

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RURAL WOMEN AND MEN IN DANG DISTRICT, NEPAL

COVID-19 in Nepal

The first case of COVID-19 in Nepal was reported on January 23, 2020. A strict lockdown was announced on March 24, 2020, to control the spread of the disease. During the lockdown, shops and businesses, educational institutions, religious places, airports, etc. were closed. Large gatherings were banned, and restrictions on public transportation and other vehicle movement between regions were in place. The lockdown was gradually relaxed in September 2020. The lockdown has had far-reaching impact on vulnerable populations with limited capacities to adapt to the pandemic. Large spikes in Covid-19 cases were only recorded in the early summer of 2021 (Figure 1).

Study description

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on rural women, we designed a longitudinal panel study with five rounds of phone survey data collection in Dang district in the mid-western region of Nepal. This note summarizes results from all rounds. The study sample was drawn using systematic random sampling from a large, representative household listing survey conducted in February 2020 across four rural municipalities in Dang district. Figure 1 provides a detailed description on the study timeline and sample size covered in each round.

KEY FINDINGS

- The lockdown early in the pandemic caused a severe income shock with 88% of surveyed households in Dang district reporting income losses; income losses included losses from largely male migrant family members, with 42% of migrants having returned by November 2020.
- Early in the pandemic, women's assets were more likely to be sold; asset sales increased as a coping mechanism as the pandemic dragged on.
- Only a small number of households received government transfers early in the crisis.
- More than a third of women respondents noted they could not access healthy foods in the early phase of the pandemic.
- Income loss was considered the largest impact from the pandemic, followed by travel restrictions, possibly linked to losses from migration incomes, and school closures.

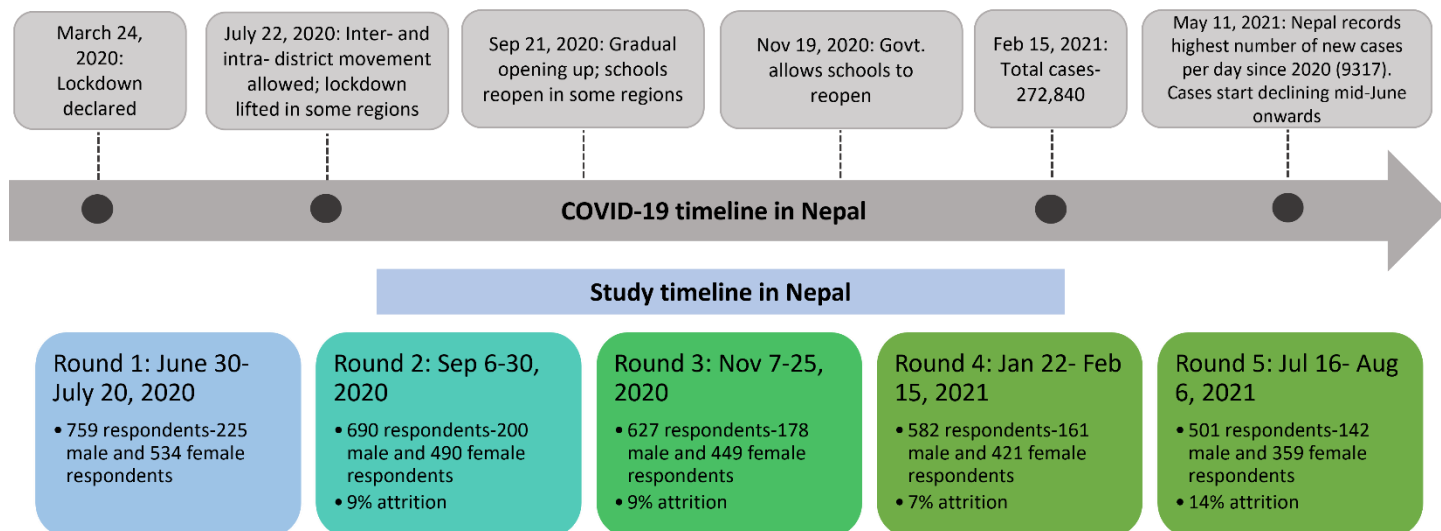


Figure 1: Nepal: COVID-19 lockdown and study timeline

Study findings

a. Economic impact

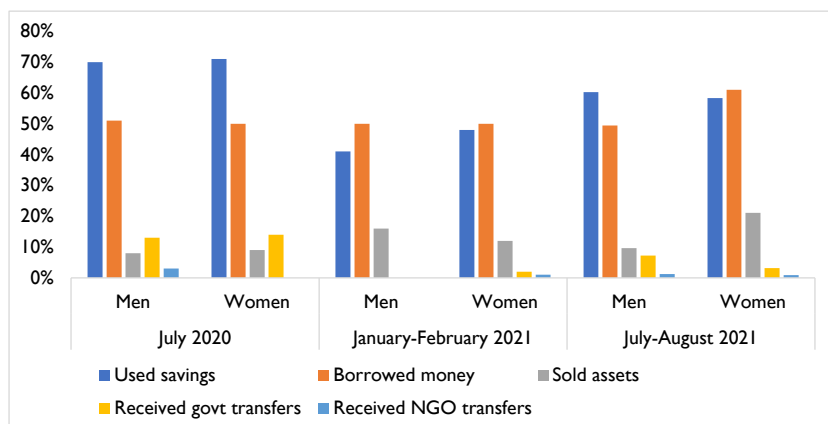


Figure 2: Coping strategies to deal with income loss

Agriculture (farming and raising livestock) was the primary occupation for most respondents; more women (81%) than men (69%) relied on the agriculture sector as their primary source of livelihood, while a higher share of male respondents were employed in the non-farm sector. Ninety-two percent of households participating in the survey owned agricultural land and 94% owned livestock. Around 30% of respondents had no formal schooling, 20% had primary-level education, 38% secondary level, and 11% beyond secondary level. Households were primarily male-headed (82%). Men's involvement in agriculture increased, especially during the second round of data collection; and declined when other economic

activities resumed, but pre-pandemic levels of employment have not yet been reached. The primary occupation of women has largely remained unchanged during the pandemic except that more female spouses were engaged in productive work by the last round as compared to initial stages of the lockdown. Women's involvement in economic activity possibly increased to augment household income considering the financial stress faced by them due to the pandemic. Eighty-eight percent of households reported income losses in round 1, and 85% in round 2, likely directly linked to the lockdown. Levels declined to 43% and 23% in rounds 3 and 4, respectively, but rose to 61% in round 5 when health impacts were felt. With the exception of round 2, women respondents reported higher income losses. Initial coping mechanisms included use of savings and borrowing money, primarily from neighbors or friends, rotating savings schemes, and cooperatives. A higher share of households relied on the savings of male members, whereas more women than men reported borrowing money to deal with the income loss, particularly in later rounds. There was an increase in the proportion of households that sold assets in later rounds, perhaps indicating more severe financial stress. At the beginning, a significantly higher proportion of women (40%) reported having to sell their own assets as compared to men (6%). Most men (94%) shared that they sold assets jointly owned by them and their spouses. By the last round, more men sold their own assets as compared to women. Moreover, of the 66% households who had borrowed money at least once, only 20% fully repaid their loans by round 4. In round 1, around 13% households received support from the government to cope with the COVID-19 induced lockdown which reduced to less than 5% in the later rounds. Additionally, over 45% households reduced their household expenditure, primarily on food items along with clothing, social functions, and mobile phone recharge.

Men are seen to have more control over their earnings, while the spouse and other household members were involved in decisions on women's earnings. Women earn less than men in rural areas. While women's productive work was not affected by the lockdown, they spent more hours than men, on caring for children, elderly, or sick people in the household across all rounds.

b. Impact on migration

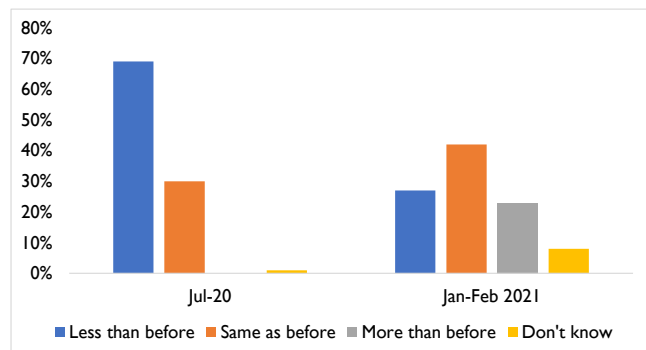


Figure 3: Coping strategies to deal with income loss

The COVID-19 lockdown adversely affected migrant workers and income from remittances. In the first survey round, 44% of households had migrant members who had lived away from home for work in the prior year, mostly men (93%). Around one third of migrant workers had returned home due to COVID-19, while many other respondents shared that family members could not return due to the closure of international borders. By November 2020 (round 3) 42% of migrants had returned. Moreover, for households that continued to have family members living away from home, only 40% received remittances in the first round, which increased slightly to 45% in the second round, 57% in the third round and fell again to 45% in the fourth round of survey. Meanwhile, there have been instances of new family members migrating for work after the

lockdown, primarily post November 2020. The amount of remittances received by households gradually improved in later rounds (Figure 3).

c. Impact on mobility

In July 2020, almost all respondents noted that their mobility had reduced due to the pandemic. Across all three rounds, women's main reason to leave the house was to collect water. Overall mobility reduced by the third round, especially for activities such as going out for buying food, selling food, and work. This can be explained by the gradual increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in November 2020. News of this increase likely led to people exercising more caution.

d. Impact on food security and dietary diversity

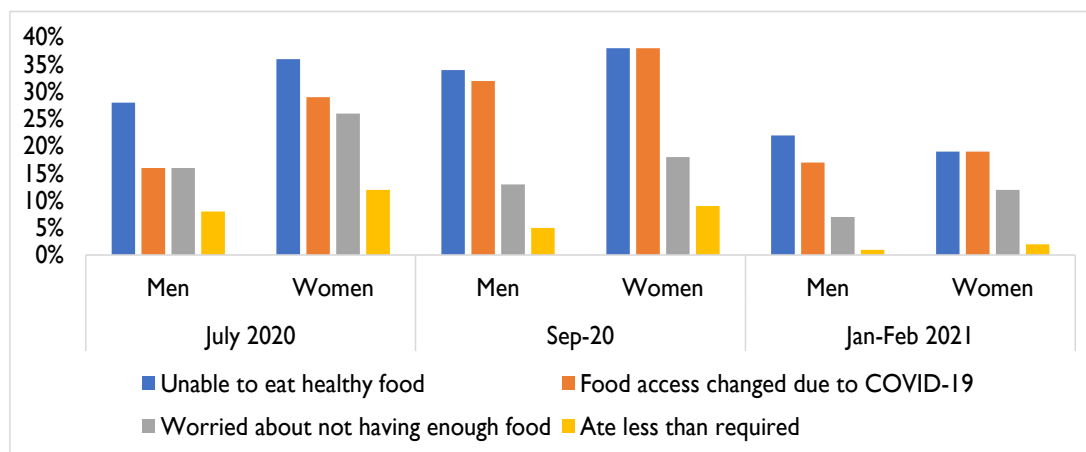


Figure 4: Food insecurity experienced in the two weeks preceding the survey

With the pandemic, a high proportion of respondents were worried about not having enough food, reported that they were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food, and perceived a change in their food access- mostly in terms of being unable to obtain enough food, getting food from sources different from their usual source, and eating less food. In the first two survey rounds, more women than men reported food insecurity. In the fourth round, the share

of households experiencing food insecurity had reduced and both men and women noted similar concerns. Twelve percent of women respondents noted that they ate less than required early in the crisis. This reduced to 2% in early 2021.

Minimum dietary diversity for women (MDD-W) was calculated for female respondents based on a 24-hour recall period to assess impacts on nutrition. Forty percent of women respondents did not have minimally adequate diet diversity in the first survey round, and this slightly worsened to 42% in round 2; by round 4, more than one-third of women respondents still did not have minimally adequate diet diversity. In terms of the type of food consumed, starchy staples, pulses and dark green leafy vegetables dominated the diets of most women. Overall, consumption of protein and vitamin B12 rich foods such as dairy; meat, poultry, and fish; eggs; and nuts and seeds remained low.

e. Impact on water security

Overall, household water insecurity levels are high in Dang district with very few households worrying about water access. Around 25% of households had to travel more than 30 mins to collect water. About 26% of households felt that their water consumption had increased and 42% of these respondents felt that this was largely due to the pandemic. Around 50% of households pay for water that they use for their household needs and around 20% noted that they paid more. Almost all households had heard about hand washing recommendations to avoid contamination with COVID-19.

f. Impact on children's education

Around 95% boys and 97% girls in the age group of 5-18 were enrolled in school prior to the pandemic, as reported during the second round. Out of these, 15% of boys and 7% of girls were attending online classes in September 2020, when schools were closed due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Schools reopened in November and in-person classes resumed for all grades. However, there has been a marginal decline in children attending school in the early 2021, when 93% of boys and girls were attending in-person classes. The proportion of girls attending school declined by 4% compared to the pre-pandemic situation. Major reasons for girls not attending school included not wanting to continue studies (35% of households); daughters getting married/already married (17% of households where girls did not return to school). Moreover, 9% of households said their daughter(s) were not attending school any longer because they had finished their studies up to 12th grade. A few others felt it was not safe to send their daughters to school (9%) or school had not re-opened (9%).

g. Overall impact

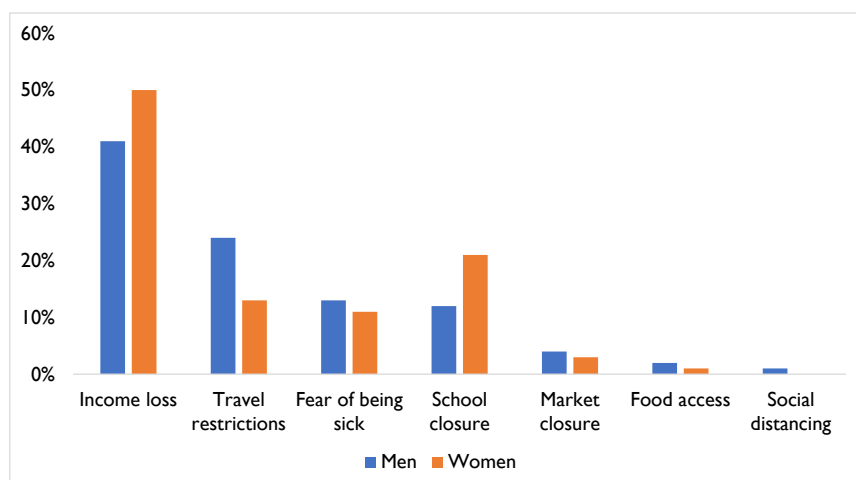


Figure 5: Most significant impact

In the July-August 2021 survey round, participants were asked about the most significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The key identified impact was income loss with half of all women respondents and 41% of all men respondents identifying income loss. Travel restrictions ranked second for men, possibly linked to their off-farm jobs, while school closures were ranked as the second largest impact by women respondents. Fear of being sick ranked third for men and fourth for women respondents. Fewer respondents considered market closure, food access and social distancing as the key impacts of the pandemic on their lives.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected vulnerable groups and exposed them to income loss, food insecurity, and magnified existing gender disparities. The redressal of these negative impacts would require both short-term strategies to help restore pre-pandemic conditions, and long-term strategies that aim to build resilience to minimize the impact of such shocks in the future. The Government of Nepal (GoN) initiated several social protection measures to help people cope with the crisis. They include the provision of food, reducing the prices of essential food items by 10%, and subsidizing electricity. Informal sector workers who lost their jobs due to the crisis were given the opportunity to participate in public-works projects for a subsistence wage or receive 25% of local daily wages. Across various economic sectors, the agriculture sector has emerged as an important and more resilient sector with substantial reverse migration from family members who lost their jobs. However, rural households also experienced large income losses and received little support. Particularly women's work loads and care time increased, their assets were often depleted first, while more than a third of women respondents did not meet minimal nutritional diversity. Interventions that focus on rebuilding women's assets, reducing their time burden and enrich their nutritional outcomes as well as that of their families are particularly needed to ensure that the crisis does not further widen the rural gender gap.

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