

Impacts of COVID-19 on Mali Women's Socio-Economic Activities

Asmao Diallo

Graduate School of Global Studies, Doshisha University

This paper assesses the impacts of COVID-19 on women's socio-economic activities in Mali. The COVID-19 crisis, which broke out in China in 2019, became the fastest global pandemic of the century within a year, exceeding public health and socio-economic challenges. Consequently, sanitary restriction measures were enacted in Mali to contain the spread of the disease. As a result of this confinement, inequalities between the sexes increased. Using data obtained from women's oral accounts, local and international news, reports, and journal articles in rural and urban Mali, the analysis found that the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted women and girls. This inequality was primarily reflected in economic and social spheres. Hence, domestic violence and the financial dependence of women increased during the pandemic. As resources decrease, women are at an increased risk of abuse due to their economic dependence on their partners. The adverse effects have been dramatic for those locked up with violent spouses leading to physical, mental, and sexual violence. The paper concludes that there is a pressing need to prevent and manage domestic violence and post COVID-19 impact on women's socio-economic activities by establishing a new, more inclusive societal order with gender-sensitive policy responses.

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis, which broke out in China in 2019, became the fastest global pandemic of the century within a year, exceeding public health and socio-economic challenges. Hence, to combat it, many nations have instigated social distancing methods and rigorous lockdowns to slow down the disease's spread and lower the number of deaths and infections. However, in many developing countries, some individuals from both rural and urban areas still do not believe in the existence of COVID-19 and continue to ignore their government's preventive measures. Among them is Mali, a landlocked country in

West Africa where 95 per cent of the population is Muslim. Mali is a secular state where individual rights are molded by various laws, including legal, customary, and religious rules. Mali's legal law stands as the most accurate one; however, religious and customary laws mainly shape relations and interactions between men and women.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of Mali has developed an emergency plan to respond to COVID-19. As of February 2021, Mali has had 8,119 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 333 deaths (CSSEGISandData/COVID-19). Nevertheless, the Government of Mali has been implementing preventive confinement measures since mid-March 2020. For example, the measures included the closure of national borders, the postponement of all public gatherings, and the prohibition of any social, cultural, sports, and political gathering consisting of more than 50 individuals. The government also closed schools, nightclubs, pubs and shortened working hours in public administration offices (UNFPA, Covid-19 2020). Nonetheless, it should be noted that mosques and churches were not closed and continue to operate as usual. Most religious leaders (Iman and pastors), cultural and traditional elites throughout the country are involved in the sensitization campaigns and encourage people to respect the government's preventive measures.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis impacted everyone but more on the vulnerable groups. Among them are women. Women are reported to suffer from domestic violence in many developed and developing countries before the pandemic. However, violence against women at the household level has been reported higher amid the pandemic (UNFPA, 2020). Additionally, the pandemic also severely impacted women's economic activities, particularly in the informal sectors (ILO, 2020). Mali is not an exception in these two realms.

This paper aims to examine the pandemic's effects on women's economic activities and their social relations with their partners. More importantly, this study aims to assess the conditions under which women are currently experiencing the new situation. Subsequently, the paper will examine the pandemic's economic impact on women's income-generating activities and the expansion of domestic violence against women during this crisis.

1. Religious and Customary Practices Versus Gender Equality in Mali

Mali is a secular country with a democratic state, showing great interest in encouraging and advocating policies promoting gender equality among all its citizens. For this reason,

Mali's Constitution of 1960 regards all Malian as equal in law irrespective of their origin, race, or religion. The preface of the constitution supports women's rights, asserting Mali's "determination to protect and secure the rights of women and children as well as the ethical and linguistic diversity of the country" (Constitution of 1960). Additionally, Mali had also ratified international agreements and treaties on gender equality. Among them are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in September 1985, the Protocol on Women's rights in 1995, as well as national legislation such as the National Policy for Gender Equality, National fund for women's economic empowerment, and the creation of a Ministry of Women and Children.

Although many Malian policies and laws endorse equality between men and women, other discriminatory laws and practices embedded in culture and religion discriminate against women (Jones et al., 2011). As an illustration, la Loi 62 an-rm/ code du Mariage et de la Tutelle (Law on Marriage and Guardianship of 1962), also identified as the Family Code, stipulates that a woman must obey her husband and the husband, in turn, must protect his wife. The Family Code further states that the wife ought to live with her husband as he is the head of the family, and he is responsible for the household finances. Thus, this law grants the husband's sole responsibility for the household property; it also supports them in inheritance, child custody, and divorce.

In contemporary Mali, religion and culture significantly shape Malians' socio-cultural lifestyle. Even though Mali is a secular country, 95% of its population are Muslim and adhere to Islamic law, which establishes various rights and responsibilities for both men and women about family and individual issues. On the one hand, Islam acknowledges that women hold autonomous legislative, financial, religious attributes from men. On the other hand, in practice, men hold supreme power and rights over women (Abukari, 2008).

Though Mali's legal laws guarantee equality between men and women in all socio-economic spheres of life, women's rights remain unequal. For example, in 2009, the Malian government took the initiative to amend the Family Code. However, these amendments' attempts faced significant opposition from the public. Attempted amendments that directly contradict Islamic Law encounter enormous challenges (Jones et al., 2011). Consequently, in response to public demonstrations and pressure from religious chiefs, the President of Mali, Amadou Toumani Touré, declined in August 2009 to ratify the parliament's Family Code reforms. The reformed Code aimed to grant more rights and opportunities to women. President Amadou Toumani Touré stated, "having widely consulted state institutions, civil society, and legal bodies, I have decided to send

[back the Code]." The President continued to say that "the decision meant to ensure [a] calm and peaceful society." Hence, Mali's secular policies generally stayed in hostility with the country's traditional rituals, mainly Muslim religious values. Some Muslims in Mali conveyed objections regarding social reforms that they thought evolve from Western countries, which endangered and jeopardized their nation's ethical structure (Jones et al., 2011).

Moreover, Mali ranks 139 out of 153 countries in the global gender inequality index of 2020 (Gender Gap Index 2020). Various reasons contribute to this low ranking. While Mali shows examples of modernity with laws and policies supporting women's rights, much of the country is still very much immersed in traditional values and practices that impact gender equality (Beridogo et al. 2001). The mixture of both legal and conventional practices establishes a context of ambiguity where females and males have cumulative access to international ideals for living conditions, knowledge acquisition, and public life involvement. However, women live in a society centered on traditional, cultural, and religious norms and practices.

These practices included female genital mutilation, early marriage, polygamy, unequal household labor division, and unbalanced responsibilities in food and commodities production (*PNIP-SA, 2011- 2015*). Mali's patriarchal system guarantees men the permanent status of family head and extends legitimacy to unequal access to resources and the exercise of power (Bourdet et al. 2010). Moreover, key gender disparities in contemporary Mali include unequal access to agricultural resources, credit, equipment, decision-making, and leadership positions. Disagreements between the national secular policy, Islamic law, cultural practices, and lack of public support for changes hampered amendments in laws regulating women's rights. In what follows, the paper will shed light on how Mali's women experience COVID-19 in such a diverse socio-cultural setting regarding their economic activities and interactions with their partners at the household level.

2. Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on Women

Mali's economy mainly relies on agriculture (farming, livestock breeding, and fishing), which employs 80% of the country's 20 million people and represents 40% of Mali's GDP (EAC-I 2018). 78% of Malians live in rural areas and practice agriculture, whereas industrial activities, administrative work, processing, and marketing farm commodities are prominent in urban areas. Before the pandemic, women made up 38.4% of the active

economic population in Mali, and of these, 48% were engaged in the agriculture sector (EAP, 2018). Malian women play a significant role in agricultural production and are generally in charge of subsistence farming, while men contribute to subsistence and commercial agriculture. For Malian women, their access to 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 (Cisse, 1985).

While in urban areas to earn a living, most Mali women often depend daily on public spaces and social interactions with customers in markets, roadsides, and stations. After the spread of COVID-19, a sharp slowdown in economic activity took place throughout the world. Mali has not been an exception. Official projections assess a decrease in Mali's economic growth rate by 0.9%. It is conceived 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% (UNCDF, 2020). The deficit has significantly affected supplies to some industries. The government's preventive measures have acutely affected the hotel, transport, restaurant, and tourism sectors. Women in these realms are more likely to be affected than men.

Furthermore, the informal economy's dominance in Africa, particularly in Mali, cannot be denied. Indeed, informal work represents over two-thirds (82%) of non-agricultural employment in Mali (UNCDF, 2020). In all cities, proportionately more females than males work in the informal economic sector (Herrera et al. 2012). Similarly, a survey on the pandemic's impacts in Mali also reveals that the COVID-19 crisis has made insecure people who work in most informal sectors (farmers, entrepreneurs, food processors, and other types of enterprises that depend on imports) more vulnerable: these are mainly women. Besides, they are often placed into unemployment with no social benefits (Dossier de plaidoyer, COVID-19,2020).

Additionally, an increase in prices is projected to occur, leading to an inflation rate between 0.3% and 4.9% (UNCDF, 2020). As social interactions are now restricted to contain the virus's spread, Mali women's financial activities will be affected. As mentioned earlier, many women in Mali's urban areas will suffer. For example, in Bamako, expenses dropped anticipated by lowered demand from local businesses; thus, shops shut down or are running at lowered capacity. Customers no longer buy as much food as they usually would (ERIG, COVID-19).

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 (Dossier de plaidoyer, COVID-19,2020). Accordingly, 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 pandemic also disturbed women in rural areas, primarily the significant players in agricultural production, food processing, and marketing in Mali. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic's repercussions, their activities have also been affected. Mainly local market interruptions impact rural women's economic endeavors for their income-generating activities (ERIG, Covid-19). Many rural women are the major "forgotten ones" in the fight against COVID-19 (Toure, 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 when this is the precise time women selling doughnuts, beans, or fried potatoes start their businesses. In an interview conducted by Benbere on the impacts of the pandemic on women's economic activities, Atta, a vegetable seller at the Yobou Tao market in Timbuktu, 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)

Moreover, this pandemic's have had adverse effects on women's income-generating activities due to the decreased number of customers. As a result, many families cannot afford the three basic daily meals (Évaluations Rapides Des Impacts Genre Du Covid-19). The pandemic hinders women's ability to take care of themselves and their families. According to UN Women Mali, the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on women revealed that women suffered from a 50% income reduction, the interruption of their income, the deprivation of income-generating activities, and the downfall of the market for what women produced (ONU Femmes, 2020).

Women also confront stress related to loss of employment and reduction of their revenue. The lack of financial self-sufficiency often leads to psychological dependency, which leads the dependents to lose their self-confidence. This results in a loss of confidence in the face of responsibility, said Diarra, a medical doctor. Women's

discrimination in Mali's society is directly linked to unequal pay, low income, poor education, and stress-related to women's physical and mental health. The *Gender Profile* of the African Development Bank documents a study in Mali in which 77% of rural women working in agriculture declared that they have never received remuneration for their productive tasks (BAD, 2011). This unpaid and hidden work in various domains of life could increase exponentially with the COVID-19 pandemic (ONU Femmes, 2020). Humiliated, sometimes beaten, and economically discriminated against, they have no option but to become submissive and entrust their plight to fatality (Toure, 2020).

Other challenges in Mali include women's lack of access to necessary commodities such as soap or hand sanitizer (ONU Femmes, 2020). Remarkably, most women in rural and urban areas cannot afford to pay for COVID-19 protection kits. The prices of hand sanitizers are beyond their financial means. They cannot afford to buy them daily, given the cost of their household expenses. Thus, regardless of the government's efforts, in most parts of the country, women say that they are the biggest "forgotten" and the least protected against the pandemic (Toure, 2020). Even though national and international legal framework protecting citizens' rights is a promised in Mali, the implementation is quite limited. Moreover, those who are responsible for the framework are primarily men (CNDIFE 2010).

Despite the extent and impact of the informal economy and the promising efforts, Mali's women ability to play a vital role in the economy has been continuously and severely diminished by the COVID-19 crisis (Informal Economic in African Cities, 2020). Thus, Mali cannot achieve gender equality if it does not increase women's low wages in conventional farming and does not provide job security for women in the informal economy. Therefore, the government must take extraordinary measures to include women's access to financial resources to meet their economic needs in the COVID-19 response strategy. The government should provide women with non-refundable grants, enabling them to conform to the government's working hours in response to COVID-19. These grants will help them support the expenses of their families.

3. Increased Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence refers to any hostile acts including rape, sexual harassment, physical and verbal abuse among individuals, psychological violence, and prohibitions of economic activities directed to 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 of women, widowhood, and religious sequestration (Beridogo, Brehima, et al., 2002). Before the pandemic, an analysis of the Mali *Demographic and Health Survey (DHS)* showed that among the interviewees of that study, many women, 60%, believed that a man has the right to beat his wife (or partner) when she leaves home without his permission, or if she neglects the children (52 %). A relatively high percentage of Malians 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 (DHS, 2006). These results attest most of Malian's tolerance of gender-based violence, especially toward women. It also reveals a sense of normality in the acceptance of domestic violence embedded in social patterns. Additionally, while the traditional values and practices that impact gender equality persist, the pandemic has created additional gaps and needs for Mali's women.

Gender-based violence increased akin to humanitarian disasters under COVID-19 (Harper et al. 2020). The United Nations Population Fund predicted that the pandemic is likely to undermine decades of attempts to end gender-based violence by weakening protection and social services for victims of such violence and raising the incidences of violence worldwide (UNFPA, 2020). Besides, an April 2020 report on pathways to violence during pandemics by the Center for Global Development presents numerous rationales that seem to echo irrespective of the context. These reasons are the financial burden of lockdowns, interruption of human interactions leading to isolation, and exposure to partners' abuse. Others also involve less access to support services, whether they are not operational or redirected to settling the victims, or constrained movement. Nevertheless, these rationales cannot justify violence that was already prevailing in Mali before the pandemic.

As mobility has been restricted in Mali to reduce the virus from spreading, women have found themselves confined with their aggressors, with no chance to escape. Additionally, when resources decrease, women are at an increased risk of abuse because of their economic dependence on their partners (ONU Femmes, 2020). Households' increased constraints due to economic pressures might lead to extra household stress and increased violence within families (Gupta, 2020). This condition is significantly exacerbated in Mali due mainly to the events that occurred since 2012 regarding multiple armed conflicts, terrorism, climate change, and the country's socio-cultural setting. Most of the civilian population, mainly women and children, are the first victims of multiple

armed conflicts, insecurity, and volatility (ONU Femmes, 2020).

Accordingly, the percentage of gender-based violence in Mali rose from 43% before COVID-19 to 54% during the COVID-19 pandemic, an overall increase of 11% (ONU Femmes, 2020). Moreover, experts in the field, such as medical doctors and health professionals, declared an upsurge in gender-based violence. According to Diarra, the head doctor at a community health center in Kayes, gender-based violence increased in the region. He continued by saying that he treated "an average of 4 gender-based violence 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). Ultimately, peri-urban and remote local communities are especially at risk as they may have lessened protection and healthcare access.

Furthermore, the closure of schools was highlighted as a possible cause of GBV. Children may be susceptible to rises in child labor and violence as educational institutions close, conventional economies are limited, and parents feel disempowered (Kundu 2020; Harvey 2020). The challenges also include the reorientation of girls toward small businesses, which could expose them to rape and assault. School closures can also 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). Accordingly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women and young girls in Mali became increasingly vulnerable as they are at a heightened threat of abuse, child labor, and marriage (Plan International Mali, 2020).

Child marriage is still an enduring issue in Mali as the country holds the sixth highest incidence rate of child marriage in the world. Specifically, 52% of Mali girls get married before 18, and 17% are married before their 15th birthday (Plan International Mali, 2020). A survey performed by Plan International on COVID-19 in the Kayes region found that child marriage rates increased since the pandemic outbreak. The spouse of the chief of the village describes as follows:

With schools' closure, the situation has changed for young people. Most of the boys are at the gold mining site; some of them 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 agree that girls

should be married at the age of 15 or after their first menstruation, irrespective of their aspirations and visions. Girls have fewer choices regarding their marriage or choice of partner. Accordingly, Socko, a 16-year-old girl, said as follows:

I was forced to marry a man that I do 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 would be allowed to continue my studies. Men decide, and we execute! It is sad not to be in control of one's own life (Plan International Mali, 2020).

Similar cases are happening throughout the country, as shown by UN Women data in Mali. With the pandemic, gender-based violence went from 43% to 54%. Gender-based violence is widespread throughout the country, and women often do not have access to justice because of social pressures and the denial of their rights (ONU Femmes, 2020). Having children and parents in the same confined space for hours could increase tensions and domestic violence against women and children. The fundamental causes of violence against women and girls in Mali are rooted in firmly entrenched gender inequalities, lack of respect for human rights, and male power abuse in communities where the patriarchal system prevailed. These types of violence and discrimination generally occur from a very early age, starting from childhood and proceeding through adulthood. Unfortunately, they are rooted, maintained, and justified by social norms and practices. For example, in contemporary Mali societies, physical violence from a male partner is still tolerated by many wives, as any spouse's suffering is believed to turn into blessings for her children (Beridogo et al. 2002).

Such occurrences can be attributed to persisting cultural norms and practices embedded in social disparities that standardize gender violence and are more likely to increase as the crisis continues. Additionally, these details significantly reveal the social and structural patterns which neglect various complex aspects that establish why some individuals' recourse to violence. As the number of GBV increases, violence against women and girls takes on a new dimension: social distancing, self-isolation, triggered by the COVID-19, are used to exercise power, threats, and control over partners (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2020). Therefore, women's unemployment with the suspension of certain economic activities, and schools' shutdowns, make the household a place of fear and abuse for women and girls. They used schools and their outdoor activities as an alibi to spontaneously escape from their violent partners before the pandemic.

Based on the various reports stated above, there is a need to create or have more counseling centers or phone counseling services for victims of GBV. 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 staffs and health professionals should be trained in the psychological care of gender-based violence survivors. Victims must also be supported and trained to invigorate the end of this behavior within their households and communities.

4. Conclusion

Women and men have been exposed differently to the dangers exacerbated by COVID-19. In Mali, women have been affected in two major areas: the deprivation of their employment opportunities in the informal sector and gender-based violence's intensification. More women lost their jobs, and their economic activities were more constrained than men. As financial insecurity has increased in society, women have faced gender-based violence more frequently amid the pandemic than in the pre-pandemic period. This implies that the previously existing gender inequality gets intensified under the pandemic situation. In response to the growing inequalities engendered by COVID-19, it is essential to establish a new, more inclusive societal order with gender-sensitive policies addressing the socio-economic inequalities, biased laws, cultural patterns, beliefs, and opinions that nurture and justify gender discriminations. Hence, there is a critical necessity to organize strategies and employ efficient short- and long-term measures to mitigate socio-economic inequality and empower women and girls.

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