

## Pushing Women Further into Poverty and Gender-based Violence: The Impacts of Covid-19 in Rural and Urban Mali Areas

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly interrupted individuals' daily lives since its breakout in 2019. If the virus spreads unpredictably regardless of sex, race, religion, or wealth, its impact has been acute for the already vulnerable individuals. Due to COVID-19 high infection, high mortality, and gestation cycle, significant protection measures were implemented in Mali over social distance and quarantine methods to lessen the spread of the disease, which in turn rendered several economic activities impossible. Using data obtained from local and international news, reports, journal articles, and women's oral accounts in rural and urban Mali, the analysis found that the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted women and girls. As a result of the confinement measures, inequalities in economic outcomes and gender-based violence between men and women have been exacerbated. Before the pandemic, most women in Mali were gaining less money and saving less than men, making it further complicated for them to hold economic shocks as lockdowns and travel limitations have disturbed their financial pursuits. The outcomes also reveal that women were at increased risk of domestic violence perpetrated by violent spouses leading to physical, mental, and sexual violence. The paper concludes that there is a pressing need to prevent and manage the post-COVID-19 impact on women's socio-economic activities and gender-based violence by establishing a new more inclusive societal order with gender-sensitive policy responses.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, gender-based violence, socio-economic, poverty, women

### Introduction

As of July 2021, it has almost been a year and a half since the initial alarm rings of COVID-19 were announced. Since the coronavirus broke out in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, it has spread worldwide at an alarming rate (Notivol et al., 2021). So far, more than 4 million people have died worldwide, and more than 194 million cases have been confirmed throughout the world as of July 2021 (JHU CSSE 2020). Despite the development and implementation of vaccines against COVID-19 in many countries, the number of confirmed cases and deaths continues to rise. Besides the health dimension, the pandemic has also brought disturbance and doubts

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in individuals' daily lives. It triggers additional challenges to the most vulnerable individuals, including women and girls, as governments and institutions in different parts of the world have taken radical and unprecedented measures requiring various restrictions on people's daily lifestyles to lessen the spread of the disease.

After a year into the COVID-19 crisis, it is evident that the economic shock of this pandemic is gendered. A World Bank report in 2020 reveals that the pandemic is more likely to have particular and severe impacts on countries where governments' capacities are already weak, exacerbating existing inequalities and vulnerabilities (World Bank 2020). The report added that the pandemic is also expected to increase levels of violence perpetrated against intimate partners, anticipated by the imposition of restrictions on movement. Some groups and segments have been incredibly prone and exposed to the immediate social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic—such as women and girls who already encounter systemic obstacles to their involvement in the economy. They generally have inadequate access to valuable resources such as land, credit, and information required to raise their farms and businesses. Globally, women and girls remain disproportionately frightened by poverty, discrimination, and violence (Olajumoke 2021). They sometimes balance most unpaid care work coupled with the usual pressures of securing money for their family. These twofold duties are arduous and make it challenging for women to earn revenue to enhance their skills and prospects. Women, for instance, make up more than 70% of the most severely affected informal economic agents in food services, farming, and micro-trade (Lenshie et al., 2021). They are also overrepresented in other affected areas like the health care sector and cross-border commerce. Studies have revealed that women and children are more likely than men to experience food insecurity and malnutrition during a crisis (Onoshakpor et al., 2020).

It is crucial to understand the unprecedented impact of COVID-19 on households in Mali. This paper aims to assess the economic impact of the pandemic on women's income-generating activities in rural and urban areas to understand and evaluate the growth of domestic violence against women and girls. The study also seeks to inform policymakers and the government by making recommendations for risk mitigation. In this vein, the article will seek to answer the following questions: What were the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on women's income-generating activities in Mali? How did women and girls cope with the pandemic at the household level? To address these questions, the remainder of the article is structured as follows: The next section provides a short description of the research methodology and an overview of the impacts of COVID-19 on low-income countries' economies and women's employment in the informal sector. These are preceded by the sections on results and discussions based on the secondary and primary data. The final section summarizes the findings regarding the impact of COVID-19 on women's socio-economic activities in rural and urban Mali and makes policy recommendations.

## 1. Study Site and Methodology

### 1.1. Study Site

Mali is a vast Sahelian country of 1.2 million square km in West Africa, bordering seven African countries. The country is structured into ten administrative areas or regions, 703 communes, 49 circles, and one district. Bamako is the capital city of Mali. In 2009, Mali's population was estimated at 14.5 million, 50.4% of whom were women, over 70% lived in rural areas (INSAT 2009), and 23% lived in urban areas (Population Data 2020). The population in 2020 grew to almost 21 million people. Bamako, the capital, is proliferating and has reached 4.3 million inhabitants (Population Data 2020). Mali's financial endeavor mainly focuses on agriculture and mining, creating 80% of the country's income and trades (INSAT 2018). Nearly 65% of Mali's land area is desert or half desert. The proportion of informal employment in the non-agricultural sectors is very high, around 99.1%, reaching 98.8% for men and 99.6% for women (World Bank 2014).

Malian societies are linked to tradition and religion as around 90% of the population are Muslim. Contemporary Malian societies are thus based on rules and norms reflecting the country's socio-economic, political, and cultural realities, which date back to traditional Malian communities and Islamic values (Diallo 2021). These rules and values established patterns and customs for household structures, social relations, and interactions between men and women. They also recognize and legitimize the domination of men as the head of households for family management and resources allocation. Within these systems, women manage complex household duties and pursue multiple livelihood strategies that men do not. Women's activities typically include productive and reproductive roles like ensuring household chores, collecting firewood, and water, caring for family members, etc.

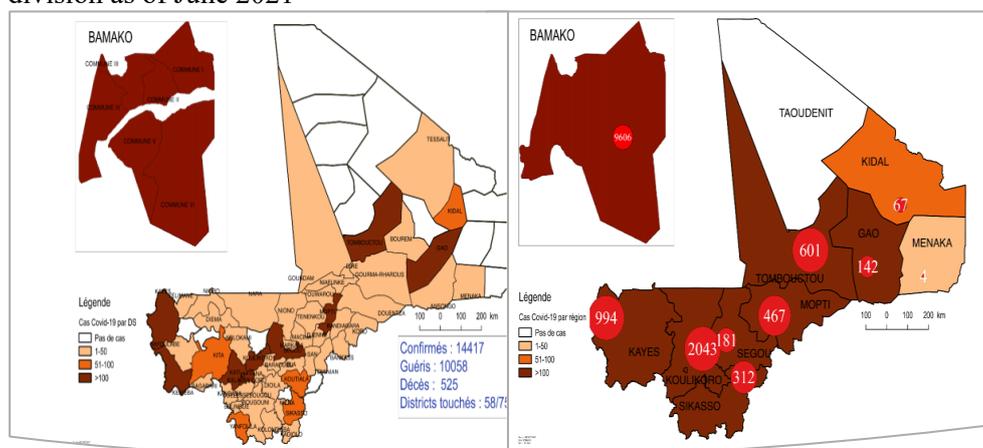
In comparison, men are engaged in more lucrative sectors of the economy, such as formal employment in government or private enterprises, trades, and other informal activities. Men are also the key decision-makers within households (Diallo 2021). Married women must often obey socio-cultural norms and rules in conducting entrepreneurship activities or joining a collective group. These norms and patterns affect women's educational attainment, access to resources, quality work, and decision-making stances. As an illustration, the INSAT (2009) survey shows that 29.4% of Malian adults are literate. The proportion of literate people is higher in urban areas (53.2%) than in rural areas (21.6%) and in wealthier households (48.6%) than in poorer families (16.3%). The literacy rate for women is 21.5% compared to 41.5% for men. This disadvantage affects girls compared to boys and is linked to the importance of marriage for girls in most communities, resulting in early dropouts from school due to motherhood. As for employment in the civil servant sector, men make up 85.5% of higher category A, while 44.1% of women are in the lower category B1.

As a result, most women are employed in informal sectors, and their level of qualification is deficient. Women work in occupations or sectors with limited employment stability and lower-level positions, with no prospect of career advancement and thus no improvement in income. About 95% of working women

are concentrated in agriculture, livestock, fishing, trade, processing, domestic activities, hotels, and restaurants (INSAT2009). Women's low level in skills employment, lower education level, lower salaries, disparities in time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, and precarious employment leave them at a disadvantage in many respects compared to men before the pandemic. They also have weak access to credit and microfinance due to the micro size of their businesses and their financial inability to expand or develop them. These also impact women's land ownership and access to other productive assets. The same situation holds true for their access to essential decision-making stances. As of 2020, women represented less than 30% in key strategic positions in the government (INSAT 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic strengthens these prevailing inequalities between men and women as resources are reduced with mobility restrictions. For instance, Mali's economy was expected to grow by 5.1% in 2019. But the IMF projection for 2020 fell to 0.9% due to the health crisis with the global shock of the coronavirus pandemic (IMF 2020). Mali had its first confirmed case in March 2020. Since then, the number of cases has dramatically increased. As reflected in (Map 1), 58 health care centers out of 75 in the ten regions have confirmed cases of COVID-19 by the end of June 2021. Mali has 14,417 cases, of which 166 were imported. Of the 14,417 patients, 10,058 have been cured, and 525 have died (WHO 2021).

Map 1: Number of confirmed cases and deaths of COVID-19 in Mali by health care division as of June 2021



Source: Government of the Republic of Mali, World Health Organization 2021

## 1.2. Methodology

As for the methodology, the study employs a mixed research method. The author uses data from reports, journals, and articles from international organizations, NGOs, and government officials to assess the pandemic's impacts on women from their oral accounts in rural and urban Mali areas to achieve the research objectives as indicated in Table 1.

The researcher collected qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources, requiring various analysis methods. Data sources were from the

internet, web pages, and print papers dealing with COVID-19 and gender, focusing primarily on Malian women. The survey employed data from NGOs, government, and international organizations in Mali as its primary data. Microsoft Excel was used to analyze the quantitative data. At the same time, descriptive analysis was applied with the qualitative data to understand the relations between the variables used to attain the research goals. Descriptive statistics involved handling summary frequency to answer the research question. Data analysis in Microsoft Excel was employed to broaden the researcher's knowledge of statistical data, compare the findings, and minimize bias from the consulted materials.

Table 1: Data Sources and Analysis Method

Research objectives	Data sources	Data analysis methods
<p>To evaluate the impacts of COVID-19 on developing countries</p> <p>To understand the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on women's income-generating activities</p>	<p><b>International organizations database</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ACDI</li> <li>• FAO</li> <li>• ILO</li> <li>• IMF</li> <li>• Plan International Mali</li> <li>• UN WOMEN</li> <li>• UNICEF</li> <li>• WHO</li> <li>• WORLD BANK</li> <li>• WTO</li> </ul>	Excel, query, figure, and descriptive analysis
<p>To understand and assess the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on women in Mali</p>	<p><b>Mali Government database</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mali Ministry of Health</li> <li>• Ministry of Women and Children</li> <li>• Ministry of Rural Development</li> <li>• INSAT</li> </ul>	Excel, query, diagram and descriptive analysis
<p>To understand and assess the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on women in Mali</p>	<p><b>NGOS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benbere</li> <li>• JHU CSSE</li> <li>• Kujenga Amani</li> <li>• JDWS</li> </ul>	Excel, query, figure and descriptive analysis
<p>To evaluate the impacts of COVID-19 in developing countries</p> <p>To understand the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on women income generating activities</p>	<p><b>Literature on COVID-19 from</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articles</li> <li>• Newspapers</li> <li>• Reports</li> <li>• Blogs</li> </ul>	Excel, query, figure, and descriptive analysis

Source: Author

As for the data analysis process, the study focuses on three major areas: (1) the economic impact of COVID-19 on women's income-generating activities, (2) its social impact at the household level, and (3) the implication these have on girls' schooling and early marriages. These factors were assessed from rural to urban areas' perspectives. These enabled the researcher to understand the relationships and impacts of COVID-19 on women in rural and urban areas.

### **3. Impacts of COVID-19 on the Economy and Women Labor in Low-Income Countries**

#### **3.1. Impacts of COVID-19 on the Economy of Low-Income Countries**

The effects of COVID-19 on economic activities in low-income countries are evident. Besides public health concerns, it has also triggered severe financial challenges. Ongoing impacts comprise complete or partial cessations of general activities and human interactions in developed and low-income countries. Export-oriented goods experienced a massive decline in demand (mainly from Asia, the United States, and Europe), borders closings, deficiency in accessing necessary products, and interruptions in shipments and air freight had additional consequences on commercial activities in developing countries that primarily rely on manufacture goods from the west (Onyishi et al., 2021).

These measures influence all-economic segments, including the health, industrial, wholesale, transportation, education, and other sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic has also altered the macro environment of the world economy, mainly in the demand and supply realm, revenue, and employment creation from the trade sector. According to the yearly trade report released by the World Trade Organization, the world marketing industry will drop by 13 to 32% in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The plunge will likely surpass the employment decline of the global financial crisis from 2008-to 09 (WTO 2020).

Exchanges of services and goods among customers will also be hindered due to travel limitations and the shutting down of marketing and business institutions (Wanije and Benefo 2020). It is believed that the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will drop by as much as 3%, while developing nations will experience the hardest struck, as much as 4% on average, with some more than 6.5% (Maliszewska; Mattoo; and Mensbrugge 2020). According to the International Monetary Fund, the world will lose 9 trillion US dollars, which is comparable to the GDP losses of Japan and Germany (IMF 2020). Specific groups or entities susceptible to the global market structure and policies like women, children, and refugees are more likely to be impacted.

#### **3.2. Women Labor in the Informal Economic Sector**

The estimation that the COVID-19 crisis would have wide-ranging harmful impacts on females and families in sub-Saharan Africa was primarily recognized. The GDP has dropped almost in every country. Several companies have fallen into financial hardship, and household earnings have been reduced (Casale and Dorrit, 2020). The International Labor Organization assesses that the number of females working in low- and middle-income nations fell 4.7% between 2019 and 2020, compared to a 3.3% decline for men due to the uneven effect of COVID-19 on areas where females make a higher percentage of the labor force (ILO 2021). The report further forecasted a decline in human development and poverty in Africa, particularly within rural communities in informal and small businesses.

Additionally, literature on COVID-19's impact shows that women's

economic and productive livelihoods have been affected disproportionately and differently than men's (Ramparsad 2020). Disruptions in supply chains and market closures have significantly impacted businesses run by women. As mentioned earlier, women earn less, have fewer savings, work in less secure jobs, and operate in the informal sector (Dube 2021). They have less access to social protection schemes and form most single-parent households. Therefore, their ability to withstand economic shocks is less than men's. Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, especially those run by women, make up many enterprises in developing countries and are among the sectors of activities most affected by the pandemic (Ryder, Wanije; and Benefo 2020). These enterprises are fragile, have difficulties accessing finance under normal conditions, and have little room to mitigate economic crises. The pandemic has particularly affected the restaurant, trade, and food processing sectors. Sustaining a business beyond a certain period is challenging with limited financial resources. Many small companies can no longer employ their current staff, let alone recruit new ones. Remote work in many of these businesses is impossible. Moreover, these companies are rarely formalized into banking systems, making their access to a first loan more challenging during this period of economic crisis (Odeku 2020).

Besides, more than 80% of the rural population depends on subsistence agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2020). Any disruption of the prevailing and future agricultural production cycles will have long-term harm and an incremental impact on the region. Communities across sub-Saharan Africa currently cope with the combined effects of COVID-19, persistent hunger, conflict, and climate change (Mzini and Boitumelo 2020). Some even forecast that the number of people worldwide touched by food insecurity will double as an immediate consequence of the pandemic (Ezirigwe et al., 2021). Understanding the challenges women faced in these multi-dimensional circumstances amid the pandemic remains a crucial study area.

#### **4. Results and Discussions**

As mentioned earlier, Mali had its first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in March 2020. As in other countries, the government has decreed a series of measures instigating social distancing methods and rigorous lockdowns to slow down the spread of the disease and lower the number of deaths and infected people. Accordingly, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs has developed an emergency plan to respond to COVID-19 in March 2020. These measures include the closure of Mali borders, curfews from 9:00 pm to 5:00 am, the interruption of all public gatherings, the prohibition of any social, cultural, sports, and political meeting of more than 50 individuals, closure of nightclubs and pubs, schools' closure, the reorganization of public administration working hours (from 7:30 to 2:30 pm) and markets (from 6:00 am to 4:00 pm).

If these measures have helped contain the virus, they have contributed to the decline of people's living conditions, who, in many cases, have been deprived of resources. Since the beginning of May 2020, the restrictions have been gradually lifted, especially those related to movement and transportation. Despite governmental and non-governmental actors' constant efforts, the extent and severity

of the economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic effects are far from being resolved. In what follows, this study assesses the impacts of the pandemic on Malian women's income-generating activities and the social and psychological consequences exacerbated by confinement measures as shown in various journals, blogs, reports from government organizations, community sources, and international organizations such as the UN and ILO.

#### 4.1. Effects of COVID-19 on Women's Income-Generating Activities

In the UN Women survey of 2020, 79% of the surveyed individuals receiving income from employment have seen their revenue decrease or dissolve, 82% for women and 77% for men (ONU Femmes 2020c). This is true for 74% of individuals in the formal sector and 82% of those in the informal sector. The most affected are women who receive income from informal employment. Eighty-seven percent of them have experienced a decrease or loss of revenue, as reflected in Figure 1 (ONU Femmes 2020c).

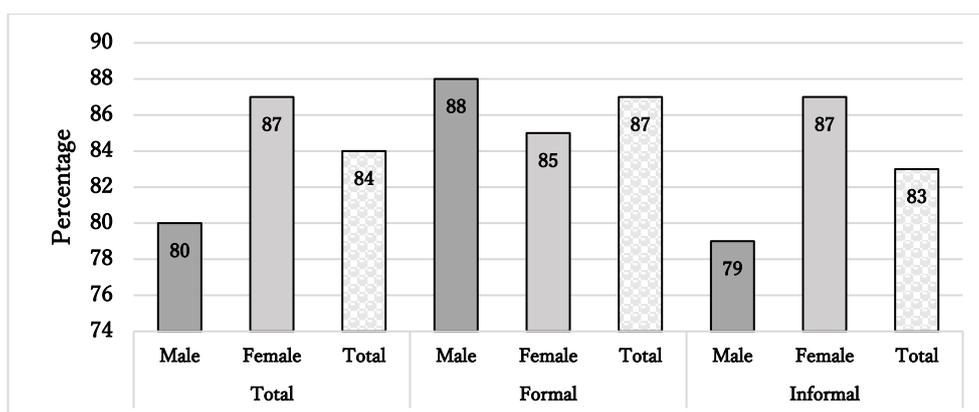


Figure 1: Decrease or loss of entrepreneurs' income by sector and sex (%)

Source: <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/enquete-rapide-sur-les-effets-de-la-covid-19-au-mali-une-perspective-genre>

Additionally, Figure 2 reveals that the pandemic impact on income was more significant in urban areas than rural areas. Eighty-seven percent of urban respondents said they had lost all their income or had seen it decrease, compared to 76% of rural respondents. This percentage rises to 78% for urban men and 75% for rural men—79% for urban women and 76% for rural women (ONU Femmes 2020b).

As for business owners, employers, and self-employed, whether in the formal or informal sector and regardless of gender, nearly 9 out of 10 business owners say they have suffered a decrease or total loss of income since the pandemic began. This affects women more than men. Eighty-three to seventy-six percent of women reported losing all their income compared to 4% of men. (Eyong; Mongbo; Ruiz; and Diaby 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has made entrepreneurs in the formal and informal sectors extremely vulnerable.

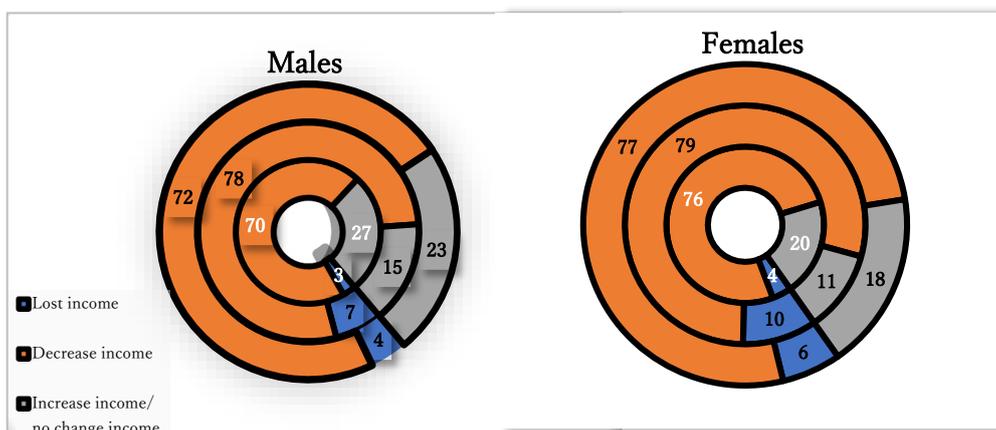


Figure 2: Change in personal income since the beginning of the crisis by sex and residence (%)

Source: <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/enquete-rapide-sur-les-effets-de-la-covid-19-au-mali-une-perspective-genre>

In the face of these challenges, heads of households have adopted strategies to deal with the pandemic. Among the strategies adopted by household heads, the most common are reducing food quality, borrowing money, goods, or food from relatives, and reducing the amount of food. Accordingly, a respondent said:

*We did not make much money during the lockdown because we couldn't access markets. This impacted our daily food consumption attitude. I can only provide two meals per day to my children. I hope the pandemic will end soon (Harber 2020).*

The pandemic impacts both men and women and other household members, yet women experience more significant harm than men. Despite the extent and impact of the informal economy and promising efforts, Malian women's ability to play a vital role in the economy has been constantly and severely diminished by the pandemic.

As for the impacts of COVID-19 on women's income-generating activities in urban areas, the study found that the informal economy's dominance in Mali cannot be denied. Throughout the country, proportionately more females than males work in the informal economic sector (Tal and Hutchinson 2020). Industrial activities, administrative work, processing, and marketing farm commodities are the main activities undertaken by women in urban areas. Most Malian women in

metropolitan cities often depend on public spaces and social interactions with customers in markets, roadsides, stations, etc., to earn a living.

After the spread of COVID-19, a sharp slowdown in economic activity occurred throughout Mali. Official projections assess a decrease in Mali's economic growth rate by 0.9% (Diarra 2020). It is envisioned today that all fields of economic activities have been disrupted, with a severe decline in output in the secondary and tertiary sectors. The tertiary sector's growth would fall from 5.5% to 0.8% (Sall and Zhang 2020). The deficit has significantly affected supplies to some industries, the hotel, transport, restaurant, and tourism sectors. Women who dominate these realms are more likely to be affected than men. Besides, most women work with no social benefits (Siham; Wei; and Xu 2021). Similarly, a survey on the pandemic's impacts in Mali reveals that the COVID-19 crisis has made insecure people who work in most informal sectors (farmers, entrepreneurs, food processors, and other enterprises that depend on imports) more vulnerable: these are mainly women (Diallo 2021). The United Nations advocacy report of May 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs in Mali reveals that nearly 20% of women had to stop their activities between March and April 2020 and that these women lost about 98% of their income (UN Mali 2020).

Additionally, an increase in prices is projected to occur, leading to an inflation rate between 0.3% and 4.9% (Ramparsad 2020). As social interactions are now restricted to contain the virus's spread, women's financial activities have been affected. Many women in Mali's urban areas will suffer. For example, in Bamako, expenses dropped anticipated by lowered demand from local businesses; shops shut down or are running at reduced capacity. Customers no longer buy as much food as they usually would (UN Women 2020).

Furthermore, a survey on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on Mali's women suggests that women's economic and productive livelihoods will be disproportionately and adversely affected compared to men (Toure 2020). Likewise, in a briefing note published in April 2020, the UN reports that women aged 25 to 34 are likely to live in extreme poverty during the pandemic. The lack of decent work and the lack of access to a decent living standard translates into a lack of access to remunerative employment, lack of employment-related protections (social and labor security), lack of right to enjoy economic and social rights, as well as difficult access to market, capital, and property for entrepreneurs. Mali cannot achieve gender equality if it does not increase the low wages women earn in conventional farming and does not provide job security for women in the informal economy.

Regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on women's income-generating activities in rural areas, the survey further shows that Mali's economy mainly relies on agriculture (farming, livestock breeding, and fishing), employing 80% of the country's 21 million people and representing 40% of Mali's GDP (INSAT 2018). More than 70% of Malians live in rural areas and practice agriculture. Before the pandemic, women made up 48.4% of the active economic population in Mali; they represent 51.6% of the rural population, make up 60% of the agricultural labor force, and account for nearly 80% of food production (Ministere du Development Rural 2014). Although Malian women play a crucial role in agricultural production, they are generally in charge of subsistence farming, while men contribute to subsistence

and commercial agriculture. Malian women farmers' access to agrarian resources and control is mediated through men, either their fathers or husbands, and their agricultural contribution is mostly obscure. Even when women have access to assets, they rarely control them. The pandemic had additional dimensions to these prevailing challenges in rural areas. Mainly it disturbed women's income-generating activities, predominantly in agricultural production, food processing, and marketing. Local market interruptions impact rural women's economic endeavors for their income-generating activities (Diallo 2021; Odeku 2020). Restrictions on mobility and prohibition of gatherings have severely reduced commercial opportunities for most rural women, who relied on informal economic activities and market events to sell their products. Their small shops and activities must close before 4 pm, which is the precise time women start selling doughnuts, beans, or fried potatoes. In an interview conducted by "Benbere," an online platform run by DoniBolg in Mali, on the impacts of the pandemic on women's economic activities, Atta, a vegetable seller at the Yobou Tao market in the Timbuktu region, stated:

*They do not give us anything to protect ourselves from the disease, and they tell us to go home before 4:00 pm. So how do they want us to feed our children? As long as a policeman does not come to evacuate me, I will not leave this market until 6 pm (Harber 2020).*

The pandemic hinders women's ability to take care of themselves and their families. According to the UN Women Mali report, the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on women revealed that women suffered from a 50% income reduction, the interruption of their revenue, the deprivation of income-generating activities, and the downfall of their markets and produces (ONU Femmes 2020 b). Mali's other challenges include women's lack of access to necessary commodities such as soap or hand sanitizer. Remarkably, most women in rural and urban areas cannot afford COVID-19 protection kits costs. The prices of hand sanitizers are beyond their financial means. They cannot afford to buy them daily, given the cost of their household expenses. Regardless of the government's efforts, women reveal that they are the primary "forgotten" and the least protected against the pandemic (Toure 2020). Even though national and international legal frameworks protecting citizens' rights are a promise in Mali, their implementation is limited.

#### 4.2. Increase in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work

A woman is initially considered a mother and wife responsible for managing the household chores and care work for children and the elderly in most parts of Mali. To be appreciated within their family and community, societal norms require a woman to be submissive and obedient toward her husband and relatives. Likewise, she must be convivial to guests, a good chief, assiduous, diligent, discrete, and enduring. Deeply entrenched stereotypes bolster social expectations, maintaining gender relations and gender roles across generations. As a result, women cannot fully contribute to productive employment and access leadership positions like men due to these expectations. On average, women spend 7 to 8 hours a day on

unpaid care work in Mali, compared to 1 hour for men (USAID 2011).

In rural areas, women spend 6 to 8 hours a day on unpaid household chores such as cleaning, cooking, fetching water, firewood, farming activities, and caring for children and the elderly. These practices increased during the COVID-19. Confinement and curfew measures have disrupted the daily lives of households by forcing people to transform the way they live and manage their time in the family.

While in urban areas, women spent 5 to 6 hours a day on domestic activities. This number is higher for career women in the formal sector who work 16 hours a day (USAID 2011). Working women work double due to their professional and household responsibilities. Thus, the gender division of labor requires women to complete productive, reproductive, and community service jobs to support their husbands, children, and other family members, which is not the case for working men.

The COVID-19 pandemic strengthens this gender disparity, particularly in households' chores and work schedules. The UN Women report in Mali reveals that 69% of women experienced increased unpaid domestic and care work in Mali (ONU Femmes 2020c). The report also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has made women in rural and urban areas spend more time on domestic activities than men. In this vein, the pandemic has highlighted the essential role of household care and tasks that have become particularly important in times of health crisis.

Unlike previous humanitarian crises, during COVID-19 domestic care remains a crucial aspect of the emergency response, given school closures, the vulnerability of the elderly, and mobility restrictions limiting the availability of domestic workers. It also forces people and communities to reinforce individual and collective hygiene through strict compliance with barriers measures. Adopting hygienic measures is one of the most effective approaches to preventing the spread of the virus, leading to an increase of two to three extra hours in the maintenance and cleaning of household premises (Ramparsad 2020). This increased workload often constrains women's abilities to engage in economic activities outside the household.

#### 4.3. Increase Health Risks

The right to health is linked to the right to life, and the COVID-19 challenges the ability of states to protect this right. Access to health care in Mali is highly unequal between Bamako and the regions and between urban and rural areas. This is due to the unequal distribution of health care personnel and difficult access to health centers. Women are particularly affected by mobility constraints. Besides experiencing economic consequences, women are at increased health risks. Women's responsibility as caregivers at the household level and in health care centers also renders them more susceptible to the virus (Achraf et al., 2021).

Feminization of the health sector is common in developed and developing countries because women are assumed to be better caregivers. This bias results in the rising enrollments of young women in medicine, nursing, and medical research worldwide (Moghadam 2021). Globally, women and girls make up 70% of the health care workforce, putting them in direct contact with those infected (WHO 2020).

In Malian urban areas, even though some 35% of all physicians are women,

they dominate the healthcare segment primarily as nurses or nurse assistants (ONU Femmes 2020a). Frontline healthcare workers have been noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic despite weakening conditions, low salaries, and threats to their health. Since the pandemic, healthcare workers have been vulnerable and sent warnings about their precarious situations, such as shortage of equipment, lack of materials, low wages, and requests for better working environments.

While in rural areas, the pandemic lowers women's attendance to maternal healthcare, which remained precarious before the pandemic due to multidimensional socio-economic conditions like poor road conditions, difficulties in accessing transportation, distances to hospitals, etc. Due to the pandemic, many women reported stopping attending hospitals for fear of being infected. Pregnant and postpartum women and girls may be particularly vulnerable to infectious diseases, especially if they have existing respiratory disorders or regular contact with sick patients. As for mental health, 73% of women said their psychological, mental, and emotional health-related to stress and anxiety had been negatively affected by the pandemic (Bazghina-werq and Souci 2020). The vulnerability of rural infrastructure and fragile health care systems are one of the leading causes of stress and anxiety among women in rural and urban areas.

#### **4. Increased Gender-Based Violence and Child Marriage**

##### **4.1. Increased Gender-Based Violence at the Household Level**

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to any hostile acts, including rape, sexual harassment, physical and verbal abuse among individuals, psychological violence, and prohibitions of economic activities directed at any entities based on their gender. These behaviors are harmful and stem from cultural norms and values, such as excision, forced or early marriage, nutritional taboos, excess feeding, widowhood, and religious sequestration (UN Women 2020). Before the advent of COVID-19, domestic violence against women and girls was already one of the major human rights violations. An analysis of the Mali Demographic and Health Survey showed that among the interviewees of that survey, 60% of women believed that a man has the right to beat his wife when she leaves home without his permission or if she neglects the children (INSAT 2009). A high percentage of Malians in rural and urban areas still believe that physical abuse is acceptable when wives misbehave, such as burning food, standing up to their husbands, or refusing to have sex with their husbands (Beridogo 2002).

Likewise, a survey conducted by an NGO (JDFS), Justice and Dignity for the Women of Sahel (2020), found that GBV was recurrent in Sahelian African countries of Burkina Fasso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Mauritania, and Tchad. Before the pandemic, the prevalence of GBV in Mali was 43%, as shown in Figure 3 (Dalla and Snorek 2020).

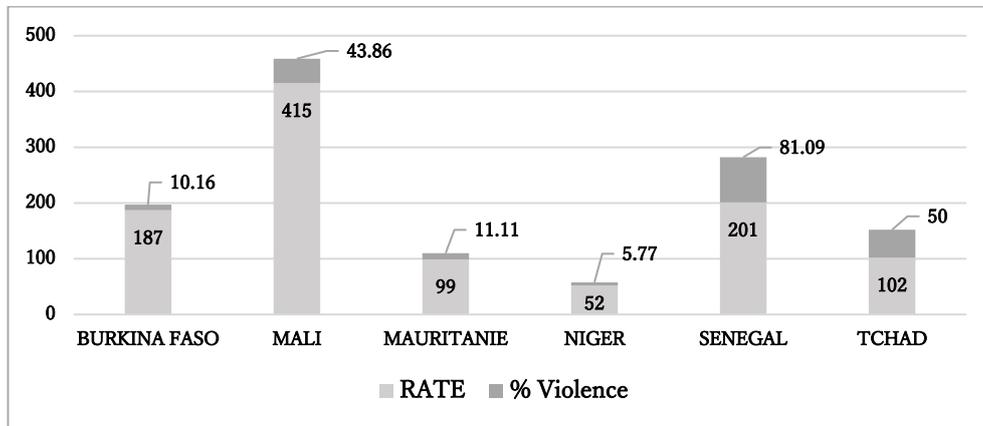


Figure 3: Percentage of Gender-Based Violence before COVID-19  
Source: Justice and Dignity for the Women of Sahel (JDWS) June 2020

These results attest to most Malian's tolerance of GBV, especially toward women. It also reveals a sense of normality in accepting domestic violence embedded in social patterns. While the traditional values and practices that impact gender equality persist, the pandemic has created additional gaps and needs for Mali's women (Diallo 2021). As the pandemic continues to escalate, this number will likely increase and cause far-reaching implications for women's and girls' sexual, reproductive, and mental health.

As illustrations, with mobility restrictions, women must stay at home all the time with men. There could be more stress from staying together for a long time without escaping. This increased stress can raise violence from men to women. Equally, a survey uncovers that the improved financial dependence of females and lowered access to external assistance are triggering the rise in domestic violence in Mali amid the pandemic (WHO 2020).

In urban areas, increased constraints due to economic pressures lead to extra household stress and increased violence within families (Rajah and Osborn 2020). This condition is significantly exacerbated in Mali due mainly to the events that have occurred since 2012 involving armed conflicts, terrorism, climate change, and the country's socio-cultural setting. Among the civilian populations, women and children are usually the first victims of assault, insecurity, rape, and volatility in conflict zones (Bazghina-werq and Souci 2020). Accordingly, the percentage of GBV in Mali rose from 43% before COVID-19 to 53% during the COVID-19 pandemic, an overall increase of 10% (Dalla and Snorek 2020), as indicated in Figure 4.

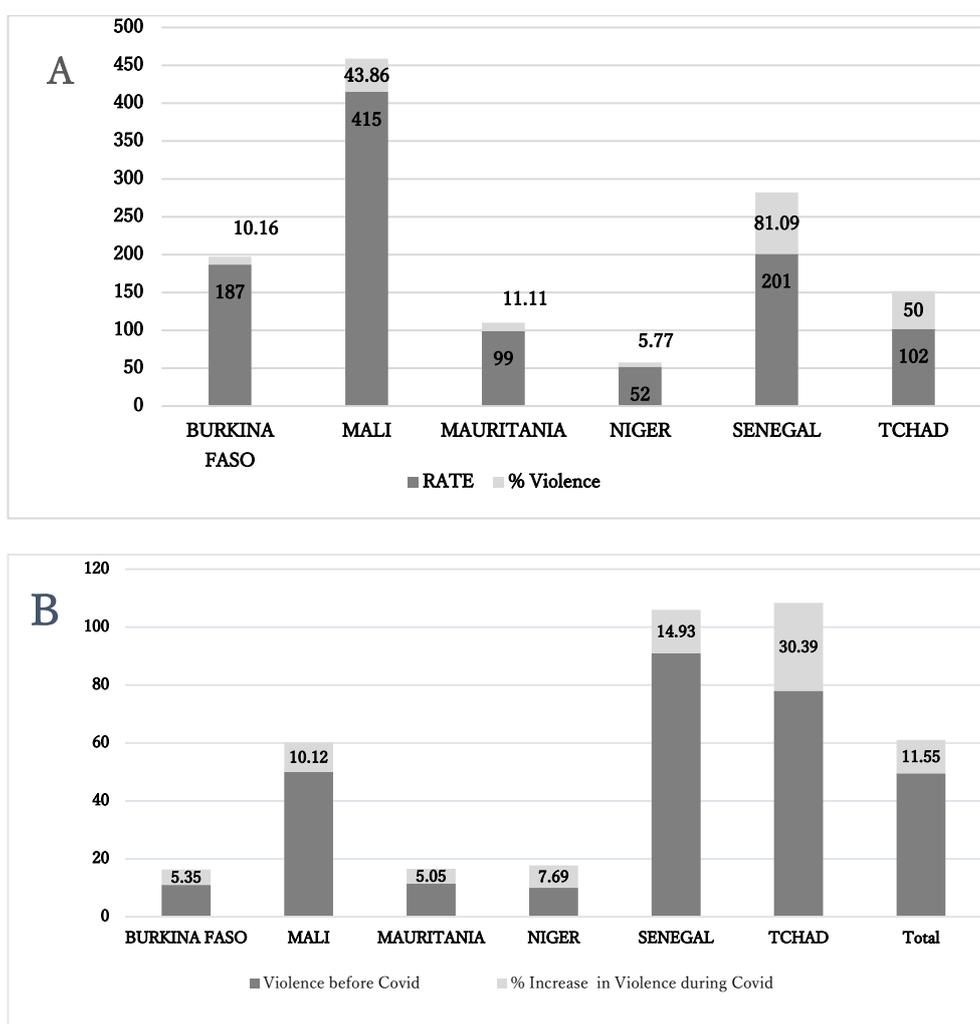


Figure 4: GBV under COVID-19 (A) and change in GBV due to COVID-19 (B)  
 Source: Justice and Dignity for the Women of Sahel (JDWS) June 2020

In rural areas, experts in the field, such as medical doctors and health professionals, declared an upsurge in GBV. The head doctor at a community health center in Kayes, Diarra, alleged that GBV increased in the region. He said that he treated “an average of four GBV survivors per week, most of whom experienced physical and sexual violence.” He also added that “the victims need psychological support, and his team is not qualified to do so” (Plan International Mali 2020). Implying that women in peri-urban and remote local communities are especially at risk as they have lessened protection and healthcare access than those in urban areas.

GBV remains widespread throughout the country with the pandemic. Women often lack access to justice because of social pressures and lack knowledge of their rights (ONU Femmes 2020a). The fundamental causes of violence against women and girls in Mali are discriminatory cultural practices, a lack of respect for

women's human rights, and men's abuse of power in communities where patriarchal systems prevail. These types of violence and discrimination generally start from childhood to adulthood. Unfortunately, they are maintained and justified by social norms and practices in which women often participate. For example, in contemporary Mali societies, a married woman is required to "*mugnou ani sabali*," meaning to endure, tolerate and accept psychological, verbal, or physical violence from a male partner/husband as sufferings from a spouse is believed to turn into "blessings" for her children. These factors ominously reveal the complexity of gender relations and structural patterns motivating some individuals to recourse to violence in marriage.

#### 4.2. Increased Child Marriage

School closures have had another consequence, especially for around 110 million children and young people (Titilope 2020). Online or distance learning courses instigate challenges for poor and low-income families who still lack essential digital tools and services like (Electricity, TV, Internet), books, materials, and adequate space in most parts of Mali, mainly in rural and peri-urban areas. This can harmfully influence young people's provisions for further education or employment opportunities.

Schools' closure was also highlighted as a possible cause of GBV. Children may be susceptible to child labor and violence in rural and urban areas as educational institutions are closed (Antonowicz 2010). Particularly, girls' access to education can also be impacted by the pandemic. For example, it might be more challenging for girls to re-enroll after schools have re-opened.

In urban areas, the challenges include the reorientation of girls toward small businesses, exposing them to rape and assault. Teenage girls being more exposed to men as street vendors may increase the probability of earlier pregnancies, mainly before marriage. School closures can likewise result in children's idleness or encourage child marriage since school can be a reason or a cover for most mothers to protect their daughters from early marriage (UNICEF 2020). This was evidenced by a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) survey in Mali during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that women and young girls became increasingly vulnerable to the threat of abuse, child labor, and marriage (UNICEF 2020).

In rural areas, the phenomenon was more noticed in child marriage, which is an enduring issue in Mali as the country holds the sixth highest incidence rate of child marriage in the world. Specifically, 52% of Malian girls marry before 18, and 17% marry before their 15th birthday (Plan International Mali 2020). A survey conducted by Plan International on COVID-19 in the Kayes region found that child marriage rates have increased since the pandemic outbreak. The spouse of the village chief describes as follows:

*With schools' closure, the situation has changed for young people. Most boys are at the gold mining site; some have migrated despite everything. The girls are in the capital city; they work there as domestic helpers. Many of them have also been married (Plan International Mali 2020).*

Due to the weight of religion and customary practices, most parents still approve marriage for girls at 15 years old or after their first menstruation, regardless of their aspirations and visions. Girls have fewer choices for their marriage or choice of partner, especially in rural areas. Accordingly, Socko, a 16-year-old girl, said as follows:

*I was forced to marry a man that I did not know. I am only in the 11th year grade; how can I do it? I want to go to medical school. I do not know if I will be allowed to continue my studies. Men decide, and we execute! It is sad not to be in charge of one's own life (Plan International Mali 2020).*

Such occurrences can be attributed to persisting cultural norms and practices embedded in patriarchal systems that standardize gender discrimination and are more likely to increase as the crisis continues. While the number of GBV increases, violence against women and girls takes on a new dimension: social distancing and self-isolation triggered by the COVID-19 are used to exercise power, threats, and control over women and girls (O'Donnell; Amber; and Potts 2020). The household then became a place of fear and abuse for most women and girls who used schools and their outdoor activities as an alibi to escape from violent partners before the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

Based on these findings, the study concludes that although both females and males have had their incomes interrupted by the pandemic, longstanding gender disparities suggest that females are more likely to get their life conditions and long-term economic opportunities adversely affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Women have been negatively affected in several important areas: the deprivation of their employment opportunities in the informal sector, the increase in unpaid care work, the decline in their physical and mental health, and gender-based violence's intensification. In rural and urban areas, women in the self-employed sector of informal farming, petty trade, small and medium enterprises, and health care workers have been most susceptible. The pandemic impacts women employed in tourism, hotel, transport, restaurant, and informal marketing activities in urban areas. While in rural areas, COVID-19 has disturbed women's income-generating activities, predominantly agricultural production, food processing, and marketing.

Overall, all women encounter increased unpaid household labor, especially women professionals in urban areas. Besides the economic consequences, women and girls faced decreased psychological health, increased GBV, and early marriage amid the pandemic. As for mental health and physical violence, women in urban areas had more options and easier access to health care centers than rural women. In urban areas, girls are reorientated toward small businesses, exposing them to rape and assault. In comparison, many girls migrated to cities or got married in rural areas. These findings imply that the previously existing inequalities between males and

females on economic outcomes and GBV have been exacerbated during the pandemic. The results also show that the economic impact of the pandemic is gendered because it has pushed more women and girls into poverty. Before the pandemic, women had already encountered systemic challenges to their full involvement in Mali's economy. But this situation has been worsened by COVID-19, as shown throughout the analysis. Empowering women to attain their full capabilities remains one of the most significant ways to fight against poverty. With the appropriate assistance, women can enhance their profits and prospects for the future.

## **Recommendations**

It has been a year and a half since the pandemic began, and the virus keeps mutating with emerging variants from different parts of the world. Therefore, we might learn to live with COVID-19, implying that countries and communities should design strategies and practices for the post-COVID-19 era. Political schemes, economic agents, and civil society organizations will help shape those strategies. In this atmosphere, policies in response to the pandemic should consider the gender inequalities highlighted in this paper to avert the heightening of prevailing disparities and safeguard women who remain most vulnerable. Thus, it is essential to establish a new more inclusive societal order with gender-sensitive policies addressing the socio-economic inequalities, biased cultural patterns, beliefs, and opinions that nurture and justify gender discrimination.

Given their fundamental vulnerabilities, if assistance measures are applied, women in the informal economic sector in urban and rural areas could be targeted as recipients. In this regard, policies should initially support women's needs and concerns as they are the most affected. The government should take extraordinary measures to include women's access to financial resources to meet their economic needs in the COVID-19 response strategy. This can be achieved by providing women with non-refundable grants, enabling them to conform to the government's working hours and restrictions in response to COVID-19. These grants will help them support the expenses of their families.

There is also a need to create or have more counseling centers or phone counseling services for victims of GBV in rural areas. By providing psychosocial support, these centers will enable victims of abuse to understand their condition as they will be better equipped with strategies and alternatives to deal with their abusers. Additional medical staff and health professionals should be trained in the psychological care of GBV survivors. Victims must also be supported and trained to invigorate the end of this behavior within their households and communities.

Governments should also create favorable conditions to empower girls and women economically by providing worthy childcare, education, and labor rights for unpaid domestic work, enforcing laws against domestic violence, implementing laws prohibiting early marriage, amplifying investments in public health, and training for better-paid medical positions. Policies to tackle disparities and enhance women's economic, social, and mental health should be established mainly in rural areas by considering local realities.

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