



The impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on women's responsibility for domestic food provision: The Case of Marondera Urban in Zimbabwe



Authors:

Sarah Y. Matanga¹ 
Memory R. Mukurazhizha² 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Languages and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Culture and Heritage Studies, Zimbabwe Open University, Marondera, Zimbabwe

²Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Midlands State University, Harare, Zimbabwe

Corresponding author:

Sarah Matanga,
sarahyeukai@gmail.com

Dates:

Received: 29 Aug. 2022

Accepted: 02 Dec. 2022

Published: 23 Mar. 2023

How to cite this article:

Matanga, S.Y. & Mukurazhizha, M.R., 2023, 'The impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on women's responsibility for domestic food provision: The Case of Marondera Urban in Zimbabwe', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(3), a8053. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i3.8053>

Copyright:

© 2023. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

When pandemics hit communities, women are bound to suffer as most of the responsibilities of ensuring food security lie on them. This article assesses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the role that church-going women play in food provision. The qualitative study used interviews and focus group discussions to examine the toll of the pandemic-induced restrictions, especially with regard to their disruption of activities that ensure the provision of food for the family. They sought to identify how an environment as restrictive as the one that was imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic affects those largely responsible for food provision in urban Marondera – the women, in this case. The focus was extended to factor in how disasters and pandemics affect women and detract from their normative food procurement and provision roles in marginal societies and how these effects can be mitigated to allow women to carry on with their roles even in restrictive environments. This research was motivated by the recent COVID-19-imposed regulations that restricted the movement of people, restrictions that have only recently been relaxed and (in some cases) removed. We also sought to establish how gender roles are played out, together with whether they are exacerbated by pandemics, and in what ways these pandemics result in higher workloads on women. By utilising the Africana womanist theory, the study analysed women roles in food provision and food security in their societies within the restrictive environments of the pandemics.

Contribution: This study concluded that there are gender inequalities that are exacerbated by these pandemics that result in higher workloads for women. It foregrounded how existing gender inequalities were exacerbated by the pandemic, resulting in higher workloads on women. It therefore recommended that women should form empowerment groups to help focus attention on food provision to mitigate challenges women face in this role. Finally, we averred that there ought to be consultation and participation of women on issues to do with pandemics to allow for their full and productive participation in critical roles of providing food.

Keywords: COVID-19; climate change; gender mainstreaming; food security; lockdown; pandemic; women; Zimbabwe.

Background and introduction

According to Nyabeze and Chikoko (2021), pandemics, by their disruptive nature, inevitably expose weaknesses in societies in the same way they create opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic struck communities differently, although it had the same symptoms depending on the variants. Zimbabwe was not spared the effects of the pandemic when COVID-19 hit the African continent. Fear gripped citizens as all social media platforms were awash with (dis) information about the disease. Zimbabwe declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national disaster on 30 March 2020 as a way of harnessing all critical national resources to contain the virus. While no one was spared the debilitating effects of the pandemic or the virus, women tended to suffer more and in unique ways. Zimbabwe is unique in this study as the COVID-19 pandemic struck an already economically struggling nation. This means that COVID-19 cannot be singularly blamed for the challenges that the women in this study faced; rather, it exacerbated a problem that was already existing, that of hunger and poverty. Hence, the lockdown restrictions introduced in order to curtail the spread of COVID-19 have negatively impacted the lives of Zimbabweans (Nyabeze & Chikoko 2021), and according to United Nations (UN)

Note: Special Collection: African Women and Pandemics and Religion sub-edited by Sophia Chirongoma (Midlands State University, Zimbabwe) and Linda Naicker (University of South Africa, South Africa).

findings, 'while everyone is facing unprecedented challenges, women are bearing the brunt of the economic and social fallout of COVID-19' (UN Women 2020). This idea is buttressed by Chirongoma and Chitando (2021), who also posit that women bear the brunt of disasters.

In Zimbabwe, the unique challenge of the pandemic resulted from the fact that for years before, the Zimbabwean challenges have been ingrained in the Zimbabwean crisis that has manifested in various ways and has been acquiring various layers over the years (Nyambi 2013). The crisis has manifested through the escalating rates of inflation, unemployment and poor health facilities, among other issues. As the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (1996:n.p.) stresses, food security exists 'when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious foods meeting their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'. When such pandemics hit, the women, who happen to be central to food security in many societies in Zimbabwe, are affected.

Given this background, it becomes critical to situate and evaluate the challenges faced by women who must survive a pandemic in an already restrictive economic environment. To this end, Zimbabweans in general had resorted to various survival strategies well before the pandemic, in keeping with their renowned traits of resilience and the ability to withstand any situation. This article therefore addresses the nature of the challenges increased by and perpetuated by the COVID-19 regulations and restrictions on Zimbabweans, with a particular focus on women in the Marondera urban community. Marondera is a town in the Mashonaland East province of Zimbabwe, situated between Harare and Mutare. Marondera is about 75 km from the city of Harare, and for most women, whether formally or informally, peri-urban farming greatly helps to sustain their families. We explore the challenges faced by women when it comes to securing food for the family, given the COVID-19 background and the concurrent general downturn of the economy. This article opens a platform for engaging with these Marondera community women, as well as assessing the impact of the imposed restrictions in their lives as far as providing food for the family is concerned. There is a need to briefly unpack these restrictions and explain why it is imperative that these be interrogated, together with the various ways they infringe on the well-being of women who are already vulnerable members of society.

According to the World Trade Organization (2020):

[M]any of the different channels through which COVID-19 is having a greater impact on women are those at the heart of gender inequalities. Wage and educational gaps, as well as limited access to finance, a greater proportion of women in informal employment and social constraints all tend to make women more vulnerable to economic recessions. (p. 1)

This means that women exist in what Butler (2006) refers to as precarious environments and as precarious beings, they suffer more than men. On the ground, the COVID-19 restrictions in Zimbabwe resulted in the closure of industries that were regarded as providing nonessential services, together with the closure of borders, spaces from which women used to derive economic benefits. Emphasis was placed on staying at home, which would restrict any movement that was considered nonessential and dangerous during the outbreak. Even religion and social gatherings were banned, and for some, who value religion and whose religions play a significant role in their lives by helping them to cope and deal with stress, as DeRossett, Lavoie and Brooks (2021) report, such restrictions came at a high price. As Hamadani et al. (2020) reiterate, the stay-at-home orders of the period tended to impair economic conditions and mental health and further exacerbated the risk of food insecurity and intimate partner violence. The COVID-19 pandemic on its own is a stressor, and when it is added to a plethora of already existing challenges that include food shortages, it becomes tragic. This study is anchored on placing women at the centre of the discussion as a way of exploring their ways of securing food for the family amidst a pandemic. Staying at home involves idleness, together with increased food uptake, all within an environment where acquiring the food is restricted. In most homes, this role, in such challenging circumstances, falls on the women. In this regard, the overarching question that this study seeks to answer is 'How are the women coping and able to provide food for the family, given this restrictive environment?'

The study was carried out in an endeavour to achieve three interrelated objectives: firstly, to assess the impact of the COVID-19 on the role that women play in food provision; secondly, to identify how such a restrictive environment affects the marginality of food providers, using Marondera urban community as a case study; and thirdly, to examine how these effects can be mitigated and to allow for the development of women-friendly solutions when responding to pandemics.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen countries putting in place tight measures to help with containing the spread of the disease, mainly by restricting movements and stressing that most of the people should stay at home.

The gendered impact of COVID-19 on societies

In this section, we discuss the gendered impact of COVID-19 on societies. We argue that women form part of these societies and are the most affected when pandemics strike. According to Osman (2009:152), women in Sudan 'through diversity of household food provision contribute to controlling the nutritional well-being of their family and are more able to improve their household food security'. This shows that women do have a role to play with regard to ensuring that their families get food and, as we stress, are bound to be affected the most in this role during pandemics.

Various literature has reiterated the role that women largely play in ensuring food security, as Osman (2009) outlines that:

[T]he direct responsibility for household food provision largely falls on women, and that the improvement of household food security and nutritional levels is associated with women's access to income and their role in household decisions on expenditure. (n.d.)

This demonstrates the need for women to have an income in order to allow them to improve and secure food at the family or household level. When women are kept away from such economic activities through imposed restrictions, their ability to provide for their families or households is compromised. As such restrictions impact the economic potential of women, the study uses this position to evaluate the extent to which this occurs.

Of significance is the description of the role of women that states that:

[W]omen are the key to sustainable development and quality of life in the family. The varieties of roles the women assume in the family are those of wife, leader, administrator, manager of family income and last but not the least important, the mother. (Your Article Library n.d.:1)

This description is important, as it links the societal role to the Africana womanist precepts that emphasise the role of mothering and nurturing that women have. We situate this study in this context as the COVID-19 restrictions have altered that which enables women to execute their duties and, in this study, their duty of providing food for the family.

In view of the above, according to Manyonganise (2022):

Women have also been affected economically by the pandemic. It was noticeable that due to the lockdown, a lot of women lost their livelihoods that has resulted in the economic disempowerment of women because of the closure of the informal sector where women are the majority. Women have also failed to adequately feed their families during the lockdown. Complaints are coming through of how hunger has become more dangerous than the virus itself in the absence of safety nets from both religious institutions and government. (p. 237)

The quotation aptly describes how the issue of food is an important entity for discussion in the COVID-19 pandemic discourses, especially regarding how this had an impact on women.

UN Women (2020) outlines how:

[F]or the single mother in South Sudan, COVID-19 lockdown measures have paused her small business that brings food to the table, for the domestic worker in Guatemala, the pandemic has meant no job and no unemployment benefits or other protection, for countless women in economies of every size, along with losing income, unpaid care and domestic work burden has exploded. (n.p.)

The quoted sentiment emphasises how women have been largely affected by the COVID-19 lockdown measures, and

these effects do have a bearing on food provision, as will be explored in the ensuing discussion.

According to UN Women (2015):

[W]hen ecosystems become more fragile and natural resources are reduced or are out of reach, poor communities that depend on them for their survival are the most affected, particularly women, the elderly and children. (p. 9)

Women tend to suffer whenever misfortunes arise; this is the reason why this study is an interrogation of how the regulations have impacted women's role of securing food for the family. Women mostly endure the brunt of the burden when disasters occur. This is also corroborated by the UN Women (2015) report stating that:

[T]he social positioning of women in many situations means that the roles they are expected to take on are often supportive and reproductive centered on the home and local community rather than the public sphere. (p. 9)

According to Towo (2020):

[W]ith high unemployment in Africa, most women and girls form the bulk of the informal sector labour force. The huge population of women and girls in Zimbabwe and Africa present a paradox of big numbers and big challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. (n.p.)

Marondera urban women also fall under the category of those who suffer when disaster looms, hence the need to establish how they have been affected by the COVID-19 restrictions as far as their role of ensuring food security is concerned. Thibaut and Van Wijngaarden-Cremers (2020) also assert that COVID-19 has affected women more than it has men.

Zimbabwe is unique, hence the need to understand its responsiveness to pandemics in a unique manner. Literature has revealed that women and girls tend to suffer more than men and boys in any society. This study therefore analyses the vulnerable Zimbabwean women and the way in which they struggle under the Zimbabwean economic challenges, as well as establishing how they are coping with the new crisis of the pandemic. This view concurs with Manyonganise (2022), who asserts that women in Zimbabwe were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical framework

The study adopted the Africana womanist theory in highlighting the role that women play in African society, both here at home and in the African diaspora. The Africana womanist theory assists in our interrogation of the role that women play in their households. For purposes of this research, we focus mainly on the mothering and nurturing role that women play in African society. The theory was propounded by Hudson-Weems (1993), who defines it as:

[A]n ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. (p. 24)

To this end, the study focuses on the critical roles that women play in ensuring food security, not only for their immediate families but for all those around them. Taking a leaf from Africana womanism, we contend that the role that women play in securing food for the family is unimpeachable and the women often go an extra mile in ensuring that there is food for the family. To state this is in no way to demean and undermine the roles that men played during the lockdowns, which, in most cases, complemented those of the women. Still, we argue that women's challenges are unique and, in the larger scheme of things, deserve study on the basis of their being central and that they are undertaken even in the face of the unique challenges women face in African societies. The study investigates how Marondera women navigate ensuring food provision within the context of the COVID-19 restrictive environment. We seek to situate their concerns in the context of the Africana womanist discourses to fully explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in Marondera and how to mitigate such in these difficult times.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to help us explore and gain an in-depth understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on the food provision capacity among Marondera women (Creswell 2014; Rubin & Babie 2011). A case study research design was utilised to best understand the peculiar experiences of women in Marondera within the context of COVID-19. Seventeen participants were purposively selected from Marondera women. In addition, three key informants were selected using purposive sampling from nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) that deal with food security, the church and the government. Key informants provided in-depth information, and they also provided information and opinions that corroborated the findings from the participants (Patton 2002). In this study, data were collected from 20 study participants and were analysed through a thematic analysis to allow a detailed picture to emerge and to give expression to different voices but in a structured way. This was achieved through the narratives from the participants that allowed the researchers to capture all the qualitative aspects within the study, together with the emotions of the women as they explained the challenges entailed as they endeavoured to fulfil their role of food provision and the challenges they faced under the COVID-19 environment.

Results and discussion of findings

COVID-19 restrictions and regulations were put in place to help in containing the virus (Mavhunga 2020), but they then led to many challenges of food provision within the societies that governments sought to protect from the pandemic. In this section, we discuss the results obtained, and we also analyse the findings of the study through a presentation of the themes gathered from the interactions with the participants. The impact of the COVID-19 restrictions is therefore presented through the themes discussed below:

The restrictive COVID-19 lockdown measures alter the day-to-day activities of women

The main aim of this study was to examine the impact of the COVID-19-imposed restrictions on women, and we initially make the premise that women are the main providers of food at the household level. The COVID-19 restrictions have in practical terms altered the day-to-day activities of women that used to empower and allow them to provide food for their families, as this is also buttressed by the (WTO 2020:7) report stating that 'many women have therefore been unable to work and, in some cases, to earn a living during the lockdown'.

The women highlighted that they are the key securers of food in their households. With the COVID-19 regulations, the women could not travel to the market to purchase fruits and vegetables at reasonable prices. They could not get into the central business district (CBD) either, making it impossible to procure some essentials they had customarily acquired in small amounts, in line with the monies they would have obtained through their endeavours. In addition to this, the women had to live with the health fears and uncertainties induced by the pandemic. Nobody really knew where, how and when they would contract the disease, added to the tension and the general unwellness women had to grapple with. One participant said:

'I normally go to the market with just a few dollars and buy fruits and vegetables for the family, but with COVID-19, it is difficult to go the market. I also fear for my health as I travel to the market. I am also afraid that if I go to the market, I might contract the disease and spread it to my family.' (Participant 1, 39 year old, university lecturer)

Sharing the same concerns, another participant had this to say:

'The distance that I have to travel to get to the market is long, with no transport, I will have to walk. It is difficult to walk as the roads are usually empty. I fear for my life.' (Participant 2, 24 year old, unemployed, mother of two)

The two excerpts above reiterate the fact that food provision and food security at the household level were affected and that the pandemic impacted the women in various ways. These women could not travel to the market because of reasonable concerns, notably the fear of being raped and robbed, as well as the fear of leaving the house and contracting the disease. This lack of movement therefore negatively impacted food provision for the family.

Skipping meals

The issue of food insecurities was also predicted as the pandemic hit the nations. Abdul (2020) opined how 'the outbreak is occurring in countries that already had significant food insecurity problems'. That shows that the food insecurities did not come with the pandemic, but they worsened an already affected nation and group of people, as

indicated in this study. From the interviews, some participants highlighted that they rely on their backyard gardens, but these were strained by the many hours spent at home as more family members had to be fed. The gardens were therefore not given a chance to produce; hence, demand became higher than supply. One of the participants put it across aptly:

'My whole family is at home, and under normal circumstances, children will be at school. Some are in boarding school and so they are catered for at school. During the lockdown, the children were at home and by their nature, they want to eat. Children were not going outside to play, so most of the time they were in the house and asking for food to eat. This strained the food supply in the house and the garden was also strained. The vegetables in the garden were strained, resulting in me being unable to provide lunch for the family.' (Participant 3, 42 year old, teacher, widow)

The same challenge was also confirmed by another participant, who said:

'We are no longer having a full breakfast meal. For instance, when we eat porridge in the morning, we will not have tea around mid-morning, rather, we will wait to eat lunch, then supper, sometimes we skip lunch.' (Participant 4, 30 year old, vending)

This was further corroborated by a key informant who explained that:

'We have had cases of women who are communicating on the WhatsApp chat groups that they are no longer having the expected number of meals as we discuss with women in the women's groups.' (Informant 1, aged 42)

From the above excerpts, we noted how women were really struggling to provide all meals to their families during the lockdown period because of strained and dwindling food supplies within the home. On a positive note, though, the participants indicated that they joined various WhatsApp cooking groups where they were learning skills to feed the family by making use of available resources. Widely mentioned were the Rudo Zvobgo¹-initiated Hotseat platforms that saw women from various locations participating in the cooking groups. This was because cooking was the major activity for the domesticated families; women had to resort to cooking and baking, and members in these groups shared recipes.

Failure to take part in activities that help to secure food for the family

Women also participated in *mikando*,² where they would pay equal amounts of money at the end of each month and the lump sum would be used to purchase basic household groceries in bulk, which would then be shared equally among

1. Rudo Zvobgo is a Zimbabwean woman who facilitates Hotseat debates, and there are various WhatsApp platforms, like Hotseat cooking, Hotseat Farming and Hotseat Doctors, among other groups, handling different topics. These platforms became vibrant during the massive COVID-19 lockdowns, as most people resorted to social media platforms that were not affected by the regulations.

2. Mikando or round refers to what most urban women use as a means to survive as they take turns to share money that they would have put together through equal contributions, these can be shared in the form of money, groceries or household gadgets.

the members at 4-month intervals. Most women who were informally employed could not go out to work because of the restrictions, and they could no longer afford to make contributions, resulting in critical food shortages at the household level.

On another note, women could not attend *china chemadzimai*³ because of the tight restrictions. Such gatherings held value for women and not attending them impacted how women survived during the trying period. One of the participants highlighted that:

'We are taught about various ways of making money like making oils, soap and perfumes and because we are not going for our weekly meetings [*china chemadzimai*], we do not know how to provide for the families, we can't earn a living by staying at home.' (Participant 5, aged 41, unemployed, female)

According to (Reliefweb 2020:n.p.), 'for women already living in poverty, these impacts can be a shock to their economic stability overall and impede their ability to purchase critical necessities, such as medicine and food'. This shows how women in Zimbabwe struggle to provide food for the family in a pandemic that is compounded by the fact that most of them are already living in poverty, as most of the monthly earnings are below the poverty datum line.

One of the participants had this to say:

'I normally go to the local market for fresh vegetables and cheaper items as sometimes if we go to the market earlier we buy straight from the farmers. However, because of the curfew, I cannot go to the market to get cheaper goods. In the process, I end up getting less than I would get from the few vendors who are doing door to door selling. This is also putting us at the risk of contracting the disease.' (Participant 6, 29 year old, flea market dealer)

Clearly, the imposed restrictions negatively impacted the day-to-day activities that women would undertake in order to feed their families. One of the key informants supported this point by saying that:

'Normally, these women go to the market with little amounts but they form groups of four to ten where they buy for example a box of tomatoes and share. This means that even those with little amounts will go home with something for the family.' (Informant 2)

The restrictions could not allow such groupings, as even those who would want to benefit from sharing were afraid of contracting the COVID-19 virus, as the process involved handling food as well as little or no social distancing. Even in the United Kingdom, 'income losses arising from the COVID-19 crisis have had an immediate impact on food security' (Loopstra 2020:n.p.). This shows that the restrictions

3. *China chemadzimai* is a church meeting that is meant for women. Women gather every Thursday to discuss women's issues. Because of the increasing number of women employed either formally or informally, working women can meet on Saturdays, but the term remains as *china*. In the contemporary context, it is no longer about the day the meeting is held, yet the name and its objectives have not changed.

and failure to undertake daily activities impact the provision of food.

Domestic violence

Another notable impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on food provision was related to domestic violence. Mashiri and Mawire (2013) aver that gender-based violence has become a cause of concern the world over; Zimbabweans are therefore not spared. This was not only caused by other marital challenges, but it was also a result of the failure of the women to provide food for the husband, who would have spent the whole day at home. One of the participants reiterated that:

‘My husband is always at home due to the restrictions, he does not provide food for the family at all but he expects to have all the meals. If I fail to provide food, he beats me up.’ (Participant 7, 35 year old, pre school teacher)

Drawing from this revelation, it is clear that food shortage at the household level fuels domestic violence. Women in some instances are regarded as the sole providers of food for the family, and failure to fulfil that duty results in them being subjected to violence. Lack of food results in domestic violence, as the man will be constantly reminded that there is no food. His worth is challenged, and that can fuel violence (Archambeault 2020). Once these women are subjected to violence, they will not be able to undertake other household chores, and this compounds challenges associated with food securities in the homes. This resonates with Sifat’s (2020) study on women in Bangladesh, where cases of domestic violence, anxiety and mental health issues have been on the increase during the COVID-19 period.

The role of women cannot be ignored, and their presence in community development should not be ignored. This is the reason why they should be protected at the family level so that they can contribute at a larger level. Children are also emotionally affected when they see their parents fighting. This is confirmed by Thornton (2014), who argues that children who live in a home where they are exposed to domestic violence represent a disempowered group. We highlight how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic does not only affect women but the whole household, because whenever there is a food shortage, the whole family suffers.

To support the above participant’s views, a key informant outlined how more cases of domestic violence were reported because of the people staying at home throughout the day. She explained how:

‘It is not bad for people to stay at home. The problem comes when there is no food for the people staying at home. When there is no food, women bear the brunt.’ (Informant 1)

The World Health Organization (WHO 2013) also notes how violence against women has been severe. This already existing problem was therefore exacerbated by the pandemic.

During our study, we also observed that there was more to food shortages than meets the eye. Lack of food disturbs family peace and, in the process, affects the mental well-being of women. The same observations were also made in Iran:

As the disease grows, authorities are asking people to stay at home and, therefore, many people have to spend extended time with their roommates or families. This situation can [result in] ultimate conflict, whether it be full-blown argumentations or passive-aggressive comments. (Pakravan-Charvadeh et al. 2021:1626)

These sentiments echo Manyonganise (2022), who avers that, ‘Within the Zimbabwean context, women have been/are experiencing all forms of violence be it physical, emotional, psychological and verbal during the lockdown period’, which demonstrates that women were exposed to various forms of abuse during the lockdown, and in the case of this study, food shortages at the household level could have contributed to this.

Children suffering from malnutrition

From the interviews conducted, it was revealed that children are suffering malnutrition as the women who are responsible for feeding these children are struggling to provide food. When mothers fail to provide food, the children inevitably fall sick and the impact is doubled, as they will have to seek medical attention for the children. This was aptly expressed by one of the participants, who shared the following information:

‘The children are also suffering from malnutrition because I am failing to provide enough nutritious foods. If I fail to feed the children, they will be prone to getting sick, and I do not have money for medication. If only I could be going to sell my sweeping brooms, I would at least get food for my children. Now that I am staying at home, I am failing to secure food for my children.’ (Participant 8, 26 year old, vendor)

This reveals how women suffer the extra challenge of having to look after malnourished children as well as having to seek for medical treatment on behalf of the children. This shows the impact of the restrictions on women as their movements to places where they can find food for their families are limited. Fore et al. (2020) point out how the pandemic has altered the daily eating patterns among families, as they say:

[A]t the same time, more children are becoming malnourished due to the deteriorating quality of their diets, interruptions in nutrition and other essential services, and the socioeconomic shocks created by the pandemic in LMICs. (n.d.)

This scenario can be linked to the participants’ sentiments in this study, as they could not access nutritional food for their children.

One key informant explained how women are used to going to peri-urban farms to trade for food.

'Local women normally go and trade clothes and household goods for farm produce in the nearby farms. But with these restrictions on movement, they cannot travel hence their children are starving.' (Informant 3)

These restrictions on movement and curfews largely affect the day-to-day hustling tactics of women, who are the major providers of food. This failure to travel also affects the children, as they suffer from malnutrition. Hamadani et al. (2020) buttress these sentiments on malnutrition, as they stress how COVID-19 has impacted low-income countries as far as food security is concerned.

Exposure to risk and danger

There are various tasks that have to be taken care of before food is brought to the table, and these include fetching water and firewood. The search for alternative energy sources, for example, comes at great personal risk for the women during the pandemic. One participant stated that:

'As women, we have to fetch water and firewood which have also become risky as most of the areas we go to fetch firewood are often secluded thereby putting our lives in danger.' (Participant 9, 31 year old, widow)

Mangizvo, Mupfuriri and Mushaka (2016) reveal how women spend longer hours in queues as they try to fetch water from community water sources. Fetching water is part of the processes of ensuring food for the family, and given the COVID-19 restrictions and curfew times, women could not really get the much-needed resource on time, thereby increasing the burden. This shows that the COVID-19 restrictions resulted in people in nonessential businesses staying at home. This means that there were few people out and about. Movement of women was therefore risky, as leaving the house to fetch water or firewood could expose them to rape. To support this, Pahwaringira, Chaminuka and Muranda (2022) affirm the importance of having water sources at close proximity, as the distance to the water source also affects the well-being of women, who will be required to prepare food for the family. The regulations did not allow women to travel these long distances, yet they still had the role of feeding the family. The participants, however, stated that in some instances, when they got water from the taps, they would fetch a lot of it and fill several containers for future use, but this would not last for many days. Coronavirus disease 2019 restrictions worsened the burden on women, as they had other existing challenges that they deal with on a daily basis. These included serious water shortages in urban areas, as well as load shedding that would result in them looking for alternative energy sources.

Another key informant emphasised the plight of women by indicating that:

'Women normally travel outside the residential locations in search of firewood. With these restrictions, it is difficult for them to go out and look for firewood to prepare meals, in the process, securing food for the family becomes difficult.' (Informant 3)

In addition to this, the lockdown meant that access to the pieces of land from which women supplement food provisions was severely curtailed. One study participant put it across that:

'We survive on small-scale agriculture and due to these restrictions; we cannot go and work in the fields. This means that there will not be enough to feed the family.' (Participant 10, 42 year old, small scale farmer)

Implications for women and gender equality

The impact of the COVID-19 regulations on women and food provision is a critical issue that needs to be considered by policymakers. Women have many tasks to undertake at the household level. They are the most affected by the effects of the restrictions; when there is a shortage of food, they are affected; this concurs with Chirongoma and Chitando's (2021) assertion that women tend to suffer more when disasters strike communities. This means that the process of securing food for the family affects their mental and physical health, as they are forced to stretch in order to meet the demands of the family. This has been revealed through the findings that food is not something that is readily available given the existing economic environment in Zimbabwe, coupled with the closure of what has been grouped as nonessential services, to which most of the women belong, if they are not formally employed.

If women suffer mental health issues, it means the family setup is disturbed. Physical and health issues are also critical, as they enable women to fully provide food for the family. Almeida et al. (2020) stress the fact that parenting can be difficult, especially during a pandemic, hence the need to provide social support for women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has argued that women tend to suffer triple effects of challenges that befall society. Where men suffer a single blow, women suffer triple blows because of the nature of the stereotypes against them, gender imbalances and the impact of the pandemic. The study has revealed that the impact of the restrictions was largely felt by women who have to provide food for the family under restrictive environments, including the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Zimbabwean crisis in its various manifestations. We noted how the restrictions also positively impacted some women, whose skills of cooking for their families were sharpened by the many hours spent at home. The study acknowledges the presence of men in these households, although emphasis was placed on women as vulnerable people in society. Having discussed the findings of this study, we therefore recommend that the roles that women play in producing and providing food for their families, and the community at large, should be equally shared with their male counterparts so that it does not become a burden that largely falls upon women. Pandemics cannot really be predicted, and by that token, they catch people unprepared.

Hence, the findings of the study are an eye opener to the nation at large. There is need for preparedness on the part of individuals at household levels as well as for the nation at large to lessen the burden on women.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the academic guidance provided by Dr Sophia Chirongoma.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the writing of this article.

Ethical considerations

The authors followed all ethical standards for research. The ethical clearance was provided by the Zimbabwe Open University.

Funding information

This article was published with the assistance of the Humboldt Research Hub in Africa, on African Women, and Pandemics and Religion based at the University of Zimbabwe.

Data availability

Data sharing information is not applicable to this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Abdul, I.M., 2020, 'Covid-19, lockdown and transitory food insecurity in Nigeria', *Food & Agribusiness Management* 1(1), 31–35. <https://doi.org/10.26480/fabm.01.2020.26.30>
- Almeida, M., Shrestha, A., Stojanac, D. & Miller, L.J., 2020, 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's mental health', *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 23, 741–748. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-020-01092-2>
- Archambeault, L., 2020, *Beyond the shadow pandemic: Protecting a generation of girls from gender-based violence through COVID to recovery*, Save the Children, Georgetown.
- Butler, J., 2006, *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*, Verso, London.
- Chirongoma, S. & Chitando, E., 2021, 'What did we do to our mountain? African eco-feminist and indigenous responses to cyclone idai in chimanimani and chipinge districts, Zimbabwe', *African Journal of Gender and Religion*, 27(1), 65–90. <https://doi.org/10.14426/ajgr.v27i1.788>
- Creswell, J.W., 2014, *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*, 4th edn., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- DeRossett, T., LaVoie, D. & Brooks, D., 2021, 'Religious coping strategies amidst a pandemic: Impact on covid-19 related anxiety', *National Library of Medicine* 60(5), 3161–3176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01385-5>
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1996, *Rome declaration on world food security and world food summit plan of action*, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome.
- Fore, H.H., Dongyu, Q., Beasley, D.M. & Ghebreyesus, T.A., 2020, 'Child malnutrition and COVID-19: The time to act is now', *Lancet*, viewed 23 June 2022, from [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31648-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31648-2)
- Hamadani, J.D., Hasan, M.I., Baldi, A.J., Hossain, S.J., Shiraji, S., Bhuiyan, M.S.A. et al., 2020, 'Immediate impact of stay-at-home orders to control COVID-19 transmission on socioeconomic conditions, food insecurity, mental health, and intimate partner violence in Bangladeshi women and their families: an interrupted time series', *The Lancet Global Health* 8(11), e1380–e1389. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(20\)30366-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30366-1)
- Hudson-Weems, C., 1993, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Bedford Publishers, Michigan.
- Loopstra, R., 2020, *Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown*, viewed 19 June 2022, from https://enuf.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/report_covid19foodinsecurity-final_1_3.pdf.
- Mangizvo, R.V., Mupfuri, E. & Mushaka, C., 2016, 'Vulnerability and resilience in the face of water shortages: The case of Mkoba 19 in Gweru city, Zimbabwe', *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 5(1), 27–43.
- Manyonganise, M., 2022, 'When a pandemic wears the face of a woman' Intersections of religion and gender during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe', in F. Sibanda, T. Muyambo & E. Chitando (eds.), in *Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic in Southern Africa*, Routledge, London.
- Mashiri, L. & Mawire, R.P., 2013, 'Conceptualisation of gender based violence in Zimbabwe', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3(15), 13–25.
- Mavhunga, C., 2020, 'Zimbabwe leader extends COVID-19 lockdown', *Voice of America*, 16 May.
- Nyabeze, K. & Chikoko, W., 2021, 'Socio-economic impact of COVID-19 lockdown measures on the informal sector livelihoods in Zimbabwe', *African Journal of Social Work*, viewed 27 May 2022, from <https://africansocialwork.files.wordpress.com/2021/07/paper-a-socio-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-informal-sector-in-zimbabwe.pdf?msckid=d02190d4cf8c1>.
- Nyambi, O., 2013, 'Nation in crisis: Alternative literary representations of Zimbabwe Post-2000', PhD Thesis, Stellenbosch University.
- Osman, I.F., 2009, 'The role of women in providing and improving household food security in Sudan: Implications for reducing hunger and malnutrition', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 10(4), 144–167. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss4/10>.
- Pahwaringira, L., Chaminuka, L. & Muranda, K., 2022, 'The impacts of water shortages on women's time-space activities in the high density suburb of Mabvuku in Harare', *wh20: The Journal of Gender and Water* 4, Article 8. <https://repository.upenn.edu/wh20journal/vol4/iss1/8>.
- Pakravan-Charvadeh, M.R., Savari, M., Haider, K., Gholamrezai, S. & Flora, C., 2021, 'Determinants of household vulnerability to food insecurity during COVID-19 lockdown in a mid-term period in Iran', *Public Health Nutrition* 24(7), 1619–1628. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021000318>
- Patton. M.Q., 2002, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 3rd edn., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Reliefweb, 2020, *Covid-19 and women's economic empowerment*, viewed 06 April 2022, from <https://reliefweb.nt/report/world/covid-19-and-women-s-economic-empowerment?msckid=09905aefc8911ecab6f9567bf2eb645>.
- Rubin, A. & Babbie, E., 2011, *Research methods for social work*, Brooks/Cole Cengage Learning, New York.
- Sifat, R.I., 2020, 'Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic violence in Bangladesh', *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 53, 102393. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102393>
- Thibaut, F. & Van Wijngaarden-Cremers, P.J.M., 2020, 'Women's mental health in the time of COVID-19 pandemic', *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 1, 588372. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fgwh.2020.588372>
- Thornton, V., 2014, 'Understanding the emotional impact of domestic violence on young children', *Educational & Child Psychology* 31(1), 90–100.
- Towo, A., 2020, *Covid-19 Zim lockdown: Gendered impacts, implications and effects on women and girls as primary caregivers*, Kubatana, viewed 23 June 2022, from <https://kubatanaana.net.2020/04/10/covid-19-zim-lockdown-gendered-impacts-implications-and-effects-on-women-and-girls-as-primary-care-givers/>.
- UN Women, 2015, *Assessment of women's livelihood needs in three eco zones of Bangladesh*, viewed 05 August 2022, from [https://unwoman30112015_2.pdf\(unclearn.org\)](https://unwoman30112015_2.pdf(unclearn.org)).
- UN Women, 2020, *COVID-19 and its economic toll on women: The story behind the numbers on*, viewed 09 August 2021, from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/a/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women>.
- World Health Organization, 2013, *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*, viewed 07 July 2022, from <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/9789241564625/en/>.
- World Trade Organisation (WTO), 2020, *The economic impact of Covid-19 on women in vulnerable sectors and economies*, viewed 09 May 2022, from https://www.wto.org/english/news/e/news20/e/info_note_covid_05aug_e.pdf?msckid=f27e3fcbf8811ecb9ae026571404979.
- Your Article Library, n.d., *Role of women in society*, viewed 11 May 2022, from <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/family/role-of-women-in-the-family-and-society/47638>.