic strategies. The prominent themes were related to gendered power imbalances, intersecting gendered burdens on women, exclusion from recovery priorities and missed opportunities for gender-inclusive recovery strategies. Although the first paper highlighted immediate implications of non-gender inclusive control measures, the second paper exposed continued exclusion of women vendors in the design of recovery interventions. Collectively, these differences in emergent themes showcases design of policies that were gender unresponsive from the onset of the pandemic all through to the post-pandemic phase. By failing to incorporate gender responsive measures, the COVID-19 policies widened the existing inequalities faced by women in the informal food economy.

Conclusions

This thesis contributes new knowledge on the gender-responsiveness of COVID-19 policies and their impacts on women in the informal food economy in secondary cities. Using the intersectional lens of the IBPA framework, this study illuminates how the policies failed to entrench gendered considerations further exacerbating existing structural inequalities faced by women vendors. This study also advances the application of the IBPA framework into the policy spaces of secondary cities of the Global South, particularly in the African context. The IBPA framework has been used majorly in the analysis of health policies within the context of the Global North in countries such as Canada, USA and Sweden, with limited application in African cities. Overall, the study underscores that since women are key players in informal food supply

and emergency recovery efforts, their unique roles and needs should be incorporated in policy formulation and implementation.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, this study proposes the following recommendations for government agencies, policymakers, community-based organizations:

1. Mainstream gender considerations into policy development and integrate women's voices in policy design by promoting their meaningful participation in decision making processes.
2. Promote women informal food vendors access to credit facilities and financing through targeted microfinance lending, less stringent collateral requirements, subsidized low-interest loans and financial literacy programs.
3. Design and implement inclusive and targeted social protection mechanisms for the informal food sector encompassing pension plans, leave benefits, maternal and childcare support, and medical coverage. These cushions against pandemic shocks and enable business continuity.

Suggested areas for further research

While this study enhanced the understanding of critical gaps in in COVID-19 policies and their implications on female-led informal food businesses in Kisumu City, several research gaps emerged. For instance, long-term socioeconomic impacts of policy interventions should be explored, focusing on food insecurity and health outcomes. Further research could undertake comparative studies across secondary cities in Kenya to illuminate best practices that could be adopted for participatory policy design. Research could also examine the role of governance and community participatory approaches in influencing gender-responsive policies. Also, an assessment of gender-responsive policy interventions in secondary cities should be undertaken to

evaluate their effectiveness in enhancing economic resilience and overall wellbeing of informal female food vendors.

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Appendix 1: In-Depth Interview Guide

The semi-structured interviews will ask questions in relation to the following themes:

In-depth Interviews:

1. *Women vendors' experience of the pandemic and increased cost of living:*

(a) Please tell me some of the changes in household income that you have experienced since COVID-19 (Probe: loss of jobs and/or income or lower working hours for other earning members). Are there any specific changes in your household income due to increased cost of living? Please, tell me more about that.

(b) Could you please describe any changes in household responsibilities you have experienced since COVID-19 and especially the additional care responsibility during the pandemic (Probe: increased workload caring for children, homeschooling as children could not go to school, looking after sick relatives, cleaning and sanitizing, and increased cooking work)?

(c) Please, share with me any changes in your responsibilities (household/in your business) given the increased cost of living

2. *The impacts of the pandemic and increased cost of living 's impacts on women's business activities:*

(a) As a businessperson, what are some of the changes in business activities you are currently experiencing (Probe: hours and place of operations; transportation of goods and products; availability of products; changes in food storage, preparation, and distribution; changes in buying practices)? Describe any changes in your business that you experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(b) Could you please describe if there are changes (during the pandemic and currently with inflation) in interactions with customers you serve? (Probe., increased negative interactions with customers, reduced purchases, changes in credit practices for customers).

(c) Talking about authority, please tell me about your experience with interactions with police and other state authorities (during the pandemic and currently with inflation) (Probe: municipal-level authorities).

(d) Did you experience any health concerns while conducting business activities during the pandemic/disruptions (Probe: risks of increased exposure to the virus, added costs of masks and sanitizers)? What of currently? Any health-related concerns that you could share with me.

(e) In your experience, have there been changes in interactions with food suppliers (Probe: difficulties in obtaining supplies due to lockdowns, curfews, and other restrictions, disruptions in the availability of certain supplies due to supply chain disruptions, sourcing new suppliers)?

(f) Are there any positive aspects of the pandemic and the current inflation that you could talk about? (New business opportunities and/or increased earnings through reduced cost of certain supplies, more sales, higher prices of goods and delivery services).

3. <u>Impacts on health and well-being</u> (at individual, household, social/community levels/scales)

(a) During the pandemic, please tell me about your experience with exposure to the virus (Probe: personal experience of illness, hospitalization, illness/hospitalization of employees and other household members, including deaths).

(b) Let us now talk about experience with pre-existing health conditions. How was the pandemic in relation to business owners with conditions such as diabetes, HIV, and other illnesses?

(c) In regard to mental health, how would you describe the status of people's well-being? (Probe: stress and anxiety; increased verbal and physical arguments/altercations with family members, including domestic violence).

(d) Thinking about your home and family, how would you describe your experience with social distancing with other members? (Probe: At home, during meals, with sick family members)

(e) In your business environment, what was your experience with protective clothing? (Probe: Access to vaccines and protective equipment (masks, sanitizers, etc.).

4. *Linkages between COVID-19 pandemic, increased cost of living and recent events in Kenya and impacts on SMEs and household food security*

(a) How has COVID-19 pandemic and the current increased cost of living affected your business

(b) Increased cost of living and the recent reactions witnessed in Kenya with our younger generations

(c) How have the recent events in Kenya affected your business activities?

(d) Any impacts of this to your household food security status

5. *Household food security status:*

(a) Can you describe to me how the pandemic impacted livelihoods, especially food security:

Probe: Changes in availability and accessibility to preferred foods.

Changes in the cost of food items.

Food preferences and food memories during the pandemic

Economic shocks to the household, e.g., reduced access to various foods.

6. *Coping mechanisms they adopted:*

(a) How did/are people in your community handle changes in the ways they operated their businesses (Probe: operating from home instead of their shops; changing business locations or

flexible hours; offering online services and delivery options; family participation in business, etc.)?

(b) Thinking of community relations, how did community and social networks of care and solidarity help during the pandemic? (Probe: food sharing, communal food buying, accessing funds/loans.)

7. Prospects and challenges for post-pandemic and inflation recovery:

(a) How do you see the various challenges of the pandemic impacting small business owners? What of inflation? Are these connected any way? Please, tell me more about this.

(b) Would you share your perspectives/thoughts on the future of your businesses?

(c) Finally, could you describe to me some suggestions for recovering from economic shocks experienced during the pandemic (Probe: emergency business loans and/or loan forgiveness).

Appendix 2: Key Informant Interview Guide

1. *If the respondent is a representative of an organization (government or non-government), ask about the organization's missions, projects, or programs regarding women entrepreneurs in the informal food sector.*
2. *Inflation and pandemic's impacts on women's business activities:*

(a) Changes in business activities.

As an officer working with people in this area, what can you say about business operations since COVID-19? Are there any observed impacts of inflation/pandemic on informal food businesses (Probe changes such as hours and place of operations; transportation of goods and products; availability of products; changes in food storage, preparation, and distribution; changes in buying practices).

(b) Changes in policies and regulations.

Talking about authority, please tell me about any regulatory changes regarding women in business's interactions with police and other state authorities (Probe: municipal-level authorities).

Are there key policies that were enacted post pandemic that affected women in food business?

Could you please tell me about any specific policy you are familiar with.

Could you please describe to me how these policy measures have affected small food businesses operated by women and in general?

(c) Health concerns

How have the concerned bodies responded to health-related issues for women conducting business activities since COVID-19?

What measures have been put in place to address risks of increased exposure to the virus in the future? (Probe continued use of costs of masks and sanitizers, municipal health inspection)?

(d) In case of future lockdowns/and disruptions

What changes are in place to improve food suppliers (Probe: Plans for obtaining supplies due to lockdowns, curfews, and other restrictions, disruptions in the availability of certain supplies due to supply chain disruptions, sourcing new suppliers)?

3. Impacts of public health containment and mitigation responses

(a) In your position/organization, what are some of the containment and mitigation measures that were implemented during the pandemic/disruptions?

(b) What is your perspective on the gender factors – additional responsibilities on women during disruptions?

(c) Could you tell me how women have been differently affected by these changes? (Probe: Financial access, Gender-based violence, access to markets, security, etc.)

4. Prospects and challenges for inflation and post-pandemic recovery:

(a) How do you see the various challenges of the pandemic impacting small business owners? Are they mutually reinforcing or intersecting?

(b) Would you share your perspectives/thoughts on the future of small business food vendors.

(c) Finally, could you describe some suggestions for recovering from economic shocks experienced during the pandemic/or other disruptions post pandemic (Probe: emergency business loans and/or loan forgiveness)? What initiatives currently exist to support informal food businesses? How gender-sensitive or gender-responsive are the initiatives?

(d) Please tell me about some of the plans that your organization or other relevant institutions plan to do to reduce the risks facing small informal food vendors, particularly women vendors, in the future.

Appendix 3: Focus Group Discussion Guide

Focus groups will be organized around the following themes and questions. However, participants do not necessarily have to discuss all these questions. The questions are just starting points for stimulating conversations among participants.

1. *Women vendors' experience of the pandemic and increased cost of living::*

(d) Please tell me some of the changes in household income that you have experienced since COVID-19 (Probe: loss of jobs and/or income or lower working hours for other earning members). Are there any specific changes in your household income due to increased cost of living? Please, tell me more about that.

(e) Could you please describe any changes in household responsibilities you have experienced since COVID-19 and especially the additional care responsibility during the pandemic (Probe: increased workload caring for children, homeschooling as children could not go to school, looking after sick relatives, cleaning and sanitizing, and increased cooking work)?

(f) Please, share with me any changes in your responsibilities (household/in your business) given the increased cost of living

2. *The impacts of the pandemic and increased cost of living 's impacts on women's business activities:*

(g) As a businessperson, what are some of the changes in business activities you are currently experiencing (Probe: hours and place of operations; transportation of goods and products; availability of products; changes in food storage, preparation, and distribution; changes in buying practices)? Describe any changes in your business that you experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(h) Could you please describe if there are changes (during the pandemic and currently with inflation) in interactions with customers you serve? (Probe., increased negative interactions with customers, reduced purchases, changes in credit practices for customers).

(i) Talking about authority, please tell me about your experience with interactions with police and other state authorities (Probe: municipal-level authorities).

(j) Did you experience any health concerns while conducting business activities during the pandemic/disruptions (Probe: risks of increased exposure to the virus, added costs of masks and sanitizers)? What of currently? Any health-related concerns that you could share with me.

(k) In your experience, have there been changes in interactions with food suppliers (Probe: difficulties in obtaining supplies due to lockdowns, curfews, and other restrictions, disruptions in the availability of certain supplies due to supply chain disruptions, sourcing new suppliers)?

(l) Are there any positive aspects of the pandemic and the current inflation that you could talk about? (new business opportunities and/or increased earnings through reduced cost of certain supplies, more sales, higher prices of goods and delivery services).

3. <u>Impacts on health and well-being</u> (at individual, household, social/community levels/scales)

(f) During the pandemic, please tell me about your experience with exposure to the virus (Probe: personal experience of illness, hospitalization, illness/hospitalization of employees and other household members, including deaths).

(g) Let us now talk about experience with pre-existing health conditions. How was the pandemic in relation to business owners with conditions such as diabetes, HIV, and other illnesses?

(h) In regard to mental health, how would you describe the status of people's well-being post pandemic? (Probe: stress and anxiety; increased verbal and physical arguments/altercations with family members, including domestic violence).

(i) Thinking about your home and family, how would you describe your experience with social distancing with other members? (Probe: At home, during meals, with sick family members)

(j) In your business environment, what was your experience with protective clothing? (Probe: Access to vaccines and protective equipment (masks, sanitizers, etc.).

4. Linkages between COVID-19 pandemic, increased cost of living and recent events in Kenya and impacts on SMEs and household food security

(e) How has COVID-19 pandemic and the current increased cost of living affected your business

(f) Increased cost of living and the recent reactions witnessed in Kenya with our younger generations

(g) How have the recent events in Kenya affected your business activities?

(h) Any impacts of this to your household food security status

5. Household food security status:

(b) Can you describe to me how the pandemic impacted livelihoods, especially food security:

Probe: Changes in availability and accessibility to preferred foods.

Changes in the cost of food items.

Food preferences and food memories during the pandemic

Economic shocks to the household, e.g., reduced access to various foods.

8. Coping mechanisms they adopted:

(c) How did/are people in your community handle changes in the ways they operated their businesses (Probe: operating from home instead of their shops; changing business locations or flexible hours; offering online services and delivery options; family participation in business, etc.)?

(d) Thinking of community relations, how did community and social networks of care and solidarity help during the pandemic? (Probe: food sharing, communal food buying, accessing funds/loans.)

1. Prospects and challenges for post-pandemic recovery:

(d) How do you see the various challenges of the pandemic impacting small business owners? What of inflation? Are these connected any way? Please, tell me more about this.

(e) Would you share your perspectives/thoughts on the future of your businesses?

(f) Finally, could you describe to me some suggestions for recovering from economic shocks experienced during the pandemic (Probe: emergency business loans and/or loan forgiveness).

Appendix 4: REB Approval in Kenya

amref health africa

Amref Health Africa in Kenya

REF: AMREF – ESRC P1670/2024 **June 24, 2024**

Elizabeth Opiyo
University of Alberta
Edmonton AB T6G 2R3
Canada
Tel: +254 780 160000
Email: eonyango@ualberta.ca

Dear Elizabeth Opiyo,

RESEARCH PROTOCOL: A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF WOMEN-LED INFORMAL FOOD BUSINESSES IN URBAN HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY AND WELL-BEING OF URBAN DWELLERS KISUMU CITY, KENYA

Thank you for submitting your protocol to the Amref Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (ESRC).

This is to inform you that the ESRC has reviewed and approved your protocol. Your application approval number is ESRC P1670/2024. The approval period is from June 24, 2024, to June 23, 2025, and is subject to compliance with the following requirements:

a) Only approved documents (including informed consents, study instruments, advertising materials, material transfer agreements, etc.) will be used.
b) All changes including (amendments, deviations, violations, etc.) are submitted for review and approval by Amref ESRC before implementation.
c) Death and life-threatening problems and serious adverse events (SAEs) or unexpected adverse events whether related or unrelated to the study must be reported to the Amref ESRC within 72 hours of notification.
d) Any changes, anticipated or otherwise that may increase the risks or affect safety or welfare of study participants and others or affect the integrity of the research must be reported to Amref ESRC within 72 hours.
e) Clearance for export of biological specimen must be obtained from the relevant government authorities for each batch of shipment/export.
f) Submission of a request for renewal of approval at least 60 days prior to expiry of the approval period. Attach a comprehensive progress report to support the renewal.
g) In case of late renewal, the Amref ESRC shall not be held responsible for any serious adverse events (SAEs) that may occur as a result of research activities that were carried out after the expiry of approval.
h) Submission of an executive summary report within 90 days upon completion of the study to the Amref ESRC.
i) All government regulations for prevention and control of the spread of COVID-19 including social distancing, provision of personal protective equipment for participants and research assistants should be adhered to during data collection. All research assistants should be monitored for COVID 19 symptoms and referred for testing in case they present with symptoms.

Prior to commencing your study, you will be expected to obtain a research license from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) https://research-portal.nacosti.go.ke and also obtain other clearances needed.

Appendix 5: REB Approval – University of Alberta

Notification of Approval

Date:	May 16, 2024
Study ID:	Pro00138854
Principal Investigator:	Elizabeth Onyango
Study Title:	A Gendered Analysis of the role of Women-led Informal Food Businesses in urban household food security and well-being of urban dwellers Kisumu City, Kenya
Approval Expiry Date:	May 15, 2025
Sponsor/Funding Agency:	SSHRC - Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council SSHRC
Sponsor/Funding Agency:	Sub-grant Through Wilfrid Laurier University

RSO-Managed Funding:

Project ID	Title	Grant Status	Sponsor	Project Start Date	Project End Date	Purpose	Other Information
RES0066278	South-South Migration and Migrant Food Insecurity (MiFOOD Project)	Submitted		2/1/2024	1/31/2026	Grant	

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

Approved Documents:

Recruitment Materials

- Recruitment Material-Interviews
- Recruitment material-FGD
- Recruitment Material-Photovoice
- Recruitment Material-Surveys

Consent Forms

- Consent Form-Survey
- Consent Form-Interviews
- Consent Form-Photovoice Study
- Consent Form-FGD

Questionnaires, Cover Letters, Surveys, Tests, Interview Scripts, etc.

- Interview Guide
- Photovoice Discussion Guide
- Consent for Photo to be taken
- Demographic questions - and - Survey questionnaire

Protocol/Research Proposal

- Study Protocol/proposal

Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to the REB for approval prior to implementation. A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the REB does not constitute authorization to initiate the conduct of this research. The Principal Investigator is responsible for ensuring required approvals from other involved organizations (e.g. universities/colleges, community organizations, school boards) are obtained, before the research begins.

Sincerely,

Carol Bolick, PhD
Associate Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).