

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND COVID-19: A CASE STUDY FROM KENYA

Research shows that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic varied greatly by country, class, race and gender (Pangborn & Rea, 2020). In this study we aim to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected empowered and disempowered individuals differently. This policy note summarizes how income was affected by the pandemic, followed by an assessment of coping mechanisms with the crisis and their interactions with women's empowerment.

Study description

To measure empowerment the note employs the Abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI) (Malapit et al., 2017). The A-WEAI was collected in early February 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted Kenya. It quantifies women's empowerment and measures gender parity. The domains of empowerment considered in the A-WEAI are production, resources, income, leadership, and time. These domains are measured using 6 indicators. Individuals are considered empowered if they are adequate in at least 80% of the indicators. This baseline dual-headed household survey was among a representative sample of rural farmers from Busia, Laikipia and Nakuru counties in Kenya. One individual from a randomly drawn sample of the baseline households was interviewed in four additional rounds through phone surveys, resulting in a total sample of 547 individuals.

The phone surveys were conducted to collect information on individual experience of the pandemic. They targeted one principal decision maker in a household, either male or female, for a total sample of approximately 250 respondents of each gender. The first phone survey was conducted in mid-September 2020, the second at the end of October 2020, the third in early December 2020 and the fourth and final round in mid-April of 2021. The surveys focused on behavioral responses to COVID-19, as well as experienced changes in income, migration, food and nutrition security, water security, mobility and schooling of children.

Study findings

Pre-pandemic empowerment status did not affect the probability of losing income due to COVID-19. Empowered women were less likely to report selling assets and more likely to report borrowing compared to disempowered women. We find that even after controlling for confounding factors, empowered women are statistically significantly more likely to have borrowed to deal with the loss of income experienced due to covid. We do not find that the loans taken out were more likely to be taken out by women, or that women were more likely to make the decision to borrow (Figure 3).

KEY FINDINGS

- Pre-pandemic empowerment status did not affect the probability of losing income due to COVID-19.
- Empowered women were less likely to report selling assets and more likely to report borrowing compared to disempowered women
- Empowered women noted that it was more likely their spouses' assets that were being sold to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- This suggests that women's empowerment has increased their resilience to the pandemic shock.

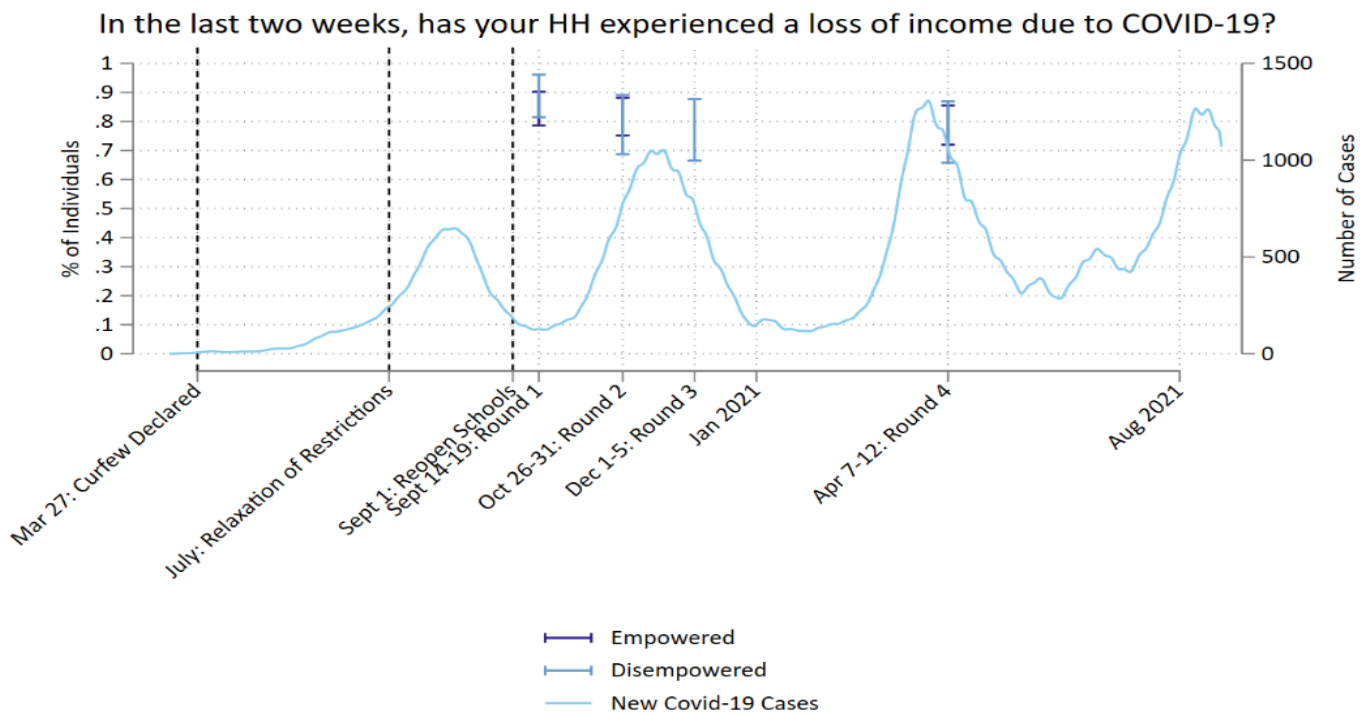


Figure 1: Loss of income due to COVID-19 as well as COVID-19 cases, March 2020 to August 2021

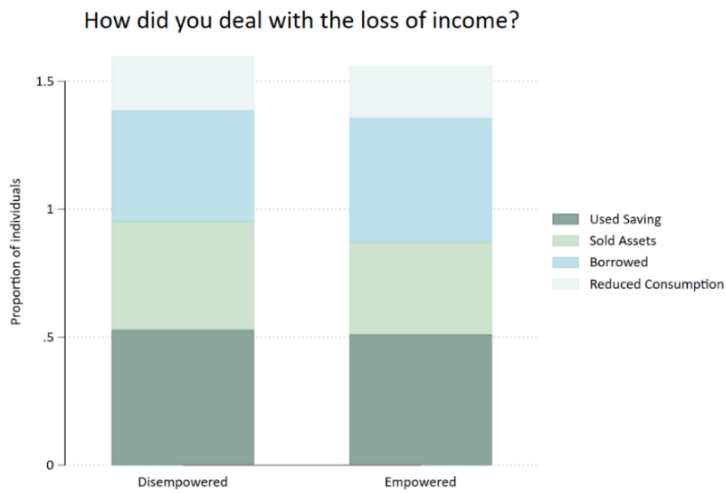


Figure 2: Coping mechanisms of empowered and

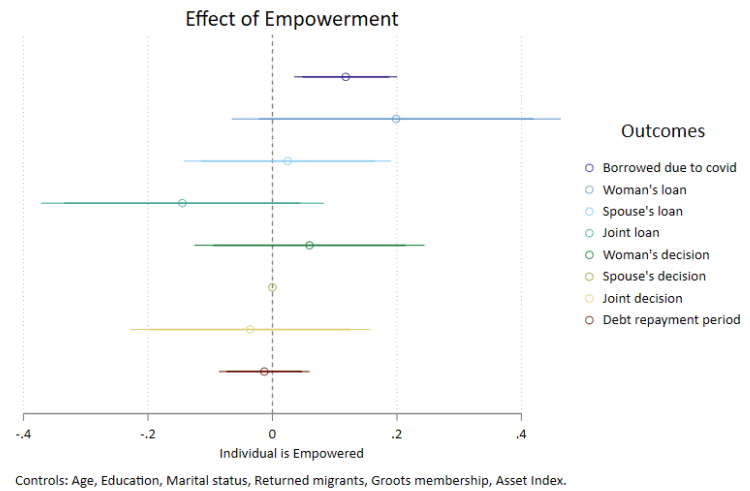


Figure 3: Estimated coefficient of empowerment on borrowing

After taking account of confounding factors, empowered women are no less likely than disempowered women to sell assets. However, empowered women were statistically significantly more likely to report that, if assets were sold, that it was their spouses' assets, rather than their own, that were sold (Figure 4). This may indicate that empowered women have more secure or protected asset ownership and/or more input into important household decisions compared to disempowered women.

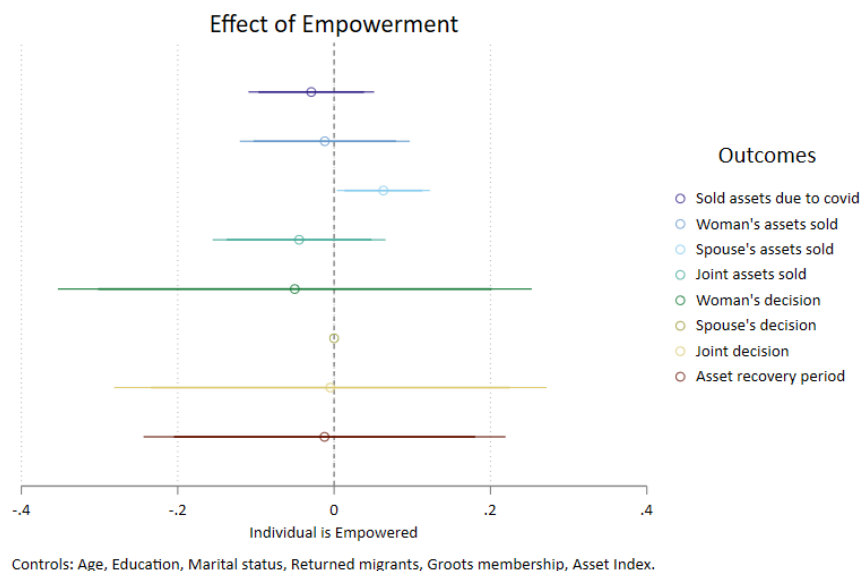
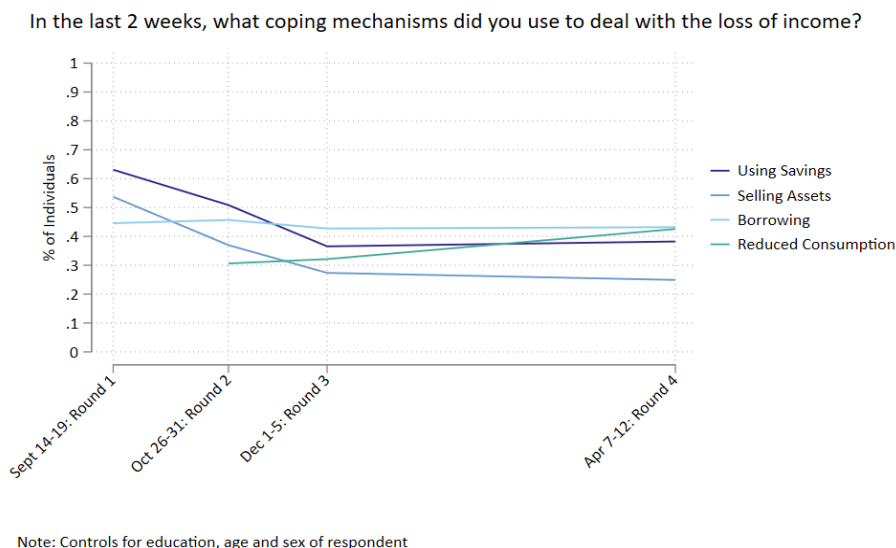


Figure 4: Estimated coefficient of empowerment on sale of

We find that initially households use saving and assets but as time passes—and assets and savings are presumably depleted—the use of these coping mechanisms decreases. Subsequently, the prevalence of reducing consumption increases with time. Borrowing remains steady over time (Figure 5).



While we lack baseline information about the prevalence of these coping mechanisms, we can track the number of hours spent caring for others from before the onset of the pandemic. As expected, the number of hours spent caring increased drastically for both men and women between February 2020 and September 2020). Empowered and disempowered women did not differ significantly in their care load.

Figure 5: Changes of coping mechanisms over time

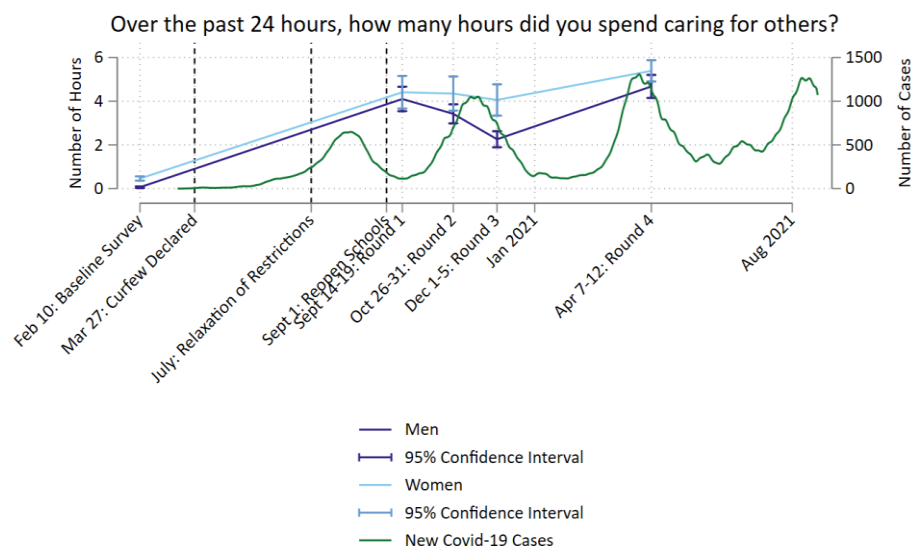


Figure 6: Care work of men and women over time

Conclusions

Women have disproportionately borne the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic due to increased care responsibilities and loss of income, among other factors (Alon et al., 2020; Azcona et al., 2020; Carli, 2020; Hjalmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Madgavkar et al., 2020). While the COVID-19 pandemic is in many ways unprecedented, past research on disease and natural disaster responses suggests that women who are more empowered in their daily lives may be more resilient to negative shocks than less empowered women (Leder, 2016; Moreno & Shaw, 2018). While not as strong as expected, our study finds evidence that more empowered women have, in fact, been more resilient than less empowered women, especially in the early phases of the pandemic before savings and assets were depleted. Empowered women in our study were more able to borrow and more able to maintain their own assets (if household assets were sold) to deal with loss of income due to the pandemic.

Women's empowerment and gender equality are important in their own right to women and girls and are instrumental to other development goals, such as reducing poverty, eliminating hunger and malnutrition, and achieving good health and well-being for women and children (Chaturvedi et al., 2016; Ogato, 2013). Our study affirms that women's empowerment is also important for increasing the resilience of women and their families to shocks, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It underscores the importance of maintaining and growing the commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment among funders, international development agencies, and implementers of agricultural development projects.

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