

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RURAL WOMEN AND MEN IN THE NIGER

COVID-19 in the Niger

In response to the first case of COVID-19 in the Niger on March 19, the government announced a state of emergency on March 27, 2020. Restrictions were gradually lifted starting in May 2020. Unlike many other countries in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, the spread of COVID-19 in the Niger has been limited. The largest spike in cases occurred in December 2020 and January 2021 and cases have plateaued throughout the rest of 2021. According to the WHO, as of 8 November 2021, the Niger reported 6 511 cases and 221 deaths.

Study description

To understand the gendered impacts of the pandemic, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) conducted phone surveys with rural women and men in the Niger with support from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The study was conducted in 8 regions of the country: Agadez, Diffa, Dosso, Maradi, Niamey, Tahoua, Tillabéri, and Zinder. A sample was drawn from a series of previous surveys that had collected phone numbers. Four rounds of the phone survey were conducted in October 2020, December 2020, February 2021, and April 2021. While 500 households were targeted for interviews in each round, fewer households participated in the first three survey rounds (between 350 and 400 households). Moreover, while the survey aimed to reach 50 percent of women respondents, the target was not achieved, given difficulties in reaching women over the phone. The sample was adjusted several times to increase the number of respondents as well as the share of

KEY FINDINGS

- Slightly less than half rural women and men reported income losses from the pandemic in the first three rounds of the survey.
- Coping strategies reflect a low level of resilience, with many households selling assets and reducing consumption, especially in later survey rounds.
- More than a third of women respondents noted unemployment during the largest COVID-19 surge compared to 14-22 percent before and after the increase in cases.
- Most respondents reported food security challenges, slightly more than half attributed these to the pandemic
- Women were more likely to skip meals across all rounds than men and worried more about enough food than men.

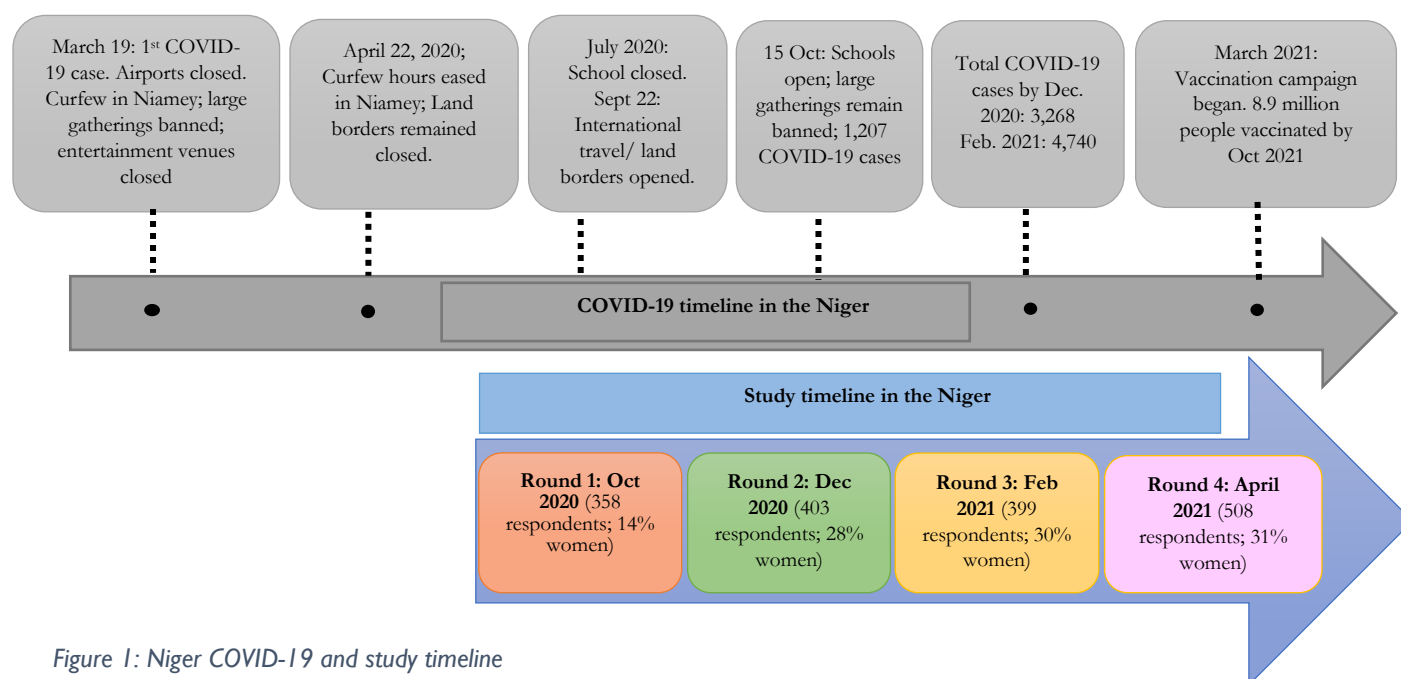


Figure 1: Niger COVID-19 and study timeline

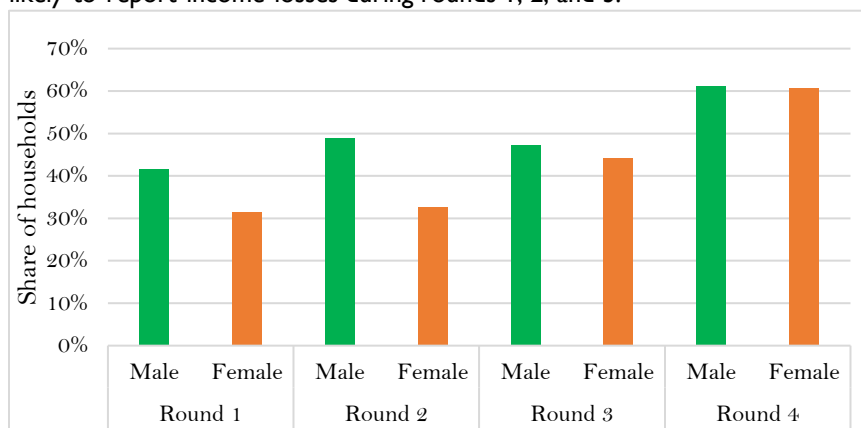
women respondents. As such, rather than a panel, the data provide individual snapshots during the pandemic. Figure 1 provides a detailed description of the COVID-19 situation and study timeline.

Study findings

a. Economic impact

While the majority of households are involved in farming, there were differences in what men and women reported as their primary occupation. Across survey rounds, between 64 percent and 80 percent of men reported farming (crop and/or livestock production) as their main livelihood activity while only between 33 percent and 57 percent of women reported the same. Significant shares of men and women (between 12 percent and 25 percent) also reported engaging in self-employment activities across rounds and between 5 percent and 10 percent of men and women engaged in casual labor as primary occupation. Women were much more likely than men to report being unemployed; the share of women who reported being unemployed was 14 percent, 35 percent, 37 percent and 22 percent in rounds 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively, while the share of men reporting unemployment was 1 percent or less across all rounds. Rounds 2 and 3 were during the largest COVID-19 outbreak so far, but case numbers were small compared to other African countries and most cases were reported in urban areas.

Given that the pandemic did not surge in the Niger as it did in other parts of the region and the globe, and as there was no lockdown affecting income generation, fewer households reported income losses (Figure 2). In round 1, 42 percent of men and 31 percent of women respondents reported income losses due to COVID-19. The shares of men and women experiencing an income shock rose to 61 percent of both men and women in round 4, following the December-January surge in cases. Men were more likely to report income losses during rounds 1, 2, and 3.



There were significant differences in income losses across occupations and rounds. Men and women who were primarily engaged in agriculture were less likely to report income losses compared to the smaller share of respondents who reported casual labor, self-employment or salaried work as their primary occupation. Among respondents who reported farming as their main occupation, women were less likely to report income losses than men across all survey rounds. Data show that most men and women reported working the same amount or less than before the pandemic. During the December/January wave of cases (coinciding with round 3), 73 percent of men and 67 percent of

women reported working the same as before the pandemic and 22 percent of men and 25 percent of women reported working less. Respondents only noted increased workloads due to COVID-19 in round 4 when 22 percent of men and 12 percent of women reported working more hours in the previous week than before the pandemic. Still another 33 percent of men and women reported working less and 45 percent and 51 percent of men and women, respectively, reported working the same as before in this round.

b. Coping strategies

Among men and women who reported income losses, coping strategies varied across rounds and by gender (Figure 3). In rounds 1 and 2, selling assets was the most commonly reported strategy to deal with income loss, followed by reducing consumption and borrowing money. These strategies differ from other countries in Africa where households first used their savings. In the Niger, use of savings increased after assets were sold, especially in round 3 among women.

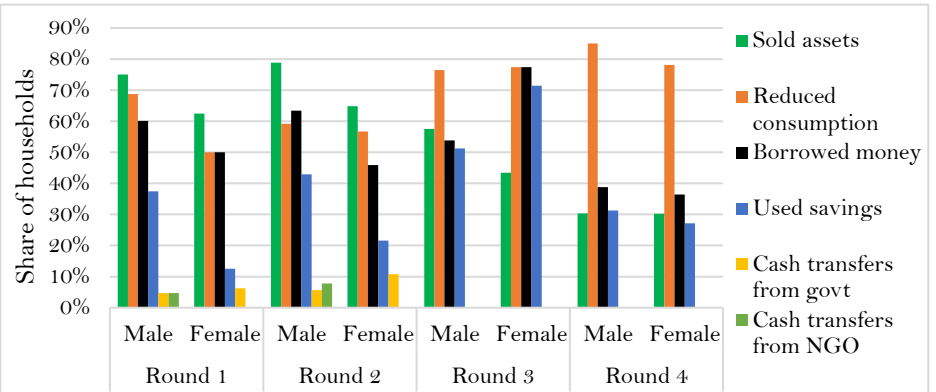


Figure 3: Strategies to cope with COVID-19 related income losses

In rounds 3 and 4 more men and women reported reducing consumption, suggesting they had few options to deal with income losses. By round 4, reducing consumption became the main response option for both women and men respondents. Only a small number of respondents reported receiving cash transfers from the government or NGOs, and these ended with round 2, before COVID-19 case numbers increased.

Men were generally more likely to report selling assets and using savings, except in round 3 (February 2021), when more women reported borrowing and using savings. The most common sources of borrowing were relatives and friends, and traders or shopkeepers. Few respondents had access to micro-credit, and none reported borrowing from other formal sources of credit.

c. Impact on food security and dietary diversity

While the pandemic had more limited impacts on income and employment in the Niger, large shares of men and women reported experiencing food insecurity across survey rounds. Between 40 percent and 50 percent of men and women did report greater difficulty in accessing food because of the pandemic across rounds 1-3. The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) was used to track changes in food security across survey rounds. Figure 4 presents selected indicators from this scale. The results show that women tend to report greater food insecurity compared to men.

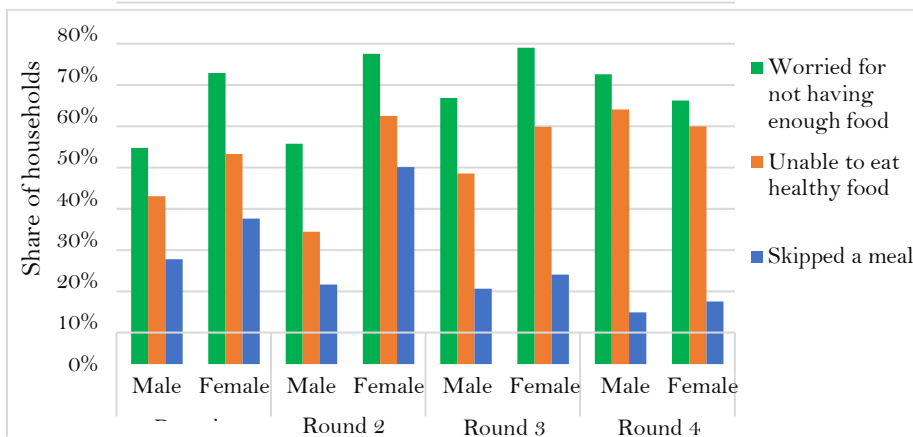


Figure 4: Food insecurity in the 2 weeks preceding the survey, FIES indicators

Across rounds 1-3 women were more likely to report worrying about having enough food, being unable to eat healthy foods and having to skip meals. However, in round 4, slightly more men reported worrying about food and reported being unable to eat healthy foods, while women were still more likely to skip meals. Food insecurity was not always attributed to the pandemic—across FIES indicators between 50 percent and 60 percent of respondents who reported food insecurity challenges in round 4, noted these were specifically related to COVID-19.

Minimum dietary diversity for women (MDD-W) was also calculated for men and women respondents based on a 24-hour recall period to assess impacts on nutrition. Across rounds, 22 percent, 43 percent, 47 percent and 42 percent of women met the minimum requirement to achieve diet adequacy of five food groups consumed in the previous 24 hours. These numbers were more consistent for men across rounds, with 42 percent, 47 percent, 42 percent, and 37 percent meeting the minimum standard for diet quality of five food groups consumed. The most common food groups consumed were cereals, leafy vegetables, and other vegetables. Legumes were also heavily consumed in some survey rounds. Between one-fourth to one-third of respondents reported consuming dairy and nuts and seeds, while less than one-fourth consumed meat, fish, or poultry across survey rounds; eggs were not consumed.

d. Impact on children's education and care burden

Schools closed nationwide during the start of the pandemic. Schools reopened in October 2020 and generally remained open—thus, the phone survey rounds did not coincide with periods of school closures in the country. Questions related to child schooling were asked in rounds 2 and 4 of the phone survey. While the pandemic was not a primary factor in school-aged children (aged 5-18) being out of school, data show that, in the fourth round, 27 percent of boys and 21 percent of girls were not attending school. The main reasons given for not sending children to school were that children started work, that the family needed help at home and in family businesses, and that households did not have enough funds to afford school fees.

Given the low number of COVID-19 cases, limited restrictions, and schools largely remaining open, the majority of men and women reported that the burden of care remained the same as before the pandemic across most rounds. Women tended to report spending more time on care in each survey round compared to men.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic had more muted impacts on livelihoods and food security in the Niger compared to other countries in the region, given lower cases of the virus, and very limited economic and mobility restrictions. Less than half of men and women respondents reported COVID-19 related income losses across most survey rounds, except in round 4 when income losses were highest (60 percent). Large shares of women also reported to be unemployed, especially in rounds 2 and 3 when over one-third of women reported being unemployed. Unfortunately, our data do not indicate whether women were unemployed by choice, as a result of the pandemic, or for other reasons. Women may also be undervaluing unpaid work on family farms and other livelihood activities.

While exposure to the pandemic was relatively lower in the Niger, households' coping strategies suggest that people are highly vulnerable to shocks and stresses. Among households reporting COVID-19-related income losses, selling assets was the most commonly reported coping strategy in early rounds and, in later rounds, the situation appears to have worsened with more households relying on reducing consumption. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of the Niger distributed food and cash transfers and implemented cash- and food-for-work programs. However, similar to many other countries, access to government transfers during the pandemic was low in the Niger. While short-term strategies are needed to address immediate needs, longer-term strategies are also important to increase the resilience of vulnerable men and women to future shocks and stresses.

Households also reported high levels of food insecurity for some indicators, such as worry about having enough food, although a significant share of respondents did not attribute food insecurity to the pandemic. A surprisingly higher share of men and women reported consuming more than 5 food groups in the previous 24 hours in most survey rounds with high levels of vegetable consumption reported. This suggests that despite challenges of food insecurity, households eat relatively balanced diets.

The results presented here should be treated with caution given that we were not able to follow the same panel of households across rounds given challenges in reaching households over the phone, especially women respondents. This is in part due to one of the original face-to-face surveys being held in the migration-prone region of Diffa.

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