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Women in Informal Trade Amidst COVID-19: SOA Market Cameroon

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Abstract: SARS-CoV-2, which stands for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, became a global health emergency in 2019. Even though the pandemic reached the African continent relatively late in 2020, it had already been terrorizing other parts of the world. In wake of the COVID-19, trade restrictions were imposed and affected the traders across the continent, but the impacts were enormous particularly on women in informal trade as they have weak fallback strategies. The study aimed to review the COVID-19 impacts on informal women traders around the SOA market of Yaoundé. The authors used both the questionnaire and interview guide to collect information from the informal traders. Results showed that the COVID-19 pandemic affected nearly all the traders with a disproportionately heavy impact on women due to their lack of a sustainable supply of commodities. While some traders accessed their merchandise from the main markets in Yaoundé, a majority of them relied on commodities sourced from rural areas surrounding the SOA market. However, purchasing goods from Yaoundé town markets posed challenges such as increased transportation costs, significantly impacting the affordability of their businesses. Moreover, buying vegetables from rural areas became more expensive as the fear of COVID-19 infection reduced the number of suppliers, leading to increased prices by those who continued to supply. Based on the findings, the study emphasizes the urgent need for Africa specifically Cameroon, to develop effective risk management mechanisms to mitigate such challenges and safeguard the livelihoods of women. These mechanisms should be designed to address the vulnerabilities faced by informal women traders during times of crisis, ensuring their economic resilience and well-being.

Keywords: COVID-19, Commodities, Informal Trade, Livelihoods and Purchasing Power

Introduction

SARS-CoV-2, commonly known as COVID-19, triggered a worldwide public health crisis in 2019. Even though the pandemic reached the African continent relatively late around February 2020, it had already been terrorizing other parts of the world (Lone and Ahmad, 2020). The emergence of COVID-19 was initially identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The virus has since spread throughout all continents affecting various countries. In March 2020, Cameroon put in place its first measures that intended to halt the transmission of COVID-19 and respond to the crisis.

Some of the measures put in place included the intrastate travel ban, restriction on large gatherings and

the closing of borders (Ndouna *et al.*, 2021). These restrictions put a strain on entrepreneurs because they were either delayed in getting their goods from suppliers or there was a delay in the delivery of their goods. Due to the scarcity of goods and the increased prices of deliveries, entrepreneurs have had to increase the costs of some goods (Chudik *et al.*, 2020).

Since late 2019 and throughout 2020, the Cameroonian economy has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside ongoing security and political crises and the decrease in global oil prices. From both a health and economic standpoint, according to the (ADBG, 2021) in Central Africa, Cameroon being the center of business, the COVID-19 pandemic had its most severe impact on the CEMAC member nations in 2020.

For example, the Cameroon real GDP dropped from 3.7 in 2019 and 2.4% in 2020, a decline of 6.1% in the real GDP, which was largely explained by the economic consequences of COVID-19 and the fall in oil prices worldwide. Authors therefore argue that COVID-19 restrictions in the effort to limit the virus' transmission had an impact on imports and exports of goods and services into and out of Cameroon in the region. To a larger extent, this affected both the formal and informal trade within the country and largely affected the non-oil sector. Arising from the above-stated situation, this study, endeavored to interrogate the effects of COVID-19 on women that are engaged in informal trade. It is important to note that, informal trade (rs) falls under the envelope category of the informal sector.

Mwango *et al.* (2019) define Informal traders, as individuals engaged in trade activities without access to labor safeguards or workplace social security. These informal traders can be located in two main areas: Within the formal sector, operating in registered businesses and within the informal sector, working in unregistered enterprises and even within households (Mwango *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, ILO (2002); Skinner and Balbuena (2019); WHO (2013); Gesund (2021), point out that the attributes of employment within the informal sector are frequently characterized by working in small and potentially hazardous environments, having limited skills and productivity, unhealthy work conditions and irregular, very low incomes, among other factors (Clara, 2020).

In most developing countries, especially those of the African continent, the majority of their population is in informal trading. This in most cases starts as a survival strategy, for example, street vending in the cities (Mwango *et al.*, 2019). It can be argued that informal trading as a sector has the largest population in the global trade industry constitutes 61% of the entire worldwide workforce and a staggering 90% of the total employment in low-income countries (Bonnet *et al.*, 2019). The role it plays and the ability to absorb a large number of people trying to survive have contributed to its expansion in most developing and emerging countries. It is bigger in developing countries than in developed countries and is an economy plugged by high levels of inequality and poverty. Nevertheless, it is now viewed as an economy that cannot be eliminated, as earlier thought, but one that would likely continue to exist permanently (Alter Chen, 2005). Globally, the International Labor Organization (ILO) argues that about 61.2% representing 2 billion workers, a significant portion of the global workforce is engaged in informal employment (ILO, 2018). Regarding this matter, the informal sector comprises approximately 90% of micro and small enterprises worldwide, making up more than half of the global labor force.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had adverse effects on the informal trading sector due to public health regulations implemented worldwide especially, Cameroon like many other countries restricted the movement of people in cities directly implying limiting the movements of the informal traders. As a result of these measures, the lives and means of income for people worldwide were put at risk. There is mounting evidence indicating that women engaged in informal trade have suffered the most severe consequences. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, informal traders, particularly women, were already in a precarious and disadvantaged position. With the pandemic, the economic hardships for women have intensified significantly (Ulrich and Kakdeu, 2020). Nevertheless, this study sought to examine the impact COVID-19 had on commodity supply, pricing of the commodities and purchasing power with a focus on women in informal trade in the SOA market of Cameroon.

COVID-19 and Informal Trade

COVID-19 affected more than 30.4 million people in Africa as they were forced into severe poverty in 2020. The African Development Bank (ADB) estimated that approximately 38.7 million individuals would be driven into extreme poverty in 2021 as a result of the effects of COVID-19 (ADBG, 2021). This study agrees with the ADB on the argument that the majority of those experiencing a sharp fall into extreme poverty amidst the COVID-19 pandemic typically possess limited educational qualifications and minimal assets (Boone, 2020). The majority of these individuals are engaged in precarious positions, such as vulnerable employment and informal jobs and they often work as low-skilled laborers (such as the women in informal trade). Due to the type of work, they are involved in, this segment of the population is at a greater risk since they frequently operate in sectors that require close personal contact, such as retail services and engage in labor-intensive manufacturing tasks that offer limited opportunities for social distancing or remote work. This study also argues that women-headed households represent a significant proportion of this vulnerable population. Women in informal trade in Africa are the majority with a lot of challenges ranging from capital, market space, police interference and now the COVID-19 pandemic. The informal sector is considered to have a vital role in the economy of developing countries (Roubaud, 2013).

Trade has enhanced the quality of life for billions of people, a substantial number of whom are women. The global economy has experienced an unparalleled downturn due to the COVID-19 pandemic, triggered by disruptions in both supply and demand. This has primarily resulted in an extraordinary global shock, causing significant harm to international trade (WTO, 2020a-b). The pandemic which is described as “a global shock ‘like

no other' has disrupted simultaneous supply and demand in an interconnected world economy" (Chudik *et al.*, 2020). Businesses owned by women are particularly susceptible and characterized by adverse sectoral specialization, occupational characteristics and financial resources. Women might face a greater impact because the industries in which they are involved economically are some of the hardest hit by the crisis (Escaith and Khorana, 2021).

In the Western and Central African regions, food prices have skyrocketed, often doubling or even surpassing previous levels in numerous countries. These significant spikes in food prices are primarily attributed to the restrictive measures implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, factors such as increased insecurity, flooding, insufficient rainfall and farmers retaining their stocks due to the uncertainties brought about by COVID-19 in 2020 have all contributed to these rising trends, which have continued into FAO (2020).

A study that was conducted by facebook and OECD in partnership with the African Innovation Lab (AFR GIL) revealed that women entrepreneurs were affected more than male entrepreneurs. The study revealed that in Nigeria 44% of surveyed female-owned businesses had to shut down due to COVID-19 while only 33% of the surveyed male-owned business shut down. Furthermore, in Ethiopia the study revealed that businesses owned by females experienced a 50% reduction in profit and sales.

Women in Informal Trade in Cameroon

The informal sector in Cameroon plays a vital role that providing high employment and the national institute of statistics notes that in 2010, it accounted for 90.5% of the employment and in 2016, that rate was 86.4% (Ndouna *et al.*, 2021). The extent of Cameroon's informal sector can be evaluated from both a macroeconomic and microeconomic perspective. On the macroeconomic scale, the informal sector in Cameroon contributes to over 57% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This level of contribution is lower than the 63.6% seen in Sub-Saharan Africa. Conversely, it exceeds the contributions observed in Latin America and Asia, which are approximately estimated at 29.2-30.2%, respectively. Following Roubaud's (2013) definition of the informal sector, the informal sector's contribution to GDP, excluding agriculture, demonstrates a similar pattern. Hence, in Cameroon, we observe a rate of 36%, while in Latin America, it stands at 24% and in Asia it is as low as 14.2%. On the microeconomic scale, Cameroon boasts a substantial number of over 2,500,000 Informal Production Units (IPUs) distributed across the nation (NIS, 2023). Regarding their distribution, rural areas make up 49.5% of these units, while the cities of Douala and Yaoundé contribute to 33.3% of the Informal Production Units (IPUs). In terms of management, women oversee 54.4% of the IPUs,

while men are in charge of only 45.6% (Ulrich and Kakdeu, 2020).

In reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cameroonian government announced about 13 containment regulations and/or restriction measures on March 17, 2020. These actions encompassed shutting down land, air and sea borders, imposing quarantine requirements for specific travelers, suspending in-person classes at schools and universities, prohibiting gatherings of over 50 individuals (Boone, 2020) and mandating the closure of bars, restaurants and entertainment establishments after 6 pm, suspension of civil servants' missions abroad, cancellation of school and university sports matches and enforcement of regulations to prevent taxis and public transportation from carrying excessive loads (Schwettmann, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic brings both obstacles and prospects to the informal sector in Cameroon. Despite the government not decreeing a total quarantine in the country since the first infection, public health regulations have drastically slowed down the economic activity which directly has resulted in a substantial reduction in earnings within the informal sector. Results by the IHSN showed that the typical income of individuals working in the informal sector amounts to 48,400 CFA francs each month, with urban areas having a higher average of 58,600 CFA francs monthly and rural areas at 38,200 CFA francs per month (IHSN, 2023). This study, however, draws its argument from the fact that the majority of Cameroonian IPUs are situated in rural areas (49.5% of total IPUs), therefore, a significant decline in activity is occurring in rural areas, particularly in the agricultural sector that serves urban markets, mainly due to reduced demand in urban centers. This study also argues that the low demand for commodities in urban markets is largely affecting the economic productivity in rural areas which then affects their livelihoods. This study aims to examine how COVID-19 has impacted women in informal trade in Cameroon (Ulrich and Kakdeu, 2020).

Cameroon, with a population estimated at 25.22 million people in 2018, has witnessed a notable enhancement in its economic growth since the early 2010 s. However, this economic progress has not resulted in substantial improvements in its overall development process. Cameroon falls into the lower-middle-income category, but its progress in reducing poverty has not kept pace with its population growth. During the period between 2007 and 2014, the total number of impoverished individuals in Cameroon surged by 12%, reaching 8.1 million. This surge in poverty is particularly concentrated, with 56% of the impoverished population residing in the northern regions. According to the world bank's country economic memorandum from April 2017, if Cameroon aims to attain upper-middle-income status by 2035, it must boost productivity and unlock the potential of its private sector. In African countries like Cameroon, the loss of life has

not been the same as in Western countries, the continent however, societies were affected economically. Cameroon being the economic hub for Central Africa has been largely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Clara, 2020). Since Cameroon announced its first COVID-19 case on the 6th of March 2020, (Minsant, 2020). Because the pandemic arrived in the midst of an already weakened economy, exacerbated by ongoing crises in the Northern regions due to Boko Haram and in the South-West and North-West regions due to separatist groups, a complete lockdown was not declared compared to other countries. This was because the nation could not bear the consequences of a total shutdown of economic operations. This study still holds the view that even with those light restrictions issued by public health, Cameroon continued to grapple with an economic deceleration, compounded by consumer apprehension (Sopponntouba, 2020).

It is, therefore, worth pointing out that, the COVID-19 pandemic struck an already fragile economy burdened by a variety of internal crises the country was contending with. PNUD (2020) For example argues that for nearly four years, businesses situated in the Southwest and Northwest regions have been incapacitated due to political problems among other challenges and these two regions account for about 16.3% of Cameroonian GDP (PNUD, 2020). Furthermore, COVID-19 saw the closure of the CDC one of the largest employers in Cameroon as the company suspended all its activities.

Both informal and formal trading have been affected during COVID-19. For example, industries such as the tomato and poultry sectors have been confronting severe turmoil. The crisis in the tomato industry is mainly a result of limitations on movement and public health regulations within the country. Additionally, the closure of borders by countries like Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, which significantly influence tomato prices, has contributed to the issue. During this period prices of commodities have been dropping to about 80% and producers, traders especially women have been complaining (Sopponntouba, 2020). This study, therefore, strived to examine the impact of COVID-19 on women in informal trade in Cameroon and also to review how such impacts have affected or led to debts among women.

COVID-19 Implications on Women's Trade in Cameroon

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the already more vulnerable conditions of women engaged in informal work compared to men, magnifying existing gender disparities. Women frequently face greater challenges in accessing productive resources like credit and technology, have less secure land tenure and smaller savings compared to men, as well as fewer networking opportunities and less influence in decision-making

(WIEGO, 2020). This hampers their ability to address and alleviate the economic consequences of the COVID-19 situation, thereby worsening their existing vulnerability.

Female entrepreneurs typically have less capital and depend more on personal funds in comparison to their male counterparts. This disparity is particularly pronounced among women engaged in the informal economy, as they face difficulties in obtaining credit. Women (2020); Gesund (2021); CARE (2020) Reports indicate that women farmers and vendors often do not qualify for low-interest or deferred loans or small business grants because they are considered "high risk" due to their frequently informal standing. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs are less likely to receive information regarding available support for informal businesses, such as low-interest loans and deferred payments, when compared to men (Women, 2020). Consequently, women engaged in farming and vending may encounter financial challenges and resort to payday lenders or other readily available sources of financing, often incurring substantial interest expenses. This situation heightens the vulnerability of women (Women, 2020).

The revised HRP June 2020 is projected that 6.2 million individuals in Cameroon require humanitarian aid in 2020. This represents an increase of 2.3 million people compared to the situation prior to the COVID-19 outbreak when an estimated 3.9 million people needed humanitarian assistance. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has made delivering aid to the affected population even more complicated, necessitating adjustments in the humanitarian response.

In general, women are more susceptible to experiencing greater adverse effects from the trade disturbances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic compared to men. One contributing factor is that a higher proportion of women are employed in sectors and within types of businesses that have been severely impacted by the pandemic. Many businesses owned or led by women fall into the category of Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) and their limited financial resources and restricted access to public funding pose a heightened risk to the survival of these enterprises. COVID-19 effects have aggravated the existing vulnerabilities among women and this pandemic is having a more significant effect on women through the key factors that underpin gender disparities, such as women's reduced earnings, limited educational access, restricted financial opportunities, heightened dependence on informal work and societal constraints, women are disproportionately affected. Additionally, their restricted entry to digital technologies and lower levels of Information Technology (IT) proficiency further restricts their potential for telecommuting and engaging

in e-commerce, limiting their ability to adapt to the current crisis. The ongoing security issues in the Northwest and South West regions are continuously disrupting the economic activities and market operations of impoverished households. Simultaneously, the depletion of food reserves during the lean season has led to price hikes that exceed typical seasonal fluctuations. Furthermore, measures such as physical distancing and border closures, implemented as part of the COVID-19 containment efforts, have impeded the movement of food products within the country. Consequently, the prices of various essential foods, such as plantains, beans and both white and yellow maize, have generally risen by 10-20%, with the extent of the increase varying by region since the onset of the pandemic (FAO, 2020).

Meanwhile, certain food items earmarked for export to neighboring nations have witnessed a significant decline in their prices due to border closures and a lack of domestic demand. A notable example is tomatoes, where the cost per crate plummeted from XAF 18,000 in March 2020 to as low as XAF 3,000 or even less in April. Although prices showed some recovery in June, reaching XAF 12,000 per crate following the border reopening, they remain generally lower compared to previous years. Similar price dynamics have been observed in other commodities exported to neighboring countries, although the fluctuations have been less pronounced for those that are not as perishable (FAO, 2020).

Materials and Methods

The study was done in Cameroon's capital city- Yaoundé specifically in the SOA market near the University of Yaoundé II. The city of Yaoundé is located in the Central Region of the country at an altitude of approximately 750 m (2,500 feet) above sea level. The capital of Cameroon, Yaoundé, is situated between 3°C 47 min and 3°C 56 min north of the equator and between 11°C 10 min and 11°C 45 min east of the Greenwich Meridian. SOA is found in the outskirts of Yaoundé and hosts the university of Yaoundé II, the university provides businesses to communities around it. The place has a lot of informal traders, but this study focused on women alone. The majority of the informal traders in SOA trade in commodities like; tomatoes, onions, vegetables, carrots and chickens to mention but a few are women. These women like any other traders in the informal market are not socially protected and do not have a sustainable financial backup in times of shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are significantly greater on women in comparison to men. This study, therefore, intended to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on women in informal trade in the SOA market of Yaoundé, with a specific focus on commodity supply to the market,

pricing and the purchasing power of the customers. And generally, how such impacts affect women's income levels and livelihoods.

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, which included both qualitative and quantitative methods for data gathering. In line with the objectives of this study, combining and integrating both qualitative and quantitative forms of data using distinctive designs that have philosophical and theoretical foundations. A mixed method approach provided this study with a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem than either qualitative and/or quantitative approaches alone. The targeted population for this study included the women in the informal SOA market, consumers and the municipality council in Cameroon. This target population formed a pool from which the sample was purposively drawn. The study employed both snowball and purposive sampling to identify the sample size on which the study was conducted. The authors used these sampling techniques because; they were not able to acquire the list of women selling vegetables and other commodities in SOA. The authors administered questionnaires to 50 women in informal trading and 10 in-depth interviews with the municipality council, consumers and commodity suppliers. Due to language barriers, the authors worked with students who are perfectly bilingual in administering questionnaires and conducting interviews. Qualitative data were recorded and transcribed into words by the authors.

The data were examined using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data underwent descriptive analysis and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to process and clean the data. Quantitatively the gathered raw data from the respondents were first organized, edited, coded and entered into SPSS. The study then used descriptive statistics to produce the charts and graphs and this helped the authors to communicate the data. Whereas, qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results and Discussion

This section has been structured under the following parts including; commodity supply into the market, impacts on prices, consumer commodity demand, consumer preferences and how a combination of these impacts implicates women's livelihoods.

Respondents' Perceptions of Commodity Supply

The findings derived from the questionnaire on the effects of COVID-19 on women in the formal sector in SOA, Cameroon indicate that 53% of the participants have experienced commodity shortages since the outbreak of the pandemic. Some of the respondents said that they have had to find alternative ways of closing the gap

created by the shortage in commodity supply. They have had to either look for other possible ways of buying their goods or discontinue selling the goods that were becoming scarce. Sobhan and Hssan (2020) in their work on "how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect female entrepreneurs from different informal sectors," argue that COVID-19 has contributed to the scarcity of goods and this has therefore affected the way goods are priced.

A young vendor respondent who is in their early 20 s explained that:

"Most of us here have had to stop selling certain products because they have become difficult to find because of how scarce they are now. In some cases, we have had to increase prices because it is expensive to buy a scarce product and you must increase the price if you want to make a profit. Overall once you see that people are not buying the product anymore, you just have to stop selling it altogether". The measures implemented to combat COVID-19 have affected intrastate and interstate trade in Cameroon. Thus, there is an evident shortage of goods available for the women in the SOA market to sell.

COVID-19 contributed to women changing the commodities traded in the market COVID-19 implications on the small-scale farmers around SOA have affected the supply to the market. The majority of the women who used to find their supply from around SOA could no longer do so as productivity was affected at the small-scale level. Implications on productivity led to increased prices at the supply level, which were not received well by the consumers (Siamabele and Yunike, 2021). Due to this challenge, most of the women had to change the types of commodities they sold in the market and also changed their main suppliers. Furthermore, the marketers said that they have had to change the type of commodities they sell ever since the pandemic. The majority of the vendors at the market have had to find more affordable goods that would still be appealing to their consumers at affordable prices. This would ensure that the women make a profit while meeting the needs of their customers.

Respondents' Views on the Commodity Suppliers

The data collected indicates that the respondents have changed their suppliers during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, 83.3% of the respondents bought their products from Marche Foundi in Yaoundé. However, the number

decreased to 16.6% when COVID-19 hit the country. The reason behind this decline is that the respondents now prefer to buy their goods directly from the farmers around SOA as that is more affordable. Moreover, the study found out that the women in the SOA market are not satisfied with the commodity supply during the pandemic as compared to before COVID-19 broke out. This has contributed to their decision to change suppliers (Table 2).

The table shows where women in the SOA market accessed commodities before COVID-19. The table shows that before the pandemic broke out women were accessing commodities from Marche Foundi which is located in the center town of Yaoundé. The majority of the women indicated that, before COVID-19, it was easier to transport all the merchandise from town with affordable transport fairs. Only a few of these women in the SOA market were able to buy commodities from the farmers around the SOA community (Table 1).

Unlike Table 1 where the majority of the women trading in the SOA market indicated being able to purchase all their commodities from the Marche Foundi market located in the center town of Yaoundé, the table shows otherwise, as most of the women now accessed their merchandize from the communities surrounding the trading area. Women indicated that the COVID-19 restrictions significantly contributed to the alteration of suppliers because they could not afford the costs of the goods available in Yaoundé city.

In addition, the increased prices by the suppliers also play a huge role in consumer-commodity demand. Since suppliers have increased the prices of their commodities, women in the market have also increased the prices of their commodities and this has faced resistance from the customers. At least about 76% of the respondents agreed that the increased prices discouraged consumers from buying their commodities. While administering the questionnaire, the researcher observed an incident where customers ended up not buying tomatoes from the respondent because she claimed the prices were drastically high.

Table 1: Commodity suppliers before COVID-19

Commodity supplier	Responses	Percentage
Marche foundi-yaoundé	25	83.3
Farmers around SOA	4	13.3
Outside yaoundé	1	3.3
Total	30	100.0

Table 2: Commodity suppliers during COVID-19

Commodity supplier	Responses	Percentage
Farmers around SOA	23	76.7
Marche foundi-yaoundé	5	16.6
Outside yaoundé	2	6.7
Total	30	100.0

With the daily changes in commodity and price preferences, the majority of the women at the market argued facing challenges such as a decrease in their profits and perishing of their fresh commodities. Although food is an essential part of sustaining life, consumers have not only limited their purchasing power but drastically reduced their consumption levels. A reduction in income and low incomes affect individual and household food purchasing power. Moreover, food insecurity is further perpetrated within poor households (Nchanji and Lutomia, 2021).

The prices in the commodities from the farmers destabilized food production as inputs also became too costly to these vulnerable rural farmers due to COVID-19 restrictions. This is also supported by Nchanji and Lutomia (2021) has had both a direct and indirect effect on the producers, entrepreneurs and customers. The results from the interviews revealed that COVID-19 had disrupted agricultural production. A woman vendor in the market said that "the quality of products they get was no longer the same as before the pandemic and this could be because producers/farmers try to put preservatives to make the produce last longer, but this affects the overall product and can in the long term have an impact on our consumer health" (Siamabele and Yunike, 2021). The production strain caused by restrictive measures put in place has also slowed down agricultural production due to farmers having limited access to seeds, fertilizers and irrigation within countries (Nchanji and Lutomia, 2021). At least, 50% of the respondents agreed that the impact of agricultural production has affected the quality of commodities in the market. According to Tripathi *et al.* (2021), farmers can adapt to any drastic changes presented to them because they have the necessary resources and prior knowledge on how to deal with the changing nature of the globe. These strategies as pointed out by the respondents can oftentimes temper with the quality of the products they receive from farmers.

Transportation Cost and its Implications on Commodities

The majority of the respondents argued that COVID-19 restrictions impacted the transportation of commodities to the market. This is because transporters increased the costs as the government put a policy of social distancing even on buses. Social distance on buses meant that bus owners transferred the cost to goods packed on their vehicles as they did not need to be distanced. In most cases, transportation costs varied between 20-30% increase. In this, most of the respondents stated that the transportation system of commodities to their market has been affected by COVID-19.

One woman noted that:

"I have had to change the way I transport my goods from Marche Foundi to SOA. I use a normal bus instead of a taxi because they have

become too expensive for me looking at the profit I am currently making"

Travel restrictions imposed in the country to control the spread of COVID-19 have affected the transportation of goods for women trading in the SOA market.

Consumer-Commodity Demand During COVID-19

Women who trade fresh produce noted that their stock spoils faster than before COVID-19 due to the decreased number of consumers they now receive. About 70% of the respondents strongly agreed that the number of their customers had reduced since the virus broke out. Marketeers further noted that their fresh vegetables perished before they could all be bought due to this decrease in consumers. A study conducted by Human Rights Watch titled Africa: COVID-19 Aid Falling Short (2021) indicated that COVID-19 has caused devastation in many African countries and the poverty levels across the continent have thus increased with women being the most affected due to their vulnerabilities.

The table shows how COVID-19 affected women in the market as they were not able to make more profit when compared to before the pandemic. This is largely attributed to the manifestation of the pandemic. Results from the interviews also revealed that the pandemic increased the cost of production which was directly pushed to the marketeer and the marketeer in return pushed the cost to the consumer in order for them to make some profit. This, however, pushed the consumers away as most of them did not have income. Women marketeers in the SOA market argued that COVID-19 constrained job opportunities for most of the casual workers living around the market as their employers were no longer making a profit hence, unable to pay their salaries (Table 3). This directly reduced the number of women purchasing goods and services from the marketeers. Women further stated that perishable goods like tomatoes and green papers to mention but a few were a loss as they cannot be preserved and still be sold. One of the women in the market clearly said that people in Cameroon generally like fresh vegetables, as such putting these vegetables in the fridge and expecting to have customers was never even an option.

Table 3: Consumer purchasing power reduction due to COVID-19

Statements	Responses	Percentages
Strongly disagree	1	3.3
Disagree	1	3.3
Neutral	2	6.7
Agree	5	16.7
Strongly agree	21	70.0
Total	30	100.0

COVID-19 Implications on Women's Livelihoods in SOA

The study also further revealed that the standard of living of most women in informal trade has been reduced due to poor incomes that have directly led to insufficiencies in food security, water and largely access to electricity. Furthermore, a growing count of individuals who became unemployed. COVID-19 has affected the standard of living of the marketeers as this has directly reduced the customer demand in the market. The majority of the interviewed women indicated that COVID-19 challenges in their informal trade have directly implicated their living standards in their individual households (Siamabele and Yunike, 2021). This is because the majority of them have been forced to not only reduce the food supply but also change the food preferences in their households as they strive to meet other socio-economic household demands like hospital bills and school bills (Siamabele, 2021).

One of the respondents argued that she was afraid that the situation would get worse after the Africa Cup of Nations was hosted in Cameroon. She went on to say that:

"The Cameroonian public health authorities have projected that COVID-19 cases might increase during and after the Africa Cup of Nations in 2022. An increase in cases will force public health to bring back the restrictions and we as marketeers are more scared because we are the most hit people. The government will most likely go to limit our movements again and this directly implicates our commodity supply chain"

Individuals in the informal sector lack the means to avail themselves of social security benefits and they do not have enough social support programs (Nchanji and Lutomia, 2021). Results also show that 66.7% of the respondents said that they did not receive any help at all from the government and were not aware of any social security assistance offered by the government. However, 20% percent of them said they received masks once from the government and that was it. In April 2020, the government of Cameroon made putting on masks compulsory for all citizens and anyone who acted contrary to that had to deal with the consequences imposed by the government. However, the market environment in SOA does not adhere to any COVID-19 protocols such as wearing masks, social distancing and using hand sanitizing. The women traders in the market have rather decided to shift their focus to serving the customers and making an income without adhering to the protocols.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research emphasizes the varying consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on nations in Africa, such as Cameroon. While the loss of human lives may

not have been as severe as in Western countries, the economic implications were significant. The informal traders, particularly women traders, bore the brunt of these impacts.

Implications on the movements of people, goods and services from one society to another largely affected female traders in Cameroon, as the country is an economic hub for Central Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak instilled fear in traders and this resulted in restricted movements for fear of contracting the virus.

Consequently, there was a reduced flow of goods and services, resulting in diminished market supplies.

The direct consequence of reduced market supplies was adjustments in commodity prices, thus affecting the purchasing power of buyers. This further exacerbated the challenges faced by traders and had ripple effects on the overall economic stability within the region. In conclusion, this study underscores the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms to mitigate the adverse effects of future crises on vulnerable categories like women engaged in informal work. By addressing the economic vulnerabilities and promoting resilience, policymakers can work towards creating a more robust and inclusive economic environment in Cameroon and similar contexts within Africa.

Recommendations

The authors are recommending that the continent of Africa must invest widely in risk management in order to prevent negative impacts on the already vulnerable women and youths. It is widely recognized that the majority of individuals engaged in informal trade in Africa are young people and women. However, the lack of extensive risk management strategies simply pushes such people into poverty. Cameroon, a natural resource-endowed country must leverage its geographical location and invest a lot in preventing future pandemics and protect the women informal traders.

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Author's Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this study.

Ethics

This article is original and contains unpublished material. The corresponding author confirms that all of the other authors have read and approved the manuscript and no ethical issues involved.

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