



## COVID-19 Coping and Resilience Mechanisms of Informal Women Workers in Uganda

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is implementing a multi-country funded research project dubbed 'REBUILD'. In this project, ICRW seeks to assess the impact of COVID-19 policies on women in the informal economy in India, Kenya, and Uganda. The project relies on an intersectional approach to establish how COVID-19 related health and economic shocks and the policy responses interact with pre-existing gender and other social norms to impact the livelihood, experience of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and Sexual Reproductive

Health and Rights (SRHR) outcomes for women who work in the urban informal.

The documented case study stories as told by the representatives of the informal women workers show the social-economic impact of COVID-19 on the informal women workers in Uganda while exhibiting the coping and resilience mechanisms.

# ***Business by Day, Residence by Night***

Women food vendors in Uganda adapt during COVID-19's first wave

***The majority of the women at the market had to spend nights there to be able to work and provide for their families.***

*Hadijah Nagugya, Chairperson Matooke zone, St. Balikudembe market*

COVID-19 has upended lives in numerous ways, inspiring lifestyle adaptations both large and small. One such example among self-employed women market vendors in Uganda was to temporarily establish residence in their place of work—at the market.

During the pandemic's first wave in 2020, after a period of total lockdown, President Yoweri Museveni allowed "essential workers" to return to work. This included women sellers at local food markets. To mitigate further spread of COVID-19 through travel, he issued a directive that market vendors should sleep at the marketplaces themselves.

*Hadijah Nagugya* is the chairperson for Matooke zone at St. Balikudembe market, which engages vendors, primarily women, with low levels of capital who are working to provide for their families. She has been at this market for 20 years, selling a variety of seasonal fruits. She explains that with government-imposed restrictions related to COVID-19, the majority of the women at her market had to spend nights there to be able to work and provide for their families. "They could not go back home during the lockdown after transport was banned by the presidential directive as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19," she said.

*Janat Nakiganda*, a restaurant owner and representative for women at Nakasero market, praised Museveni for allowing market vendors, especially women, to spend nights in the market as a means of mitigating the spread of COVID-19. The government provided items to support this "move," such as mattresses, mosquito nets, and personal hygiene products. She says enabling overnight stays at the market helped women sustain their businesses, which may not have survived otherwise.

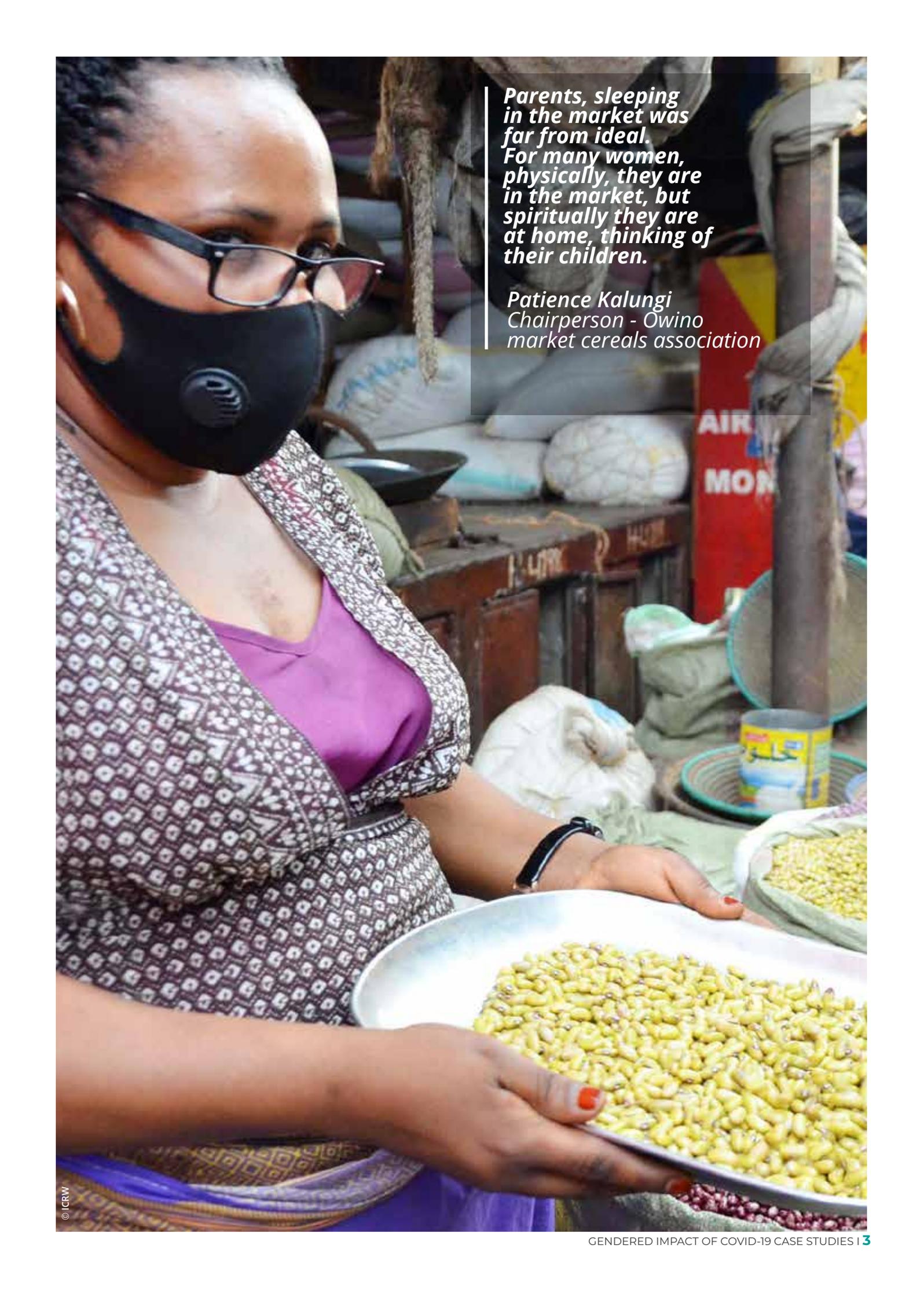
*Caroline Nabukeera*, leader of a group that sells greens and peppers at Nakasero market, agrees that the government played a vital role in helping them sustain their livelihoods while keeping them safe during the pandemic. "We received mosquito nets, sanitizers, and hand-washing devices from the pandemic national taskforce" she says, adding that the opportunity to stay

at the market was especially vital in the period during which public and private transport was banned across the country.

Not all women embraced this abrupt lifestyle change, however. *Patience Kalungi*, Chairperson of Owino market cereals association in Kampala, says that for parents, sleeping in the market was far from ideal. For many women, she said, "Physically, they are in the market but spiritually they are at home, thinking of their children." This challenge was compounded by the temporary closure of schools, leaving many women no choice but to leave their children home unsupervised in order to fend for the families.

Furthermore, not everyone agrees that the government did what was needed to allow women to safely spend nights at markets. Ritah Nakiganda, a leader for a vegetable group in Nansana, bluntly states that "As leaders in the market, we agreed that all people commute home because there were no measures in place to help women spend nights in the market as far as the presidential directive to prevent COVID-19 was concerned." She adds that the lack of mosquito nets prevented women from sleeping in the market, and ultimately it was private companies and NGOs that intervened to provide sanitizer and soap for use at the market.

As the pandemic drags on into its third year, these women recognize that the more tenable path toward a resumption of life as usual lies in simple practical preventive measures. Janat Nakiganda exhorts people who come to Nakasero Market to get vaccinated if they haven't yet and to wear a mask for the safety of everyone at the market. Patience Kalungi, together with other women she leads, advocates for mass vaccinations to facilitate opening up schools and weekly markets. Hadijah Nagugya stresses that lockdown is not a solution to put an end the pandemic, but rather, mask-wearing and vaccinations should be encouraged to allow the economy to get back on track. To her, new habits such as mask-wearing represent a small silver lining of the pandemic with respect to public health in general. "Women are happy that the majority of them in Owino market benefited from the preventive measures, as the common flu plus cough have been greatly reduced in the market," she says with satisfaction.



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*Patience Kalungi  
Chairperson - Owino  
market cereals association*



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***Janat Nakiganda  
Women representative -  
Nakasero Market***

*Government played a vital role in helping us sustain our livelihoods, while keeping us safe during the pandemic.*

*Caroline Nabukeera  
Group Leader, Greens and Peppers- Nakasero Market*



# COVID-19 mitigation measures

## The plight of women in the informal sector

**Majority of the women at the market had to spend nights there to be able to work and provide for their families.**

*Hadijah Nagugya Chairperson Matooke zone, St. Balikudembe market*

COVID-19 mitigation measures such as transport restrictions, quarantine requirements, curfew, and bans on many weekly markets were implemented in Uganda and many other countries with public health and safety in mind, but as we are coming to learn, these measures also come with a cost.

Saudah Kamba is a 50-year old tailor in Busia district Main Market. She notes a number of restrictions adopted to contain the pandemic which had a severe impact on women's businesses, including school closures, travel restrictions and curfews, quarantines, the closure of many weekly markets, and occasional lockdowns. Among women who were able to keep their businesses running, the most immediate impact was the falloff in customers.

Caroline Nabukeera a leader to the group selling greens, and peppers in the market, says the curfew was a key factor in dampening her client base. "Women are counting losses because of the reduced number of customers due to the changed time from as they have to vacate the market by 5.p.m." she says.

Fatuma Namagembe, a business woman from Kabalagala Trading Center and a leader for fish vendors at Ggaba Fish Landing Site project, says COVID-19 had a negative effect on women as majority had to adjust their time of work from night to day. "By 7.00pm the whistles by security are all over the place as they seek people to close business and majority of the people will not have finished their work yet." Previously women in this business would work mostly in the evening to get more clients and yet they are forced to close their business at 6pm to be able to beat the curfew time. "At rush hour, there are few clients as people aim to reach to their homes also busy running home." She says that some women have actually run out of business to beat curfew while others have been arrested and taken to court for working in prohibited areas by KCCA (Kampala Capital City Authority) enforcement teams.

Sarah Nabukya, owner of a hair salon in Kireka, Wakiso district, says that before COVID-19, the salons would work

from morning till midnight; the curfew cut significantly into one of her busiest periods, which were usually after 5pm.

Hadijah Nagugya, the chairperson for Matooke zone at St Balikudembe Market, not only suffered lost income from lack of usual customers, but also lost a large stock of perishable produce, which spoiled because of few customers who came to market. Like other women in the markets, she also lost larger corporate clients such as hotels and restaurants, as well as a number of primary and secondary schools, which were forced to close.

Patience Kalungi, another challenge with transportation lockdowns was women's forced reliance on informal suppliers, such as boda-bodas. When movement was restricted, many women turned to these to deliver their goods to customers. The women could not trust boda-boda with items worth millions and yet a rider has not made anything during the day. Actually, some women lost produce to riders who have never been seen again after they were sent to customers.



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***Fatuma Namagembe  
Leader - Ggaba fish  
landing site***

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