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Gendered Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Food Security, Agricultural Production, Income and Family Relations in Rural Areas of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

Madina Junussova, Roman Mogilevskii, Mira Maulsharif, Annarita Macchioni Giaquinto,
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Madina Junussova*, Roman Mogilevskii*, Mira Maulsharif*, Annarita Macchioni Giaquinto**, Erdgin Mane**, Zalina Enikeeva*, Mariia Ianova*, Baimat Niiazaliev*, and Saule Chalbasova*

Abstract: Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated containment measures implemented to control the spread of the virus have exacerbated existing gender inequalities. This paper explores changes in agriculture, food security, nutrition, and family dynamics in the rural areas of Central Asia —specifically, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan — during the pandemic, focusing on women and men. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analyses, the findings reveal that rural women were disproportionately affected due to pre-existing gender disparities and limited decision-making power. Women experienced compounded challenges, including increased unpaid work, additional agricultural labour and household chores, difficulties associated with online schooling and healthcare management, limited access to agricultural resources, and a higher risk of domestic violence. The pandemic heightened women’s vulnerability to food insecurity, whereas Central Asian governments’ interventions failed to support all women effectively. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to guide future policymaking, aiming to mitigate shocks and stressors and develop gender-responsive actions that empower rural women and men. These recommendations focus on improving food security and overall well-being in the rural regions of Central Asia, recognizing and addressing the distinct challenges women faced during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 impact, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, gender, agriculture, food security, nutrition, inequality, gender-based violence, gender-responsive policy making

JEL codes: D10, J16 J22, Q12

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1. Introduction

Globally, restrictive measures taken to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to the widening of pre-existing gender inequalities, especially in rural areas (UNECE, 2020).

In most developing countries, public systems in rural areas are weak, so women routinely take on the burden of caring for children and the elderly (Sibanda, 2019). Rural women are primarily responsible for most household chores but lack decision-making power, hence their mobility and opportunity to engage in paid work are limited (Doss and Quisumbing, 2020). Women in rural areas generally have limited access to information and market resources, which prevents them from playing a more active role in productive activities (FAO, 2024). In addition, domestic violence and discrimination against women are dominant factors hampering their well-being and holding them back from trainings or better income-earning opportunities (UN Women, 2020).

Rural women in Central Asia have been disproportionately affected during the COVID-19 pandemic because of their low decision-making power and limited access to finance and services (UN Women, 2020). During the pandemic, rural women have taken on additional responsibilities in providing food, farming, home-schooling and other household activities (UNECE, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed mental stress, an increased physical workload and food insecurity on rural women of Central Asia. Moreover, rural women risk being underrepresented and of not benefiting from COVID-19-related government assistance (FAO, 2020).

Most studies analysing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Central Asian countries emphasize the lack of sex-disaggregated data on rural areas, preventing an assessment of the gendered impact of the pandemic on rural women and men. At the same time, the practice has shown that efforts exclusively targeting women are ineffective if men feel left out (Sibanda, 2019). Hence, it is crucial to study the gender-disaggregated impacts of the pandemic on both rural women and men and to introduce effective gender-responsive social protection policies (UNICEF, 2020). Adequate evidence-based national strategies must incorporate a gender dimension to pursue gender equality and change rural community behaviour and attitudes towards women.

This paper presents the key findings of the joint research project undertaken by the Institute of Public Policy and the Administration of the University of Central Asia and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), initiated and funded by FAO. The study fills the current gender statistics gap by assessing gendered analyses during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, covering its effect on agriculture, food security, nutrition, access to resources and services, workload and changes in family relations in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Results have shown that rural women have been disproportionately affected during the pandemic because of existing gender inequalities prior to the pandemic in all three countries. As a result of their limited decision-making power within the household, women have fewer opportunities to access the resources and assets required to fully benefit from farming activities. In addition, more rural women than men reported decreased food consumption, while pregnant and breastfeeding women reported being unable to access health services and medicine. Rural women also reported increased unpaid workloads, while having to combine agricultural activities with household chores, treating sick family members and helping children with their online schooling.

While Central Asian governments did initiate some financial and food assistance, not all rural women who had experienced income loss were reached. Losses of jobs and income also raised tensions and sparked acts of aggression, making rural women vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse. More-

over, rural women in the three countries remained unprotected and unaware of what to do during a family conflict.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review, while Section 3 describes the methodology. After that, Section 4 presents critical findings on agriculture, labour migration, income loss, food security, work burden, access to services and family relations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report concludes with Section 5 by presenting gender-responsive policy suggestions to address the different needs of rural women and men in the targeted Central Asian countries.

2. Literature Review

Between 702 and 828 million people were affected by hunger in 2021 globally, representing an increase of about 150 million since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the subsequent economic downturns (FAO *et al.*, 2022). The gender gap in the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity, based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), widened considerably in 2020 and 2021, primarily driven by Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. In 2021, the gender gap reached 4.3 percentage points – (with 31.9 percent of women in the world being insecure compared to 27.6 percent of men), while it was 3 percentage points in 2020 and 1.7 percentage points before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups in Asia and the Pacific identified that food groups rich in micronutrients (fresh fruit and vegetables) essential for lactating and pregnant women are more susceptible to price fluctuations because of their supply chain (Kim, Kim & Park, 2020). In addition, the Global Report on the Food Crisis estimated an increase of 135 million individuals at a greater risk of food insecurity compared to pre-pandemic levels in 55 countries, including the Middle East and Asia (FSIN [Food Security Information Network] and Global Network Against Food Crises, 2020). As consequence of disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the levels of risk affecting the food economy have grown in Central Asia (Workie *et al.*, 2020). This rising food insecurity has placed pregnant women and children in the region at greater risk (FAO *et al.*, 2021). Children had limited access to nutritious and balanced meals because of school closures and the suspension of school meal programmes.

Central Asian economies have been particularly vulnerable to shocks and structural issues amid the COVID-19 crisis because of their low levels of income diversification and high dependence on income from the out-migration of labour, as well as imported goods. The COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated the vulnerabilities faced by migrants from Central Asia engaged in seasonal, agricultural or manufacturing jobs (Zivetz *et al.*, 2020). In Kyrgyzstan, more than half of its labour out-migrants reported losing their jobs as a result of the pandemic (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises, 2020; UNDP, 2021). According to a survey by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021), from March 2020, 51 percent of Kyrgyzstan households reported income loss as the main effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP, 2020a) assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on livelihoods in Tajikistan studied the implications for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises and migrants. The study showed a strong correlation between household income and migrant labour, with household income falling when the primary breadwinner is a migrant worker. In Tajikistan, labour remittances fell by 15 percent because of border closures, and approximately 60 percent of households found it challenging to afford a nutritious diet (Zivetz *et al.*, 2020). In Uzbekistan, remittances represent 10 percent of GDP, and it has suffered from a decrease in inflows during the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2020a). In addition, people engaged in non-farming

activities in Uzbekistan experienced decreased purchasing power following the rise in food prices (Muratov, Pardaev & Hasanov, 2020).

In 45 developing countries, including Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Erokhin and Gao (2020) investigate the causal relationship between food security and macroeconomic variables. They found strong evidence of a correlation between access to food and food security in Tajikistan, suggesting that price fluctuations impact food insecurity. The study also estimated that a one percent increase in COVID-19 cases in Tajikistan led to a 0.14 percent increase in people with insufficient food. In Kyrgyzstan, changes in the food trade balance have caused a ten percent increase in the undernourished population. Higher dependence on imported food has also been reported, causing local food insecurity to become more volatile with respect to changes in import-export trade patterns. Another study in Kyrgyzstan identified the relatively poor harvest as a leading cause of poor access to food for 20.4 percent of the population working in the agricultural sector (FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises, 2020).

The Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2021) studied the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and food security in ten countries, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Despite an increase in Uzbekistan's gross national income and the efforts to expand its economy, Uzbekistan's increase in agricultural productivity has not kept up with the pace of overall economic growth. COVID-19 imposed regional trade restrictions, which left food supply and prices volatile in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are highly dependent on imported grains. The price fluctuations in Tajikistan resulted from speculation, decreased supply and a lag in supply responses. In Central Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on purchasing power and the ability to afford essential food items, as demand-side factors such as food expenditure have a higher risk of exposure than supply-side factors.

UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), SIAR (Research Consulting) and STA ACT (Social Technologies Age (2020) conducted a gender assessment of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihoods of men and women in Kyrgyzstan. Overall, 33 percent of men and 17 percent of women reported decreased agricultural income. A higher percentage of women (40 percent) compared to men (28 percent) reported being stressed owing to the closure of schools. In Kyrgyzstan, 60 percent of women reported increased cooking, cleaning, and other household work. In addition, 17 percent of surveyed women who lost their jobs lived in rural areas. Women in rural areas seldom have access to remote working facilities, online platforms, or Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) skills. Gender-biased social norms often obstruct rural women's and girls' access to and use of digital technology, intensifying other prevalent constraining factors, such as poverty and poor infrastructure. From March to April 2020, which are usually active farming months, the pandemic posed a challenge for rural communities in accessing seeds and fuel, increasing the burden of work on rural women. The number of domestic violence cases registered in Kyrgyzstan from January to March 2020 reached 2,319, with 95 percent of victims being in the 21–50 age group.

In Uzbekistan, Seitz *et al.* (2020) assessed the risks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how best to assist vulnerable groups. In Uzbekistan, the socioeconomic impact has varied depending on age, access to social assistance, economic conditions and dependence on remittances. With mobility restrictions in place, people with disabilities (PwDs) have been disproportionately affected, as they have difficulty accessing markets. Income from all sources fell by 38 percent in 2020 compared to the previous year.

Compared to 2019, the percentage of households receiving income from remittances fell by 54 per-

cent in 2020. Individuals unable to afford food rose from 9 percent to 12 percent in April 2020, while 16 percent of respondents also were not able to obtain medical help.

The World Bank's (2021) gender assessment report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tajikistan highlighted several substantial, pre-existing inequalities that amplified the adverse effects of the pandemic on women. Tajik female enrolment in preschool, middle school and higher education lags behind that of their male counterparts, eventually leading to future occupational segregation. In 2016, 69 percent of the working-age female population was not engaged in paid work and employed women earned only 60 percent of their male counterparts' earnings. Disruptions in health services caused by the pandemic limited women's access to reproductive health services. During the COVID-19 outbreak, teenage pregnancy and maternal mortality increased, as well as the frequency and severity of gender-based violence (GBV).

Existing studies acknowledge the lack of detailed gender-disaggregated data on rural areas of Central Asian countries. This gender knowledge gap prevents the assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on agriculture, food insecurity, income, access to services, workload and GBV. UN Women, UNFPA, SIAR & STA ACT (2020) and UN Women (2021) studied data availability in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and indicated the need for gender-disaggregated data to produce detailed gender analyses. The study recommended addressing data gaps to inform evidence-based gender-transformative policies in line with Uzbekistan's strategic framework for gender equality.

Given the current data gap in rural areas, this paper contributes to enhancing knowledge about the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on agriculture, food security, access to resources and services, changes in workload and domestic violence in rural areas of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

3. Methodology

The study applied a mixed-methods approach by combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to better understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural women and men in the selected Central Asian countries. The study started with a comprehensive literature review of relevant papers and reports using a content analysis technique (carried out January–February 2021). The results have been used in developing a preliminary hypothesis, phone survey, and interview questions. The phone survey (April–May 2021) aimed to collect quantitative data on agriculture, food security, mobility, workload and family relations.¹ Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted in the final data collection stage (May–June 2021) to clarify phone survey findings and obtain detailed information from rural women about the causes and consequences of the pandemic on them and their families.²

The survey was conducted remotely through software-based, computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATIs). The target population were men and women living in the rural areas of selected Central Asian countries. The study sample is a random selection of 3 000 people (1 000 per country) living in rural areas of the three targeted Central Asian countries, including rural women and men in Kyrgyzstan (aged 18–75), Tajikistan (aged 18–78), and Uzbekistan (aged 18–74). The study respondents were equally divided by gender, with 500 rural women and 500 rural men per country, to ensure adequate representativeness. The sample size was distributed proportionally to the total rural pop-

1 The phone survey results were analysed using quantitative methods such as statistical analysis in Stata.

2 Transcripts of the KIIs were analysed using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

ulation in each region of the studied countries. Despite efforts in sample design to have the most representative sample, we should acknowledge that phone surveys are biased by design because they target only those with access to a landline or mobile telephone.

Trained national experts on agriculture and gender issues from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan conducted 60 face-to-face KIIs (20 per country). Key informants included four national and local government representatives, two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) members and 14 rural women per country. The national experts conducted interviews following a specially developed guide containing several open-ended questions. Before each interview, the trained national experts explained the study's objectives to each respondent and obtained their oral and written consent to participate. The KII results were analysed using NVivo software.

4. The Gendered Impact of COVID-19

4.1. Changes in Agricultural Production During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Border closures and mobility restrictions posed challenges for rural women and men engaged in farming. Routinely agricultural-relevant processes were delayed owing to a lack of fuel and lubricants for ploughing, sowing, harrowing and cultivating fields. Some farmers could not timeously purchase feed and fertilizers. Moreover, the lack of access to agricultural production resources (e.g. seeds and fuel) affected harvests and caused disruptions in the supply chains of foods and other goods, and increased food prices. Almost all respondents reported increased prices of inputs required in their agricultural activity. In addition, livestock farmers of both genders faced additional expenses because hay and alfalfa prices had risen by between 50–100 percent.

and women farmers suffered from income losses because of their inability to sell agricultural products or because they received lower revenue for their products. Smallholder producers of perishable products, such as fruits and vegetables, were hit the hardest. Farmers who could not sell their livestock suffered further losses because they had to feed and support them for several months. Farmers had to sell milk and meat to villagers at lower prices when the Kyrgyz government closed roads. Notably, in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, farmers trading agricultural products and selling directly from their fields faced no pandemic-related difficulties in accessing markets.

In 2020, based on ILOSTAT employment statistics, the agricultural workforce in Kyrgyzstan comprised 43.83 percent female workers, while in Tajikistan, this figure was 53.37 percent, and in Uzbekistan, it stood at only 32.86 percent. A year-over-year comparison with 2019 indicates a more significant decrease in the participation of women in agricultural employment compared to men, with a decline of -9.4 for women versus 2.7 percent for men in Kyrgyzstan, -0.4 for women versus 0.9 percent for men in Tajikistan, and -4.8 for women versus 3.8 percent for men in Uzbekistan.³

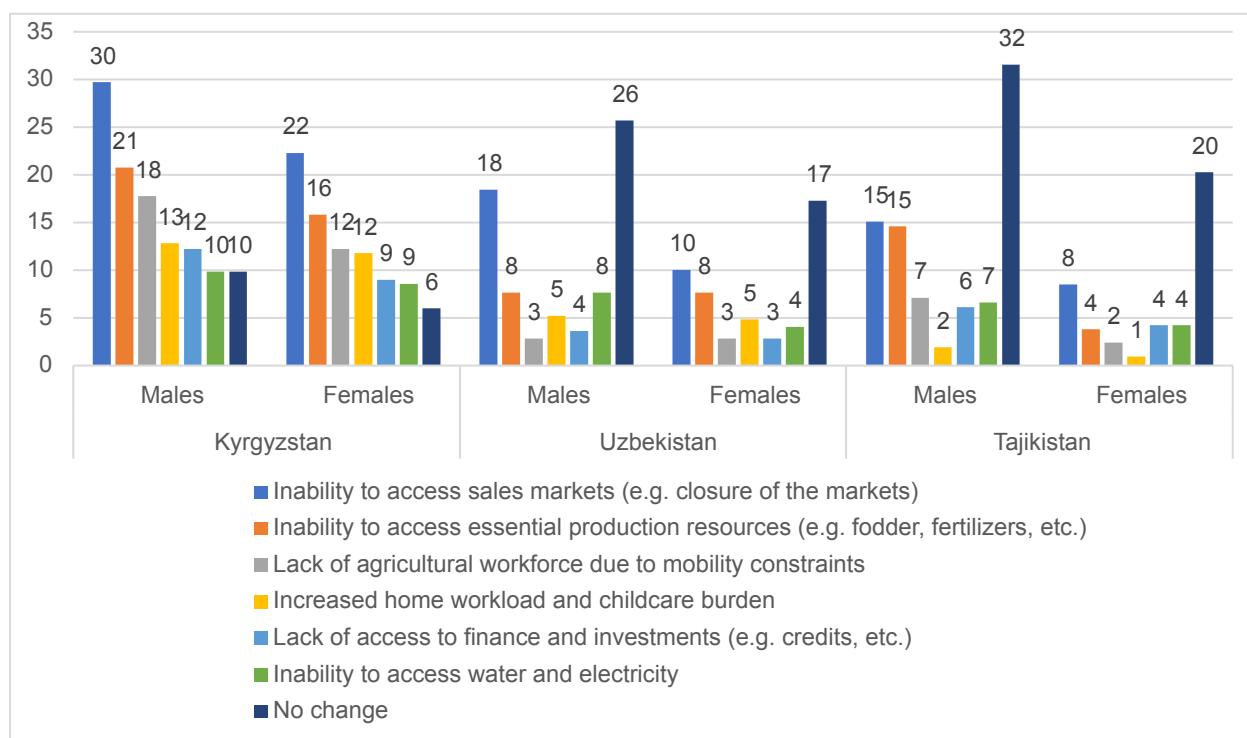
In rural areas, only a minority of both men and women are engaged in salaried or waged agricultural work, ranging from 1 to 5 percent. Our survey findings reveal that more rural men than rural women are involved in agricultural production. Additionally, a higher proportion of rural men compared to women are engaged in owning farming or livestock businesses, with a statistically significant difference ranging from 33 percentage points in Kyrgyzstan to 10 percentage points in Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, more rural men than women reported that the COVID-19

3 Data made available from Costa et al, 2023 paper presented at UNECE in May 2023.

pandemic had harmed agriculture. Among individuals belonging to households producing vegetables and animals for consumption and selling or selling only, a statistically significant lower proportion of females (8–22 percent), compared to males (15–30 percent),⁴ reported that they could not access markets to sell their products during the COVID-19 pandemic in all three countries (see Figure 1). In addition, a higher percentage of men compared to women reported struggling to obtain the essential resources required for agricultural production in both Kyrgyzstan (21 percent of men and 16 percent of women) and Tajikistan (15 percent of men and 4 percent of women), although this difference is statistically significant only for Tajikistan.

Figure 1. Changes in agricultural production owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, by sex and percentage



Source: UCA-FAO phone survey, April–May 2021

Pre-existing gender inequalities predominantly influence COVID-19-induced changes in agricultural production. As more rural men than rural women systematically engage in agricultural production, more rural men than women reported that the COVID-19 pandemic harmed agriculture and that they experienced agricultural challenges caused by the pandemic.

Additionally, owing to their limited decision-making power within the household, women in Central Asian countries remain dependent on men's decisions on farming and selling agricultural products. Results show that significantly more men than women reported making decisions on selling and farming in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (35–42 percent of males versus 10–14 percent of females for selling, and 29–45 percent of males versus 10–24 percent of females for farming).

Rural women's limited decision-making power has negative implications in terms of access to land and other farm assets.

Key informant interviews revealed that within the household, wives must often consult with their husbands on all activities and usually cannot borrow or sell any assets without their permission. At the same time, all family property usually belongs to him. As stated by a rural woman from the

⁴ T-test of equality of means between women and men rejected at the conventional five percent level.

Khatlon region of Tajikistan: “If rural women have their farm, they work there, but if they do not have lands, they work on dekhan farms for money or agricultural products.”⁵

Land is a crucial input for agricultural production, food consumption and income. However, policy analyses in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan revealed that the official land plot registries do not show the landowner’s gender, preventing a more robust assessment of gender-based gaps in access to land. In the three Central Asian countries, rural women experience unequal land rights concerning marriage, inheritance or in cases of divorce. Article 27 of the Family Law Code of Uzbekistan (1998) grants women rights over family assets in the case of a divorce. Nevertheless, rural families traditionally favour men when acquiring residential houses and land through inheritance (ADB, 2018). Many Tajik widows often have no access to property that is registered in their husbands’ or other male family members’ names. (ADB, 2016; OECD, 2019). In Kyrgyzstan, women and men have equal rights over inheritance and land ownership, but customary laws tied to social norms make women less likely to inherit land and assets (ADB, 2019).

Our results confirmed gender-based differences in land ownership in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with 74–81 percent of men landowners, and only 19–26 percent of women.⁶ Rural women’s limited opportunities to own agricultural land have negative implications in terms of their access to finance and services, potentially preventing them from earning additional income from farming.

4.2. Changes in Income and Labour Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In all three Central Asian countries, rural women have limited access to non-farm assets and finance. In Kyrgyzstan, 44 percent of women aged 15–49 do not own any property, and less than 5 percent have sole ownership of a dwelling. In Uzbekistan, female-owned dwellings accounted for only 30 percent of all registered real estate transactions in 2016 (excluding Tashkent). Similarly, in Tajikistan, women represent only 16 percent of homeowners (ADB, 2016). Generally, the lack of assets to be used as collateral for financial institutions prevents rural women from accessing financial products, including loans. Besides the absence of collateral, compelling evidence shows that rural women cannot borrow from financial institutions because of high interest rates, short repayment periods, their engagement in subsistence farm production with low investment returns, as well as the high female unemployment rate. In Uzbekistan, rural women mainly cultivate crops with low investment returns, making loan repayment difficult (FAO, 2019). High interest rates, combined with short repayment periods (from six months up to a year), prevent Kyrgyz women from receiving formal credit (FAO, 2016)

Dependence on the financial decisions of male family members is a critical reason for rural women’s limited access to finance in all three countries. Socially established cultural norms allow male members only to deal with finances, while women have less or no involvement in such decisions (ADB, 2016). For example, 70 percent of Central Asian women reported not knowing their household’s monthly income (World Bank, 2021). In Uzbekistan, an older male member usually manages household finances and the family budget (ADB Uzbekistan, 2018). According to our results, significantly more males than females in all three countries decide on how to use their personal income (28–49 percent versus 11–22 percent), family expenses (28–43 percent versus 13–26 percent), borrowing money (34–45 percent versus 11–20 percent) and repayment of borrowing (45–49 percent versus

5 There is an official definition of dekhan in each of the three countries, but for rural women and men, dekhan means a small farm owned and run by family members.

6 The average size of land owned by males is 2 ha, and by females 1.4 ha in Kyrgyzstan. In Uzbekistan, the average size of land owned by males is 3 ha, and by females it is 0.5 ha. In Tajikistan, the average size of land owned by males is 5 ha, and by females it is 1.53 ha.

12–19 percent). Rural women in Central Asia remain dependent on rural men’s decisions related to the use of finance, and often rural husbands also control their wives’ earnings.

Pre-existing gender gaps in financial decision-making and access to assets and finance have resulted in different impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural women and men. Considerably more rural women than men reported a significant loss of income because of the pandemic in Kyrgyzstan (44 percent versus 37 percent) and Tajikistan (28 percent versus 22 percent). To deal with the loss of income, a higher proportion of men compared to women reported selling assets. Even though the only statistically significant gender difference is in Uzbekistan, with 26 percent of males and 19 percent of females selling assets to deal with the loss of income during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ Significantly more males than females used savings to deal with income loss in Kyrgyzstan (22 percent versus 18 percent) and Uzbekistan (12 percent versus 6 percent).⁸ Savings represent an insurance mechanism against income shocks. Even though significantly more women than men reported not having savings in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan, where livestock represents a substitute for savings. A rural woman from the Jalalabad region (Kyrgyzstan) declared that “the local population is not in the habit of keeping money in reserve. Livestock raising is the major investment.”

Rural women in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan borrowed money from acquaintances and relatives as a coping strategy to face income losses. In Tajikistan, more rural women than men borrowed from acquaintances (16 percent versus 4 percent). More females than males have borrowed from their relatives in all three countries. At the same time, more males than females in Uzbekistan had borrowed money from a bank (10 percent versus 5 percent) and neighbours or friends (17 percent versus 9 percent).⁹

Rural women further decreased their participation in financial and family decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Kyrgyzstan, significantly more females than males confirmed less decision-making power in the distribution of family income. A higher proportion of rural women reported that the pandemic reduced their decision-making power in buying food: 28 percent versus 26 percent in Tajikistan, 19 percent versus 13 percent in Uzbekistan and 16 percent versus 12 percent in Kyrgyzstan.

Gender-based discrimination and the division of care responsibilities within the household prevent women from migrating to work. More males than females are engaged in labour migration in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as, traditionally, female engagement in labour migration is not supported by rural households.¹⁰ Women must find alternative income-generating activities locally (FAO, 2016). Social factors such as women being assigned to household work and childcare, marital obligations and mobility constraints contribute to women having less access to information, education and employment. All these factors have longer-term implications, such as female structural unemployment.

Our results showed that, as of April 2020, more men than women have migrated to work abroad or in other regions of their own country: 72 percent of migrants from Kyrgyzstan and 88 percent from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were men. Rural males have more decision-making power than females and can independently decide to migrate, seeking higher earnings and better job opportunities. Significantly, more males than females reported deciding on the migration of family members: 39 percent versus 15 percent in Tajikistan, 36 percent versus 8 percent in Uzbekistan and 30 percent versus 8 percent in Kyrgyzstan.

7 The sample is restricted to respondents who reported a loss of income.

8 The sample is restricted to respondents who reported a loss of income.

9 The sample is restricted to respondents who borrowed to deal with the loss of income.

10 Interview with a rural woman from the Fergana region of Uzbekistan.

As a result of the implementation of COVID-19-related restrictive measures, more male than female labour migrants were unable to leave their home country to work abroad or lost their jobs abroad. The survey results showed that among migrants who could not leave their home country to work abroad, 71 percent of migrants in Kyrgyzstan, 92 percent in Uzbekistan, and 89 percent in Tajikistan were male. More than half of the respondents who received remittances experienced a loss of remittance inflow compared to the pre-pandemic period: 58 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 55 percent in Uzbekistan and 53 percent in Tajikistan.¹¹ During KIIs, rural women confirmed income losses during the COVID-19 pandemic: “During COVID-19, my children did not work in Russia for three months. They did not send money. It was difficult for us to live without this money.”¹²

4.3. Changes in Food Security and Nutrition During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The closure of borders and trade restrictions imposed by neighbouring countries, which provided essential food imports prior to the pandemic, have caused food shortages in Kyrgyzstan. Depreciation of the local currency and rises in world food prices also led to inflation spikes. Consumer prices for staple foods substantially increased by April 2020. In January–April 2020, retail grain prices (rice and wheat) increased by 27 percent in Uzbekistan, 19 percent in Kyrgyzstan and by 17 percent in Tajikistan compared to the same period in 2019 (Giap, 2020).

In Tajikistan, the COVID-19 pandemic harmed food security by changing patterns related to food consumption, dietary diversity and availability. More than 45 percent of the 1 400 households surveyed by the World Bank said they were worried about health and food security, with the rural population feeling less capable of affording a sufficient variety of food products (Seitz *et al.*, 2020). Consumers in Tajikistan also suffered from COVID-19-related trade restrictions. In particular, owing to the export restrictions applied by the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) during the first six months of 2020, the shortage of imported food led to a rise in prices for eggs and flour, beef, cotton seeds, oil and rice (UNDP, 2020a). In 2020, the depreciation of the Tajik national currency by 14.2 percent and a 9.4 percent rise in inflation, led to the prices of vital food products (vegetable oils and fats, sugar, wheat products and potato) to increase by 13 percent (TAJSTAT, 2021).

Our results show that 37 percent of the rural population in Uzbekistan, 47 percent in Tajikistan and 44 percent in Kyrgyzstan are moderate or severe food insecure (FImod+sev).¹³ Data suggests that statistically significant differences in food insecurity exist when comparing males and females, pointing to possible gender-based discrimination in adequate access to food. Figure 2 shows the prevalence of moderate or severe food security in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan by gender.

The overall prevalence of severe food insecurity (FIsev) is five percent, eight percent and seven percent, respectively. There is a significantly higher proportion of women experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in Uzbekistan, where the difference in moderate or severe food insecurity between men and women is seven percent (40 percent versus 33 percent); in Tajikistan, where the gender gap is 14 percent (54 versus 40 percent); and in Kyrgyzstan, where it is eight percent (48 versus 40 percent). In Tajikistan, the country presenting a higher gender-based gap in food security

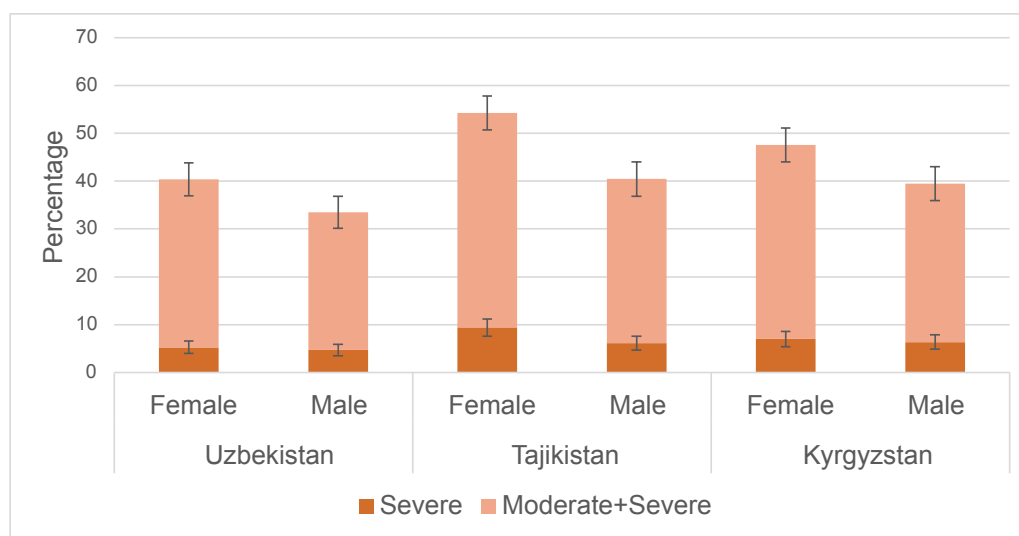
11 The sample is restricted to respondents who reported receiving remittances during the COVID-19 pandemic.

12 Interview with a rural woman from the Rudaki District of Tajikistan’s Districts of Republican Subordination.

13 The study applied a modified version of the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) module to assess food security in rural areas. FAO established the global reference scale based on FIES data collected over three years from 2014 to 2016, used as the international standard to set the two reference thresholds of severity for experience-based food-insecurity measures. The SDG Indicator 2.1.2, FImod+sev, is obtained as the cumulated probability of being in the two classes of moderate or severe food insecurity.

(14 percent), there is also a statistically significant difference in severe food insecurity, with women experiencing higher prevalence compared to men (nine versus six percent).

Figure 2. Prevalence of moderate and severe food insecurity, by sex and percentage

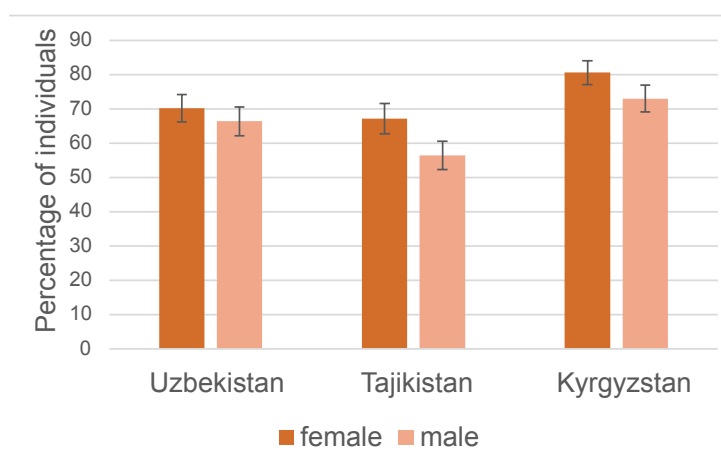


Source: UCA-FAO phone survey, April–May 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions had considerable implications for food security in Uzbekistan (World Bank, 2021). Consultations with agricultural experts showed that during the pandemic, Uzbekistan's population started to consume fewer meat products (CERR, 2020). In 2020, compared to 2019, the inflation rate increased by 11 percent, and the prices of eggs, oils and fats, meat and wheat increased by 17 percent (UZSTAT, 2021).

As shown in Figure 3, a higher share of rural women in Tajikistan (67 percent) and Kyrgyzstan (81 percent) compared to rural men (56 percent and 73 percent, respectively) considered the COVID-19 pandemic to be the main driver of their food experience. In addition, when comparing rural women and men in Uzbekistan, the reported pandemic-induced impact is higher for females (70 percent of females and 66 percent of males), albeit not statistically significant.

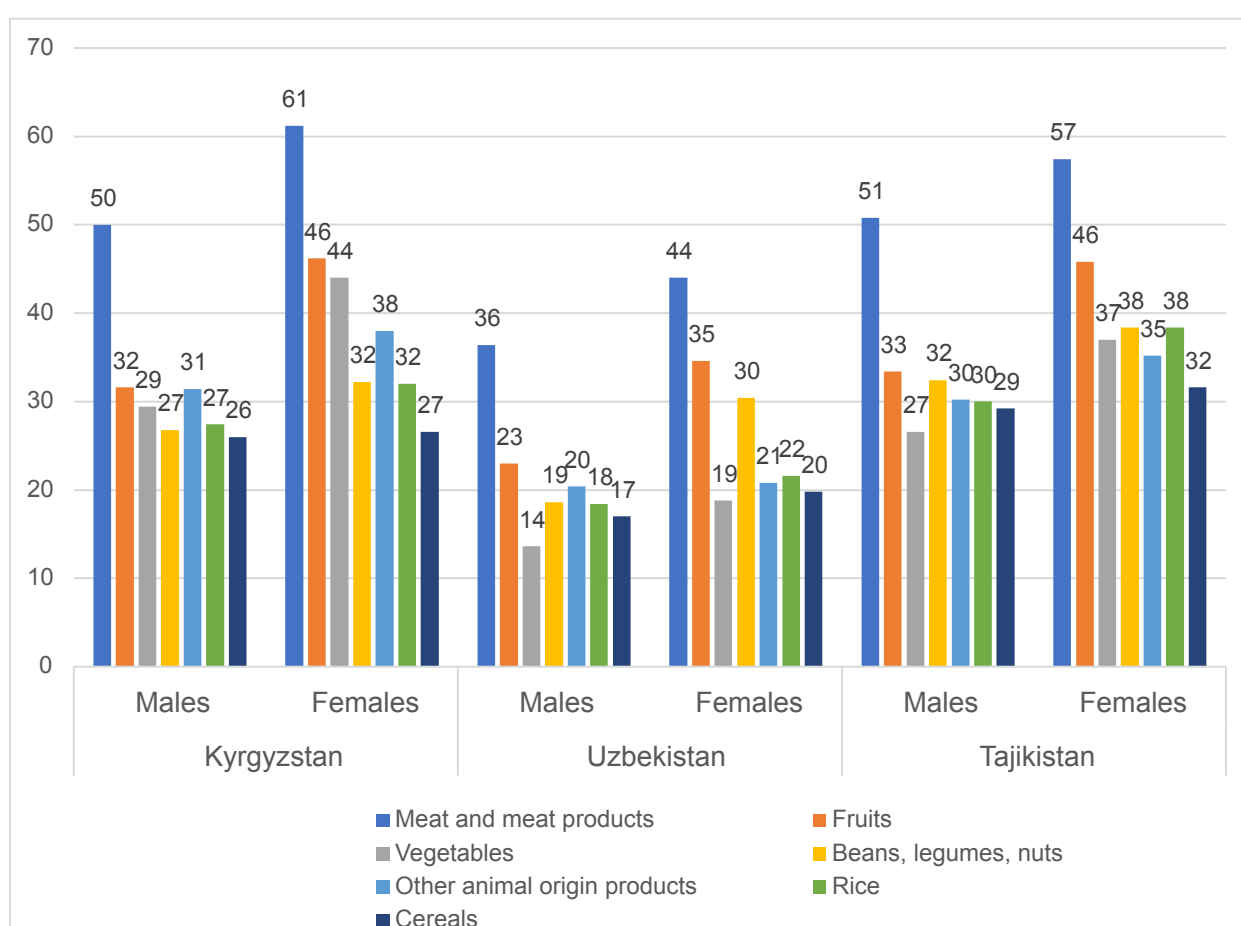
Figure 3. Food security affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, by sex and percentage



Source: UCA-FAO phone survey, April–May 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected food diversity. More rural women than men started to consume less meat and meat products, eggs and dairy products, fruits, vegetables, beans, legumes and nuts (see Figure 4). Overall, 61 percent of females and 49 percent of males in Kyrgyzstan, 57 percent of females and 51 percent of males in Tajikistan, and 44 percent of females and 36 percent of males in Uzbekistan have decreased consumption of meat and meat products since the pandemic outbreak. Moreover, 46 percent of females and 33 percent of males in Tajikistan, 46 percent of females and 32 percent of males in Kyrgyzstan, and 35 percent of females and 23 percent of males in Uzbekistan decreased their consumption of fruits. More female respondents than males reported reduced vegetable consumption in all three countries: 44 percent versus 29 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 37 percent versus 27 percent in Tajikistan, and 19 percent versus 14 percent in Uzbekistan. A higher proportion of women than men reported decreased consumption of beans, legumes and nuts in Tajikistan (38 percent versus 32 percent) and Uzbekistan (30 percent versus 19 percent).

Figure 5. Decrease in food consumption, by sex and percentage



Source: UCA-FAO phone survey, April–May 2021.

According to KII participants, they had to decrease consumption of some products and change their eating habits because of their inability to access or afford certain products as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pertinent recollections are provided below by rural women (one from each of the three countries: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan):

There was a flour and vegetable oil shortage, and we could not find it in our village. I heard they brought flour for sale in Kamaz trucks. By the time I got to the point of sale, no flour left. It was difficult for women like me. Without a husband and a car, we could not buy it. At that time, we did not have any flour left at home, and we were forced to borrow from neighbours.¹⁴

I try to cook meals without meat but rather with peas, beans, rice, and greens...I often replace meat with eggs.¹⁵

Our diet is mainly potatoes, carrots, and onions, and we consume a lot of rice and bread. Meat is expensive in our country and a little tight: if they have a small budget, they can buy meat once a month ... We eat eggs instead of meat.¹⁶

Different COVID-19-induced impacts on women and men were largely owing to pre-existing gender-based inequalities. The main factors explaining the gender-based disparity in access to food are the relatively poor purchasing power of rural women and their limited decision-making power over the household budget. In rural areas of Central Asian countries, all financial decisions on income spending, including its distribution and the purchase of groceries, were mainly undertaken by men, and only to a limited extent by women. Our previous results show that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender-based decision-making gaps, disproportionately affecting rural women's food and nutrition security.

4.4. Changes in Workload and Access to Public Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Already before the pandemic, a significantly higher proportion of women than men spent more time cooking in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. During the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly more rural women than men increased the time spent cooking in Tajikistan (46 percent versus 14 percent) and Uzbekistan (36 percent versus 5 percent).

Before the pandemic, in Tajikistan, rural women spent more time than men taking care of other family members and cleaning. This workload increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the KIIs, many rural women also noted a considerable increase in their workload because of the extra time that needed to be spent looking after family members. The following are illustrative examples given by respondents from the three countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respectively):

We have a large family of 14 in our house, and I am the youngest daughter-in-law in such a large family. My husband's sister and her children live with us. She is divorced. The mother-in-law lives with us. I got infected with COVID, but I could not lie down anywhere. Despite being very sick, I continued to do all household chores, such as cooking. I received no treatment. After work, I also took care of my children.¹⁷

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted women, especially rural women. They did housework, fieldwork, gardening, livestock breeding, taking care of children and elderly family members, and even their husbands. Due to the closure of borders, many men did not leave to work and stayed at home. The responsibilities of women during the pandemic increased by two to three times.¹⁸

[...]yes, the workload has increased. Everyone in my sister's house, my sister, her husband and her son got infected with COVID. Then, our daughter-in-law wore a mask and gloves, looked after

15 Interview with a rural woman from the Khatlon region of Tajikistan.

16 Interview with a rural woman from the Fergana region of Uzbekistan.

17 Deputy Mayor of Akimat of Ala-Buka of the Jalal-Abad region of Kyrgyzstan.

18 Interview with the representative from Dusti, an NGO based in the Khatlon region of Tajikistan.

them, and administered injections. No one took them to the hospital. They had to receive treatment from relatives at home.¹⁹

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, rural women in all three countries spent considerably more time than men caring for children. School closures increased the time spent taking care of children. It also hindered women's mental well-being because of the home-schooling undertaken with a poor Internet connection and a lack of other equipment required for studying online. During the COVID-19 pandemic in Tajikistan, significantly more rural women than men increased the time spent taking care of children (47 percent versus 34 percent) and helping children with their education (48 percent versus 38 percent). In fact, unlike the Kyrgyz and Uzbek governments, Tajikistan closed all schools and kindergartens from 25 April to 10 May 2020. Our results confirmed that significantly more rural women (29 percent) than men (17 percent) reported limited access to the Internet in Kyrgyzstan. According to the KIIs, during the school closures and the transition to online education, rural women in Kyrgyzstan faced limited access to the Internet, as well as to mobile phones and televisions.

Lower access to education induced by school closures disproportionately affects girls. Out-of-school rural girls can be forced into child labour – within their households, on family farms, or away from their natal homes – with negative consequences for their health and well-being, work experience, and ambitions for later life. Past crises have shown that school dropout rates for girls typically increase in post-crisis situations as a result of such factors as disruption of education, loss of adult jobs and lack of social protection (ILO, 2020b). This is particularly true in rural areas, where schools are often far away from the family home, and the lack of affordable transport constrains girls' school attendance. Although the gendered impact of schools' disruption is yet to be fully understood, previous shocks (the 2008 financial crisis and 2014 Ebola outbreak) suggest that girls will likely be additionally affected in terms of permanent dropouts, child labour and early pregnancies (Malala Fund, 2020).

Measures stemming from the pandemic restricting access to health facilities and services hindered vulnerable population subgroups, including rural women. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a significantly higher percentage of women reported less time accessing health services in Tajikistan (77 percent versus 68 percent) and Kyrgyzstan (51 percent versus 40 percent). Rural women stated that there was an overall lack of medical services in villages, and they could not access emergency aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three relevant examples are presented below from two of the three countries (first and third from Tajikistan, and the second from Kyrgyzstan):

There are neither polyclinics nor hospitals in the village. There is only a small medical centre with one doctor and two nurses. During the pandemic, doctors with nurses worked all day. We did not call the ambulance... even if we called them, they would say they did not have petroleum. If we paid for the petroleum, then they would come.²⁰

There is no pharmacy in the village. We went to the city of Batken. Since there were roadblocks, we had to go to Batken City using other routes.²¹

I have a mother-in-law. She had high blood pressure. I called an ambulance. They could not come because of the road closure and established checkpoints. They asked me to take her to the checkpoint.²²

19 Interview with a rural woman from the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan.

20 Interview with a rural woman from the Sughd region of Tajikistan.

21 Interview with a rural woman from the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan.

22 Interview with the representative from the Suzak Crisis Centre of the Jalalabad region of Kyrgyzstan.

4.5. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Family Relations and Domestic Violence

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women have experienced high levels of stress and aggression from other family members. Women and girls have been confined at home as unemployed and economically dependent, cut off from regular support services, living in stressful situations and experiencing job losses and economic insecurity (UNDP and UNICEF, 2021).

In many cases, females experienced both physical and emotional abuse. In Kyrgyzstan, from January to March 2020, the number of reported domestic violence cases rose by 65 percent compared to the same period in 2019, and 95 percent of victims were women aged 21–50 (UNDP and UNICEF, 2021). In Tajikistan, 16.4 percent of households reported having observed domestic violence in their neighbourhood in the preceding 30 days (UNDP, 2020a). In Uzbekistan, domestic violence hotlines established by NGOs experienced a fivefold increase in calls in the first week of the pandemic (UNDP, 2020b). According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, between January and October 2020, local law enforcement agencies issued more than 8 430 protection orders to protect victims of domestic violence. Many interviewed women noted cases of their husbands drinking alcohol and physically punishing their wives instead of helping with their increased responsibilities and devising coping strategies. During the KIIs, the following accounts were given on the issue of domestic violence by respondents from the three countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan):

During the pandemic, family quarrels increased, the number of drinkers increased, the number of wife beatings in families increased, so one could say, life became hard.²³

There are very high rates of psychological violence against women, primarily from the mothers-in-law and other relatives of the husband, including his brothers. Women go to the parental home to complain and cry, but they do not take any serious steps, fearing the breakdown of the family and condemnation from society. People rarely turn to local officials or the police about domestic violence. Nevertheless, there were only a few cases when they informed the police.²⁴

In addition to physical violence, there is also psychological violence from the mother-in-law and other relatives of the spouse. They treat women as commodities and consider them extra mouths to feed. They must serve the whole family from morning to evening to feed themselves. Therefore, they turn to our centre for psychological help, and we must teach them a profession. Otherwise, they start looking for an easy way to earn money since their family often does not need them.²⁵

A higher percentage of women than men reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the leading causes of disagreements between family members were financial issues and restricted mobility. In Kyrgyzstan, significantly more rural women than men disclosed that disagreements or tensions among family members arose with regard to family expenses (19 percent versus 14 percent), borrowing money (17 percent versus 9 percent) and mobility restrictions (21 percent versus 15 percent). In Uzbekistan, similarly, more rural women than men pointed out income (21 percent versus 16 percent), family expenses (22 percent versus 16 percent), and borrowing money (20 percent versus 15 percent) as the leading causes of family conflicts during the pandemic. In Tajikistan, significantly more rural women think that parenting and child care disagreements lead to family conflicts. The KII findings confirmed that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, family conflicts had emerged because of a lack of finance and the inability of people to leave their homes. Specific accounts from all three

23 Interview with a rural woman from the Naryn region of Kyrgyzstan.

24 Interview with a nurse from the Mushkurt Jamaat Health Centre, A.Jami district of the Kabadiyan region of Tajikistan.

25 Interview with a representative of the Department for Working with Vulnerable Families of the Ministry of Makhalla and Family Support of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

countries (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) were given by respondents as follows:

My son became neurotic because he did not know how to earn a living. We lacked money, and he became even more irritated. He argued with his wife. He took out a loan. I scolded him, his wife too, and he was nervous.... There was not enough money for food.²⁶

[...]everyone was sitting at home, both men and women. There were many fights and scandals between them because the women were overwhelmed. They had to cook more. Women fought with their husbands about finding money and doing what a man should do.²⁷

The jobless men sat in a house in front of the television and got lazy. All the work in the house and garden fell on our shoulders. The men became irritable. Even about small things, they immediately began to be rude and to swear.²⁸

Rural women and men had sought to resolve family disputes without any outside help prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the leading role of the eldest family member in mitigating and resolving family conflicts is recognized by most rural people of both sexes. During the pandemic, more rural women than men in Uzbekistan have admitted to having conflictual discussions more frequently with family members. The use of external sources to deal with family disagreement was reported by a smaller proportion of rural people of both sexes. According to KII participants, the female victims of family violence feel uncomfortable about informing the police and sometimes even their own parents. Rural women from the three countries (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) provided the following illustrative comments:

In this case, women go to their parents' house. For example, my daughter comes after arguments with her husband or when she is in a bad mood. She usually stays to get calm or can stay for a night, and then we send her back to her house and husband.²⁹

[...] usually, women do not report, only in extreme cases[...] and also women are afraid of what their parents would think if they got divorced. It is very hard with the Uzbek mentality. Because even her parents will say that it is her fault... Once a woman gets married, she should stay and live in her husband's house.³⁰

It is a shame, sometimes I think: "I have four children from my husband, and how can he be a bad person now?" and what will others think, it is a shame. Such thoughts do not allow me to complain. I wanted to complain to the police and the village court several times but could not bring myself to do it.³¹

The governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are working on improving their legislative base to protect women from domestic violence, but rural women continue to depend on men's decisions. In 2013, the Government of Tajikistan introduced the Law on Prevention of Violence in Family. However, Tajik women regularly face physical and psychological violence because of their limited power in family decision-making (Cabar.Asia, 2020a). According to a recent study, 97 percent of men

26 Interview with a rural woman from the Jalal-Abad region of Kyrgyzstan.

27 Interview with a rural woman from the Samarkand region of Uzbekistan.

28 Interview with a rural woman from Rudaki of Tajikistan's Republican Subordination District.

29 Interview with a rural woman from Rudaki of Tajikistan's Republican Subordination District.

30 Interview with a rural woman from the Andijan region of Uzbekistan.

31 Interview with a rural woman from the Jalal-Abad region of Kyrgyzstan.

and 72 percent of women in Tajikistan believe that women must tolerate domestic violence to maintain good family relations (Cabar.Asia, 2020b). In 2019, the Government of Uzbekistan introduced the Law on Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women and the Law Protecting Women from Discrimination and Violence. However, in rural Uzbekistan, families continue to engage in early marriage, preventing teenage girls from finishing their secondary education (Voluntary National Review, 2020). In fact, when girls are out of school, they typically become more exposed to GBV, teenage pregnancies and forced marriages. This practice inevitably reduces married girls' access to education and exposes them to early pregnancies compared to those enrolled in school (Kapur, 2018).

Key Informant Interview participants from the respective governments reported that special hotlines and aid centres assist women in dealing with domestic conflicts. However, none of the interviewed rural women knew about the existence of these services. According to a representative from the Department of Social Protection and Social Development of the Suzak village in the Jalalabad region of Kyrgyzstan, rural women had used hotlines to report cases of violence during the pandemic. The Ministry of Makhalla and Family Support of Uzbekistan representative discussed the special rehabilitation centres (shelters) where women could get help in all regions. However, representatives of NGOs stated that not all shelters could provide adequate assistance to victims of domestic violence owing to a lack of sufficient resources. With these limitations, aid centres do not take any preventive actions but mainly deal with domestic violence consequences.

Our study found that the need for domestic violence warning and prevention did not appear to be understood by rural communities. Rural residents do not perceive domestic violence as a violation of women's rights. Many rural women and men lack awareness and understanding of the long-term implications of domestic violence, such as mental and physical disability, temporary and permanent disability, reduced or deprived reproductive capacity and even death resulting from injury or suicide.

4.6. Government Aid for Rural Women and Men During the COVID-19 Pandemic

From January 2020 to April 2021, the Kyrgyz government spent 6.1 percent of its GDP as public expenditures to support the country's socioeconomic development in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (IMF, 2021). On 31 March 2020, it announced the first measures to support businesses, including a deferral for submitting tax returns and arrears, and a moratorium on business inspections. To support socially vulnerable population groups, the Government of Kyrgyzstan allocated KGS 122 million (USD 1.5 million) to supply 152 500 people with food packages worth KGS 800 (USD 10) as humanitarian aid. The Government of Kyrgyzstan allowed borrowers who had to suspend financial and economic activities to obtain the possibility of prolonging payments beyond the end of the debt repayment period without interest. Meanwhile, borrowers whose financial and economic activities declined were granted a six-month payment deferral. Under the umbrella of the national programmes, "Financing of Agriculture" and "Affordable Housing", the Kyrgyz government provided low interest rate loans to citizens as part of its second anti-crisis measures.

Charitable organizations, caring citizens and entrepreneurs also provided people in need with food packages in Kyrgyzstan. The FAO-GEF (General Environment Facility) Regional Project has allocated KGS 12 million (USD 145 199) to support farmers and households most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kyrgyz government prepared a list of vulnerable rural persons to whom fertilizers and diesel fuel were provided, covering 1 067 farmers and their families from 47 village communities. To guarantee food security and to keep prices stable, in the spring of 2020, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) implemented a reduction or exemption on import duties for an extended list of

food products, tariff quotas on meat and sugar, as well as bans on the export of some goods including wheat, rice, vegetable oil, sugar, eggs, salt, and mineral fertilizers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, on 11 July 2020, the Tajik government issued a decree on providing one-time assistance equal to the minimum wage of TJS 400 (USD 39) to support vulnerable population groups. In February 2021, it announced the provision of additional cash assistance to 70 000 vulnerable households across Tajikistan through a targeted social assistance programme administered by the State Agency for Social Protection. Under the emergency module of the existing Targeted Social Assistance system, the Tajik government provided one-time cash transfers to over 65 000 poor households with young children. Transfers and information on optimal child nutrition and parenting practices aimed to compensate for poor nutrition and to support early child development affected by food price shocks caused by the pandemic (World Bank, 2021). In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tajik government allocated USD 1.93 million to support the development of the country's agricultural sector.

On 14 March 2020, the Tajikistan government introduced an exemption from VAT for imported sugar, vegetable oil, wheat and rice to remedy the situation with respect to accessing imported products. On 30 March 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture of Tajikistan introduced quotas on wheat and flour exports (UNDP, 2020a). On 5 June 2020, the Tajik government introduced a special regulation to maintain affordable prices for wheat and wheat products, sugar, vegetable oil, beans, potatoes and oil (Tajikistan President Decree No.1544, 2020). On 25 April 2020, the Tajik government introduced a ban on the export of beans, wheat, rice, eggs, potatoes and meat. Moreover, the government applied tax and customs benefits to support local agriculture, leading to a substantial increase in the production of poultry and eggs in 2020 compared to 2019 (FAO *et al.*, 2021).

To respond to the economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, on 19 March 2020, the Uzbek government established the Anti-Crisis Fund with reserves of UZS 10 trillion (USD 916 million). It used the Fund's resources to support low-income families, the unemployed, and other vulnerable groups. On 30 July 2020, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree "On Additional Measures to Provide Material Support for the Population in Need of Assistance and Social Protection During the Coronavirus Pandemic". The corresponding implementation actions included the distribution of one-time financial aid to over 400 000 families (1.7 million people), amounting on average to UZS 220 000 (USD 20) per family member. During the Eid holiday, 150 000 families in need received a one-time financial payment from the Kindness and Support Fund amounting to UZS 150 billion (USD 137,020). To financially assist families during lockdown, the Government of Uzbekistan gave paid leave to employed parents during the closure of schools and kindergartens (UNDP and UNICEF, 2021).

By 8 January 2021, the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan approved the development of the "Women's Notebook". Consequently, local governments have to study women's problems, needs, and interests by visiting villages twice a year and identify specific women to be included in the "Women's Notebook", based on their responses to individual questionnaires. The local governments have added into the "Women's Notebook" women aged over 30 years by mahallas (neighbourhood, self-governing bodies) who fall under the following categories: unemployed women in need of social protection; women whose breadwinner passed away or is no longer in their household; women with disabilities; homeless women; single women with one or more children with disabilities; women in need of medical protection and/or legal assistance; and women who have suffered from harassment and/or domestic violence. All women included in the "Women's Notebook" are to receive government support such as loans for entrepreneurial activities of up to UZS 33.45 million (USD 306 535), one-time financial assistance from UZS 446 000 (USD 41) to UZS 892 000 (USD 81), help in renting a home and

other assistance.

To keep food prices affordable, the Government of Uzbekistan introduced an exemption from import tariffs and duties on the number of food products and eliminated VAT on imported vegetable oil and beans. In April 2020, President Mirziyoyev signed a decree exempting local businesses from paying property and land taxes from 1 June to 1 September 2020 and accumulated penalties and fines resulting from an inability to pay taxes from 1 January to 15 May 2020. Meanwhile, entrepreneurs were given the right to receive a deferral for VAT paid when importing goods (including works, services, etc.) for up to 120 days.

The Government of Uzbekistan supplied farmers with land to support the production of vegetables, fruits and meat. It also launched a programme to encourage farmers to lease new gardens, vineyards and greenhouses for up to seven years with a three-year grace period. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture of Uzbekistan assisted farmers with selling their products. At the same time, local authorities engaged local entrepreneurs to organize the delivery of food products and other critical goods to villages. At the same time, the Uzbek government helped buyers to convene with farmers to buy their products during periods when farmers could not attend markets. The local administrations gave farmers special permits to move around cities and regions and organized mobile markets, including clothing markets.

As part of a socioeconomic response to the COVID-19 crisis, FAO supplied rural families in southeastern Uzbekistan (Bukhara and Kamashi Districts) with 34 greenhouses (FAO, 2021). Meanwhile, the US government provided Uzbekistan with life-saving equipment, laboratories and medical supplies to protect health care workers (Zivetz *et al.*, 2020). By 15 November 2020, the value of US technical assistance provided to Uzbekistan for the year exceeded USD 9.1 million.

The Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek governments have all provided vulnerable rural men and women with one-time financial and food aid in response to the pandemic.³² However, most of the respondents of both genders reported not receiving any assistance during the pandemic and claimed that this aid targeted only the vulnerable persons identified as eligible for social assistance prior to the pandemic. Unfortunately, owing to a lack of updated and reliable data, the intervention has yet to cover all rural women and men who have experienced COVID pandemic-induced income shocks, food shortages or health problems. In view of the time and capacity constraints, local governments have been unable to conduct additional investigations to provide up-to-date lists of vulnerable individuals. Moreover, many rural women and men who lost their jobs have yet to become eligible to apply for government aid, as they are mainly engaged in informal work. Consequently, as stated by many rural women during the KIIs, not all rural women in need received government aid.

In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, aid was not gender-specific, while in Uzbekistan, the national government attempted to address rural women's needs. Following the latter's recommendations, local governments developed lists of women at risk in so-called "Women's Notebooks", as described above. Nevertheless, neither the process of identifying potential beneficiaries nor the mechanism for providing targeted aid has been fully transparent, and no information has been released in local media about them. For example, a rural woman interviewed in our survey with many children did not know about "Women's Notebooks" and reported not receiving any aid. During the KIIs, local NGO representatives explained that the inability to reach vulnerable women resulted from the insufficient

32 According to the country legislation, "vulnerable" are people in difficult life situations that they cannot overcome on their own, namely: disability, pregnancy, old age, consequences of work injury and professional diseases, loss of a breadwinner, loneliness, orphanhood, neglect, lack of a place of residence, mental issues, violence or life-threatening situations, and other difficult life situations such as COVID-19. Therefore, identifying the vulnerable usually includes special investigation from the government or applications from eligible candidates, including collecting evidence to prove that they can fall under the vulnerable category.

capacity of local governments, which lacked the financial and human resources needed to punctually monitor and interview all rural women and men in their region.

According to our results, national and local government interventions did not reach all the households that experienced income loss because of the COVID-19 pandemic. A higher proportion of men than women reported not receiving any aid during the pandemic in Uzbekistan (90 percent versus 84 percent) and Kyrgyzstan (73 percent versus 66 percent). Among the respondents who experienced income shocks, only 14 percent of males and 13 percent of females in Tajikistan, 9 percent of males and 12 percent of females in Kyrgyzstan and 6 percent of males and 9 percent of females in Uzbekistan received financial aid from their government.³³ According to the KIIs, national and local government representatives provided one-time aid to low-income families, but some rural women reported not receiving such aid. The following are illustrative comments from respondents in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan:

[...] I have not heard about any governmental support. I have only received 400 somonis targeted to low-income families once (I had to get a certificate approving my financial condition first).³⁴

We have not heard of any support from the Government.³⁵

During the KIIs, some participants noted that entrepreneurs and private actors supported rural people by providing medicine, food products and money, as illustrated by the following accounts given by respondents from the three countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan):

Migrants have shown their solidarity during COVID-19. They provided great help, not in monetary terms, but by sending medicine.³⁶

Local entrepreneurs and even some migrants who have a good income, through their relatives, provided monetary support and food to their relatives and fellow villagers.³⁷

My brother from the United States sent USD 1 000 that I distributed among 15 neighbours. I handed out USD 100 to each of them.³⁸

Traditional information sources such as television, local newspapers and their neighbours are often used by women in rural areas who do not have access to more recent technologies such as the Internet. The KIIs suggested that rural women usually do not own any equipment enabling internet access in Tajikistan. Significantly more males than females used the Internet to learn about COVID-19 in Tajikistan (44 percent versus 33 percent). In Uzbekistan, 43 percent of males and only 36 percent of females in rural areas listen to the radio. In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, significantly more women than men had learned about the situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic from television, neighbours and newspapers.

According to the study results in all three countries, governments used television to disseminate details of critical information and recommend protective measures for rural women and men. As the

33 The sample is restricted to respondents who reported a significant loss of income.

34 Interview with a rural woman from the Khatlon region of Tajikistan.

35 Interview with a rural woman from the Republic of Karakalpakstan of Uzbekistan.

36 Interview with a rural woman from the Ala Buka, Jalal-Abad region of Kyrgyzstan.

37 Interview with the local government representative of Kabadian, Khatlon region of Tajikistan.

38 Interview with a rural woman from the Urgut of Samarkand region of Uzbekistan.

qualitative analyses have shown, governments or other actors have yet to supply rural people with information that could have helped them to cope with the crisis. For example, governments have not provided any information about how to apply for government aid. None of the local media supplied rural men and women with contact information on centres that could provide aid in cases of GBV.

5. Recommendations

a. Establish evidence-based and gender-responsive social protection measures to be ready to mitigate the possible negative impact of the multiple potential threats on rural women and men.

National governments could introduce more effective measures to strengthen and expand social protection programmes, considering the gender-specific vulnerabilities of rural women and men, and develop transparent mechanisms for their implementation. The social protection programmes should cover all rural people in need, following the principle of “leaving no one behind”. It is also essential to redefine who precisely should be categorized as the vulnerable rural population impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic by constantly monitoring the situation in rural areas. For example, the vulnerable population should include rural women who are financially dependent on rural men working abroad for an extended period of time and cannot always financially support their families. The state needs to keep records of vulnerable rural women and families and provide them with targeted assistance accordingly.

National governments should engage local executive authorities to enhance the quality of local data to monitor and evaluate gender-related impacts, and provide timely aid to the most affected rural women and men. There is an urgent need to collect data disaggregated by sex and age, and that includes data on gender-related risks, needs and barriers to employment, finance and access to services (e.g. health services). This would allow for an assessment of how rural women and men live in rural areas, thus providing a more adequate and timely response to crises such as that created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local executive authorities should also take preventive and social protection actions in coordination with local NGOs, local leaders and other informed actors to guarantee that social assistance is aimed at vulnerable families, eliminating domestic violence and making prudent decisions.

b. Adopt gender-responsive measures to support rural women and men engaged in agricultural and non-agricultural activities and enhance food security.

The national governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan should create an enabling environment to allow more rural women to be educated and engage in the paid and value-added parts of agricultural production chains. As stated by rural women during the KIIs in Uzbekistan, the national government has allocated land plots to support some vulnerable rural population groups, including women farmers. However, national governments could better stimulate local production by providing necessary agricultural inputs, such as seeds, feed and fertilizers. Moreover, it is essential that state training and farm support programmes are introduced to fill the gaps in the agricultural product markets by creating seed banks and fodder stocks, and providing local organic and non-organic fertilizers. These agricultural activities, with high added value, represent attractive, well-paid and safe places of work for rural women. Rural women can be empowered with support for family businesses or assistance in forging business partnerships. The respective governments can educate rural women on creating business networks or agricultural cooperatives, providing them with starting-up

resources such as land, seeds and other technical assistance. The relevant governments should also engage rural women in local marketing studies and information campaigns, as rural women traditionally play an essential role in distributing information and news among other rural females living in the same villages.

The national governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan need to learn from each other's positive experiences, such as assisting local entrepreneurs in travelling and buying products directly from producers, and adopting adequate strategies to assist rural people in responding to any external crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As identified during the KIIs, rural women prefer to sell agricultural products directly from the field, relieving them of any travel and other transaction costs. It is also vital to support small- and medium-sized enterprises and to keep prices affordable on domestically produced food products.

The respective governments should pay special attention to the availability of fresh and healthy food and its affordability for pregnant and breastfeeding rural women and mothers. Breastfeeding mothers and infants can be subsidized with provision of a free food package for feeding, in particular, addressing underweight children. The practice of issuing free vitamin complexes for pregnant women suffering from malnutrition by doctor's prescription also can be introduced. In addition, national governments should improve their communication with rural women and men.

The following are specific recommended steps in this regard:

- Promoting the introduction of TV shows that broadcast accounts of innovative cases of how people domestically and abroad have coped with the crisis, what they have done with agricultural products they could not sell and/or what new sales channels they have discovered for themselves. Moreover, the TV shows could teach rural men and women the basics of entrepreneurship and new farming methods for those with limited resources. For instance, a TV show could advise establishing farms by teaming up with neighbours or those who can provide labour or knowledge.
- Local executive authorities should be engaged in disseminating and promoting successful farming practices undertaken during the pandemic through central and local television stations to help other rural people develop survival strategies and better adapt to their new realities.
- Launching TV broadcasts on dietary basics to educate rural women on eating healthily. From there, they could learn what a vital and balanced diet is, some recipes for healthy dishes using the products they grow, and how to properly combine various plant products that supply family members with multiple food groups and help enhance their immune systems to increase resistance to viruses. In cases of a lack of breast milk, rural mothers can learn how to arrange supplementary feeding of babies with homemade food without adverse effects on children's health.

c. Enhance rural women's access to agricultural and financial resources.

National governments should introduce appropriate land-use regulation changes and work on a suitable mechanism for adequate implementation of land tenure legislation, considering the provision of equal access of women and men to land registration rights. At the same time, they should codify the requirement to indicate the landowner's gender in the official documents to help monitor gender equality in terms of access to land.

National governments should also allocate funds for family business training to engage married couples and family members in entrepreneurial activities. Joint training of spouses and other family

members on how to run a family business could lead to greater economic diversification, creating new jobs and reducing the number of labour migrants, as well as strengthening the role of women in decision-making within the family.

It is vital to monitor the activities of rural business owners from the beginning and ensure that women entrepreneurs have access to allocated grants and loans with low interest rates in rural areas. Moreover, national governments should invest in capacity building and improving the financial literacy of rural women to empower them with knowledge and engage them in negotiating loan contracts.

d. Improve women's access to medical services, help centres for domestic violence victims and increase public awareness about gender-based violence (GBV).

National governments need to allocate economic resources aimed at providing rural women and men with affordable and accessible medicines and public health services. They could organize mobile medical assistance teams involving local women and men as social workers trained in patient care and palliative care for patients living alone, those with small children, and those with no means of communication. These teams could also be involved in GBV awareness and prevention services, as many people do not know that GBV is both a medical and a human rights issue.

It is imperative to establish new shelters or centres, to support the existing ones, for victims of domestic violence in rural areas and develop accessible mechanisms for anonymous appeals. This can encompass call centres, panic buttons in accessible places for victims of domestic violence in rural areas, telephone applications and teaching rural women how to gesture for help.

Local executive authorities should be engaged in the development of local mechanisms supporting victims of domestic violence and informing the population about the existence of help centres and shelters. At the same time, these efforts should involve a strong engagement with local leaders and cultural gatekeepers (both often male) who are usually privy to these more sensitive intra-household issues, and can be leveraged as critical allies in GBV awareness-raising and new norm-building campaigns within local communities.

It is also crucial to prevent domestic violence, promote gender equality, and combat gender stereotypes and sexual discrimination in the family by organizing and running national awareness-raising campaigns, encouraging the engagement of health workers, teachers, NGO representatives and local religious leaders.

National governments should also engage civil society representatives by providing grants to NGOs and active local civil society groups to conduct preventive information campaigns and explain the consequences of domestic violence. Educating rural people about respecting all women as mothers and daughters is vital. Rural women should not have to tolerate psychological and physical violence from family members.

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