Coping with COVID-19 shocks in Western Uganda

Ambika Sharma, Ariel Gruver, Joao Montalvao, Michael O’Sullivan*

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Headline results

We conducted a phone survey with women respondents in Western Uganda, among rural agricultural households. The data were collected by phone between August and September 2020, from 1,289 households across 5 rural districts in Western Region, as a follow-up survey for an ongoing study on land titling. Women were the primary respondents for this survey.

Households in Western Uganda were facing widespread agricultural and non-agricultural income shocks in September 2020, indicating a prolonged and protracted crisis. Three quarters of the households, which are primarily engaged in agriculture, faced a fall in agricultural output prices and half reported a rise in the prices of agricultural inputs. In addition to agricultural income and food price shocks, a large portion of our sample lost non-farm sources of income. More than 44 percent of households faced a non-farm business failure, 43 percent reported losing jobs, and 36 percent were affected by illness of income-earning household members. Compared to March 2020, shocks became more numerous, more prevalent, and more concentrated around job loss and disruption of agricultural value chains in September 2020.

The population was also food insecure and facing high food prices. More than 70 percent of households reported stocking up on more food than normal due to COVID-19 related movement restrictions. About 1 in 5 households reported skipping a meal in the preceding 7 days, and a majority of the sample experienced food insecurity in other ways. Further, 60 percent of the sample reported a rise in prices of major food items.

To cope with these shocks, many households have liquidated productive agricultural assets. Households have employed several coping strategies in response to the shocks. More than 40 percent of households engaged in additional farm-based activities to cope, while several relied on their savings and borrowing. However, in addition to these measures, some households have now started liquidating their agricultural assets — 30 percent of our sample sold agricultural assets to cope with shocks.

Households could be shedding productive assets after having exhausted other, more preferred ways to cope. They have low access to safety nets, remittances, and transfers. Theoretical and empirical literature posits that households respond to shocks using a preferred sequence of coping measures — temporarily reducing food consumption and other expenditure and later shedding assets. Households may be taking this latter measure after having exhausted other options. Net transfers into the household were negative just before the COVID-19 restrictions were enacted in March 2020. Additionally, access to safety nets is low. Fewer than 2 percent of all households in our sample had access to safety nets or cash support in August-September 2020.

Women who have previously faced intimate partner violence and other poor socio-economic outcomes seem to have fewer coping options during the crisis, and may be worse off. Women who had higher decision-making power within the household before the COVID-19 crisis, or live in their village of birth, appear to cope better by employing more income-generating options and having better food security in the household. In households where women previously reported any incidence of intimate partner violence, post-COVID outbreak coping outcomes appear worse. Women who lived in polygamous households seem to be earning less than women in monogamous households. These results, though suggestive rather than causal, indicate that women who were less empowered before the pandemic — whether through household decision-making power, marital quality with the spouse, or intimate partner violence — may face even worse socio-economic outcomes during the pandemic.
Context, sample, and representativeness

In Uganda, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has brought the twin shocks of a public health emergency and economic crisis. At the time of writing, Uganda has 40,535 reported cases of COVID-19, and 334 deaths. On March 18, 2020, the Government of Uganda placed restrictions on international travel and public gatherings, and by March 30, a curfew had been declared from 7pm to 6.30am. Public transportation was banned, and movement of private vehicles was also restricted. Coupled with regional instability and low demand, this had adverse implications for the trade, services, and agriculture sectors.

In Uganda, COVID-19 thus presents twin shocks of a public health emergency and economic crisis induced by containment measures and global economic meltdown. Moreover, there is mounting evidence across Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere of gender differences in the impact of these shocks—with much of the effect being borne disproportionately by women.

We conducted a phone survey in Western Uganda from August to September 2020 with women respondents in rural agricultural households. Data collection occurred from 21 August-21 September 2020 in a sample of 1,289 households in rural Western Uganda, across the districts of Buhweju, Isingiro, Mbarara, and Sheema, as a follow-up survey for an ongoing study on land titling. Women were the primary respondents for this survey. The COVID-19 module questions were framed at the household level, but 89 percent of the respondents for the COVID module were women. This sample represents the population of Western Ugandan districts that regularly cultivates and informally owns at least one parcel of agricultural land, and has mobile phone connectivity. Only households where the head of household and spouse are both present and alive took part in this study.

We use panel data for two sub-samples for additional intertemporal insights. For a sub-sample of 241 households from these 1,289, we also have data from just before the COVID-induced restrictions were imposed in Uganda. These data are from an in-person survey which was launched with this sample in March 2020, but was stopped due to COVID restrictions. For these 241 households, we thus have indicators on pre-COVID and post-COVID outbreak outcomes. For a sub-sample of 438 households from these 1289, we use panel data from 2015 to analyze whether women with positive pre-existing outcomes did better in coping with the pandemic shocks. The data from 2015 were collected in-person as a part of the baseline survey for the original land-titling study.

Results: COVID awareness and food security

Almost all households have heard of COVID-19, and most report engaging in protective behaviors like social distancing and hand-washing. Almost 99 percent of the households have heard of COVID-19. The three most prevalent measures that the government took to prevent COVID-19 spread, according to the respondents, is compulsory mask wearing (80 percent), social distancing (65 percent) and hand washing (45 percent). Households also report strong adoption of some COVID-preventive measures: more than 95 percent avoid large groups, 97 percent avoid handshakes, and 98 percent wash hands with soap more

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often. The reported adoption of these measures in our sample in Western Uganda is higher than that of a recent national survey by Uganda Bureau of Statistics and the World Bank, which found that around 80% of households in the country reported frequent hand washing and avoiding larger groups.  

Rural households in Western Uganda are facing high levels of food insecurity. More than 70 percent of households report stocking up on more food than normal due to COVID-related restrictions. About 1 in 5 households reported skipping a meal in the last 7 days, and a majority of the sample reports food insecurity in other ways. About 70 percent ate a lower variety of foods than they wanted, 66 percent were unable to eat healthy foods, 50 percent ate less than they thought they should, and 54 percent worried about not having enough food to eat. These findings corroborate earlier studies in the Western region. 

Results: Shocks

1. Shocks faced by households in September 2020

Households have faced widespread agricultural shocks since March 2020, with increased input prices and reduced output prices. In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, every household in the sample has faced serious socio-economic shocks. By August-September 2020, when this survey took place, three quarters of households faced a fall in agricultural output prices and half reported a rise in the prices of agricultural inputs (Figure 1). Despite the reported fall in output prices, 60 percent of the sample reported a rise in prices of major food items. The first wave of the High Frequency COVID-19 surveys by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and World Bank found the same set of shocks to be prevalent in rural Uganda – increased food prices, decreased output prices and increased inputs prices. However, the incidence of these shocks is much larger in our sample – for instance, while 30 percent of rural households faced higher food prices in another World Bank study from June 2020, 60 percent face the same shock in our sample in August/September.

Certain staple foods became more expensive, driving up food prices despite falling prices of overall agricultural output. Anecdotally, the high-priced food items were reported to be beans, groundnuts, maize flour, and millet flour; beans and groundnuts were being planted at the time of survey, and thus not widely available in the area. The gaps in the prices of agricultural inputs and outputs, as well as the

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6 Similarly, the World Bank in a survey in July-August 2020 found that one in five households in Western region was moderately food-insecure. “COVID-19 Impact Monitoring: Uganda, Round 2.”
10 These differences could partly stem from the differing samples. The “COVID-19 Impact Monitoring: Uganda, Round 2” data represents the entire rural population of Uganda, while our survey focuses on the rural Western region of Uganda. However, rural Western Uganda is richer and better off compared to other parts of the country, such as the North or Eastern (see, for example, World Bank. “Uganda Poverty Assessment 2016”. 2016). Thus, the drastically higher shock incidence could indicate worsening conditions for households as the crisis becomes protracted and its effects accumulate over time.
11 As reported by our survey field teams. This is corroborated by Mahmud and Riley 2021, who find that in May 2020 the prices of beans, maize flour, sugar, and salt were high in the Western region.
rise in prices of processed food such as flour, indicate that supply chain disruptions may have occurred, possibly due to lockdown measures such as restrictions on transportation and movement. The second round of UBOS—World Bank COVID-19 studies also finds evidence of supply chain disruptions in rural Western Uganda, with price declines of agricultural output such as eggs and milk, coupled with a decline in sales. They also find that the lack of access to veterinary services and reduced access to markets affected livestock activity in Western Uganda.\(^\text{12}\)

**Households have also lost non-farm income due to business closures and job losses.** In addition to agricultural income and food price shocks, a large portion of our sample lost non-farm sources of income. More than 44 percent of surveyed households faced a non-farm business failure, 43 percent reported losing jobs, and 36 percent were affected by illness of income-earning household members (Figure 1).\(^\text{13}\) Shocks that result directly in a loss of income — such as illness of income earning household members, job loss, or business failure — were experienced by households as the primary shock. Shocks that appeared from supply chain disruptions, such as increase in prices of food items, and increases in prices of non-agricultural and agricultural inputs, were more commonly reported as secondary or tertiary shocks.

*Figure 1: Shocks experienced by the households.*

Source: Authors’ calculations using GIL Uganda Midline Phone Survey 2020.

**Households have increased farm-based work and liquidated productive agricultural assets to cope with the shocks.** More than 40 percent of the households engaged in additional farm-based activities to cope


\(^{13}\) The loss of non-farm income is corroborated by Mahmud and Riley 2021: their study finds that in May 2020, household enterprise profits and wage income was almost wiped out post-lockdown, resulting in a 60 percent decline in non-farm income in Western region.
with the shocks (Figure 2). However, in addition to increasing their total household labor supply, households have now started liquidating their agricultural assets to cope — 30 percent of our sample sold agricultural assets to cope with shocks. Additionally, about 13 percent of households reduced their food consumption. These households reported having no safety nets to cushion them from shocks — only 0.5 percent received assistance from NGOs, and 1 percent received assistance from government.

Figure 2: Coping mechanisms employed by households.

Source: Authors’ calculations using GIL Uganda Midline Phone Survey 2020.

Households are relying less on savings and borrowing to cope. Almost 20 percent of households rely on savings and 9 percent on borrowing to address the fallout of the shocks they have faced. In comparison, earlier surveys find a greater use of savings and borrowing to cope with shocks. In the June 2020 study at the national (including both rural and urban) level, 40 percent of households relied on savings to cope with shocks, and 20 percent borrowed money. In the May 2020 study, data collected from two districts in rural Western Uganda revealed that households used nearly 50 percent of their savings and borrowed more, but had not yet liquidated their fixed assets of livestock. Borrowing appears to be less prevalent in Western Uganda compared to other regions. In a study from July-August 2020, around 7 percent of

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14 This corroborates the work of Mahmud and Riley 2021, who found that households in Western Uganda responded to losses in non-farm income by increasing total household labor supply to household farm and livestock activities.

15 Rural households in Kenya were also found to be selling assets and dissaving to smooth consumption in 2020: Egger et al. “Falling living standards during the COVID-19 crisis: Quantitative evidence from nine developing countries”. 2021.


17 Mahmud and Riley. “Household response to an extreme shock.”
Western Ugandan households reported having borrowed money to face the COVID-19 emergency, compared to more than 22 percent nationally at the rural level.\textsuperscript{18}

II. Evolution of shocks between March and September 2020

For a sub-section of our sample, we exploit panel data from March and September 2020 to study how shocks faced by these households grew. For a sub-sample of 241 households, we also have data from March 2020, just before COVID-induced restrictions were imposed in Uganda. These data are from an in-person survey which was launched with this sample in March 2020, but was stopped due to COVID restrictions. For these 241 households, we thus have indicators on pre- and post- COVID outbreak outcomes. These households are not a random sub-sample, and are mostly drawn from 2 out of the 5 districts within Western region that make up the full sample. However, the panel comparison of these households’ outcomes between March 2020 and September 2020 sheds light on the evolution of shocks over time.

From March to September, households saw a dramatic increase in the frequency and severity of the shocks they faced. For the 241 households that were surveyed both in March (in-person) and August/September (by phone) 2020, a clear pattern emerges. Compared to March, shocks became more numerous, more prevalent, and more concentrated around job loss and disruption of agricultural value chains in September (Table 1). In March, 24 percent of the sample reported facing no shocks, while by August-September, all households were affected by shocks. Further, while in March the two most prevalent shocks were irregular rains (faced by 17 percent of households) and drought (16 percent), by August-September the most prevalent shock was a fall in prices of agricultural outputs (77 percent) and increase in price of agricultural inputs (51 percent).

Loss of employment rose steeply between March and September. Loss of employment was reported by less than 1 percent of the households in March, but rose to 36 percent by August-September (Table 1). Illness of income-earning household members was reported at 8 percent in March but 30 percent in September. Finally, additional shocks that the households faced after the COVID-19 restrictions were nonfarm business failures (40 percent) and increases in the prices of non-farm business inputs (66 percent).

The shocks faced appear abnormally stark even after accounting for seasonality. The months of August and September, when this survey was conducted, are considered a relatively lean season associated with lower food security when compared with the harvest period (Figure 3). While historically the prices of maize, a staple, are the lowest around September,\textsuperscript{19} food prices have been high throughout the year of 2020.\textsuperscript{20} However, data for the subsample of panel households shows that shock incidence was much lower in March 2020 (Table 1). Much like August-September, March is also a key period for land preparation and planting in this region of Uganda, with food security expected to be lower. The difference in shocks experienced between March and September therefore strongly underscores the disruption of rural socio-economic well-being stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3: Agricultural calendar and food security in South Western region of Uganda.

Table 1: Shocks experienced before (March 2020) and after (August-September 2020) the COVID-19 outbreak

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>March 2020 (N=241)</th>
<th>August-September 2020 (N=241)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not experience any shocks</td>
<td>24.07</td>
<td>No clear comparison available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular rains</td>
<td>17.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landslides</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erosion</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in the earnings of currently (off-farm) employed household member(s)</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious illness or accident of other household members</td>
<td>10.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of other household member(s)</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft of money / valuables / non-agricultural assets</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict/violence</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drought</td>
<td>16.60</td>
<td>Drought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flooding</td>
<td>10.37</td>
<td>13.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unusually high level of crop pests and disease</td>
<td>20.75</td>
<td>Disease/Pest invasion that caused harvest failure or storage loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unusually high prices of agricultural inputs</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>Increase in price of agricultural inputs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unusually low prices for agricultural output</td>
<td>11.62</td>
<td>Fall in the price of agricultural output</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of employment of previously employed household member(s) (not due to illness)</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>Job loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious illness or accident of income earner(s)</td>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>Illness of income earning member of the household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of income earner(s)</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>Death or disability of an adult working member of the household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft of agricultural assets / output (crops or livestock)</td>
<td>9.13</td>
<td>Theft of crops, cash, livestock or other property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Death of someone who sends remittances to the household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loss of an important contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nonfarm business failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Destruction of harvest by insufficient labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in price of non-agricultural inputs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fall in the price of non-agricultural outputs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in price of major food items consumed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ calculations using GIL Uganda Midline in-person Survey 2020 and GIL Uganda Midline Phone Survey 2020. The orange indicates an increased incidence of the shock in the second time period, while green indicates a decreased incidence, and yellow a similar incidence. Shocks in white are ones where a clear comparison across the 2 waves was not available.
Table 2: Coping with shocks before (March 2020) and after (August-September 2020) the COVID-19 outbreak.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of respondents picking the following options</th>
<th>March 2020 (N=183)</th>
<th>August-September 2020 (N=241)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changed cropping practices (crop choices or technology)</td>
<td>13.11</td>
<td>No clear comparison available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced expenditures on health and education</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent children to live elsewhere</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconditional help provided by relatives/friends</td>
<td>17.49</td>
<td>Received assistance from Friends &amp; family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconditional help provided by local government</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>Received assistance from the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed dietary patterns involuntarily</td>
<td>12.02</td>
<td>Reduced food consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household took on more NON-FARM (wage- or self-) employment</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>Engaged in additional income generating activities (non-farm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household took on more FARM wage employment</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>Engaged in additional income generating activities (farm-based)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relied on savings</td>
<td>10.38</td>
<td>Relied on savings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Borrowing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtained credit</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>Borrowed from friends &amp; family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Took a loan from a financial institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asset Shedding</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold durable household assets (agricultural or non-agricultural)</td>
<td>8.20</td>
<td>Sale of assets: agricultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold land/building</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>Sale of assets: non agricultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rented out land/building</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress sales of animal stock</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did nothing</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>Did nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduced non-food consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Credited purchases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed payment obligations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sold harvest in advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Received assistance from NGO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ calculations using GIL Uganda Midline in-person Survey 2020 and GIL Uganda Midline Phone Survey 2020. The orange indicates an increased incidence of the coping mechanism in the second time period, while green indicates a decreased incidence, and yellow a similar incidence. Coping mechanisms in white are ones where a clear comparison across the 2 waves was not available.

21 Of the 241 households, only 183 reported facing any shocks in this period; see Table 1.
Most households have increased the number of coping measures they take in response to shocks. Reliance on friends and family has reduced (Table 2), indicating an exhaustion of the resources of informal insurance networks over time, especially in the face of a covariate shock affecting the entire community. Instead, households have started seeking more off-farm employment (7 percent in March to 11 percent in September), increased farm-related employment activities, and are relying more on their savings (10 percent in March compared to 23 percent in September). Most notably, more than a quarter of households were shedding their productive agricultural assets—a finding that has not been reported in previous recent work.

Households could be shedding productive assets after having exhausted other, more preferred ways to cope. Theoretical literature on shocks and consumption smoothing posits that households respond to shocks using a preferred sequence of coping measures—temporarily reducing food consumption and other expenditure as an initial response, and selling productive assets as a last resort.22 This is corroborated in empirical work23 which finds that that selling productive assets is a low-reported coping mechanism, and is more likely to occur among already poor households. At the same time, livestock has been shown to be a form of semi-liquid savings, to be used by agricultural communities during shocks,24 and rural communities in North and Eastern Uganda were found to sell livestock as the most common response to a weather shock.25 However, we find that households in our sample are much more likely to shed assets in September 2020, than before the COVID-19 outbreak (see Table 2) — indicating that the severity and duration of these shocks have pushed households to take on a more drastic set of coping strategies.

Households in our sample have low recourse to remittances and transfers. For the sub-sample of households with available data from March 2020, we find that net transfers into the household were negative before the COVID-19 restrictions. Only in-kind transfers were positive, which could indicate that monetary remittances were low. Other work in Western region corroborates the low levels of internal transfers in March 2020, pre-COVID-19 restrictions.26 Analysis of global remittance flows shows that nation-wide remittances into Uganda in the second quarter of 2020 had fallen drastically compared to the previous year.27

Additionally, access to safety nets is low. Less than 2 percent of all the households in our sample had access to safety nets or cash support in August-September 2020 (Figure 2). In addition, since the COVID-19 shocks affect the entire community, the scope to obtain assistance from informal networks may be limited. This can help explain why people in our sample were getting assistance from friends and family before the COVID-19 shock, but are now forced to rely on their own savings or credit (Table 2). A more recent UBOS-World Bank study finds that while income from various sources appears to be recovering, it is still low compared to pre-COVID levels, and worry around repaying loans is high in rural Uganda.28

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26 Mahmud and Riley. “Household response to an extreme shock”.
27 World Bank and KNOMAD. “Migration and Development Brief 33”. 2020. Figure 1.10.
Results: Gender

We use panel data from 2015 and 2020 to analyze whether women with positive pre-existing outcomes did better in coping with the pandemic shocks. Almost 89 percent of respondents for our sample in August-September 2020 were women. In addition, data were collected from the same sample of women in an earlier wave in 2015. To analyze the panel data on outcomes for women, we restrict the analysis to the control group of the main study (which was not assigned any land titling treatments in the original design). The resultant sample is 438 women, each of whom was interviewed in 2015 (baseline) and August-September 2020. Women with better decision-making, marital quality and other outcomes at baseline, appear to cope slightly better with the pandemic fallout in certain dimensions. However, this analysis is only indicative and not causal.  

Women who were more empowered at baseline appear to cope better in terms of income and food security, today. Women who had higher decision-making power at baseline, were 4 percent more likely to work in a non-farm income generating activity, and 4 percent more likely to report increases in farm income since March 2020. Women who were living in their village of birth at baseline, report fewer worries in the household around food security. Such households are also more likely to have used savings to cope with shocks. Meanwhile women with higher marital quality at baseline, spent fewer hours on non-farm activities, especially in non-farm businesses.

In households where women previously faced intimate partner violence, post-COVID outbreak coping outcomes seem worse. If the husband was violent as reported in baseline, the household in 2020 was more likely to report that at least one person in the household skipped a meal. Households with violence were also much less likely to work in additional income generating activities as a way to cope with household shocks. While these results were reported at the household level, in most cases the respondent was the wife.

Women in polygamous households face greater food insecurity and lower earning prospects than those in monogamous households. Women from polygamous households were more likely to report that the household is worried about having enough food to eat, and they were less likely to engage in additional income-generating activities to cope with household shocks. Women from such households also appear to earn less in August-September 2020, than women in monogamous households. They were more likely to use assistance from friends and family to cope with shocks, which could be due to an additional social network brought on by the additional wife/wives.

These results, though suggestive rather than causal, indicate that women who were less empowered before the pandemic, whether through decision-making power within the household, marital quality with the spouse, or intimate partner violence, may be facing more deteriorated socio-economic outcomes during the pandemic.

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29 All results have errors clustered at the village level and controls for household size, husband and wife ages, husband and wife schooling, a household-level asset index and district, subcounty, and parish locations.
30 Defined as the current husband having ever physically harmed the wife, as per the baseline survey 2015.
31 Polygamous at the time of baseline survey 2015.
Policy Conclusions

Asset sales by Western Ugandan households indicate that COVID-19 crisis has become protracted over the months, leading to coping behaviors which could impede future income opportunities. More than 30 percent of households in our sample in Western Uganda have sold agricultural assets to cope with unexpected events since March 2020. This is a signal that households are being pushed towards increasingly drastic measures to cope with continued COVID-19 shocks. While income and employment are gradually increasing as compared to the immediate aftermath of Uganda’s lockdowns in March 2020, there is still widespread loss of income, with 50 percent of farming households in Western Uganda needing to sell their agricultural produce but being unable to. Coupled with loan repayment worries that affect 70 percent of rural Ugandans, and continued disruption in local markets that have reduced livestock products’ prices as well as sales, these households are in need of developmental assistance in addition to immediate humanitarian need. While recent work shows that at the national level, there is a gradual recovery in employment rates and number of non-farm business, household incomes remain significantly below full recovery.

Women are in an especially vulnerable condition. Our analysis shows that women who lived in polygamous households seem to earn less than women in monogamous households; women who were less empowered before the crisis face worse outcomes in terms of income and food security today. Further, in households where women previously faced intimate partner violence, post-COVID outbreak coping outcomes are worse. It is well documented that the crisis has affected women and girls in several specific and severe ways, thus policy interventions will need to address the COVID-19 setbacks for households in a way that also accounts for the additional vulnerabilities and burdens that women are facing during this crisis.

Cash transfer programs can serve the twin role of helping households tide over the immediate crisis, and aid their longer-term economic recovery. In the face of the many shocks households in Western Uganda are facing, from high food prices to business failures, cash transfer programs could help them to meet their immediate consumption needs. It can also help them overcome urgent liquidity constraints and thus prevent them from selling assets. Further, carefully implemented cash transfer programs can reduce intra-household conflict and intimate partner violence by reducing intra-household poverty. Evidence from Africa has shown that delivering cash grants to women improved their likelihood of working, improved the dietary outcomes in their households, and led them to invest in more assets. From the implementation perspective, quarterly delivery of the grants worked as well as monthly – which could allow for cost-saving.

Agricultural interventions could aid households as they navigate several agricultural shocks from rising input prices to falling output prices. Using mobile phones to provide digital extension services to farmers, has shown promise and low cost and appropriate for contexts with pandemic-induced movement restrictions. Further, including women farmers in the agricultural planning process can help the household to increase its agricultural productivity. Research from Cote d’Ivoire finds that having farming couples of the household create an action plan together improved household production as compared to having the husband make the action plan alone. Involving women in the planning and strategy of the farm work for the year helped women improved their ownership on farm activities as well as their agency over productive resources.38

Households are already diversifying their income generation activities to cope with the shocks; aiding this process can help build resilience for the future. Many households in the Western region are engaging in non-farm activities as well as increasing their farm work to cope with income losses and other shocks. Cash grants bundled with business training and access to savings groups (or mobile money accounts, which could help to financially include and empower rural populations, especially women) have been shown to increase households’ overall consumption and income, as well as help women expand their self-employment. Helping rural households to maintain or return to diversified income sources beyond their own farm work, especially restoring non-farm business, will help them build resilience for future shocks.39

References


