

Food Systems and Food Producers during COVID-19: Gendered Patterns and Local-Global Structures

Haldis Haukanes

Castellanos, P., Sachs, C. E., Tickamyer, A. R. (eds.). 2022. *Gender, Food and COVID 19. Global Stories of Harm and Hope*. New York: Routledge Focus.

In May this year, the IHR Emergency Committee on the Covid Pandemic, with the support of WHO Director General, established that 'COVID-19 is now an established and ongoing health issue which no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern'.¹ For many people, the pandemic seems long gone and an issue of the past. For others, its consequences are still being felt – for example, as a result of the painful loss of a dear one and/or the enduring strain on livelihoods and economic resources.

While the long-term effects of COVID-19 are yet to be fully described and analysed in social science research, we have, in the aftermath of the pandemic, seen a number of publications that examine the effects of the pandemic on people and societies as it happened. The edited volume discussed here belongs to this body of research and deals with an essential topic: COVID-19-related effects on global food systems and, very importantly, on the actors involved in these systems. It came out of a blog initiated by the editors to highlight and exchange information about the gendered outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic in various parts of these food systems. From the contributors to the blog post, selected people were asked to write more extensively on the topics they initially addressed in the blog – hence this book.

The volume has contributions reporting from a wide range of geographical locations, including case studies from Southeast Asia, Latin America, Australia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and the United States. It contains 15 short entries, in addition to a brief introduction and a conclusion written by the editors. Altogether 28 different authors contributed to the book, approximately one-third of whom are affiliated with Rural Sociology at Penn State University. Their contributions shed light on the lives of actors in different parts of the food chain, ranging from small-scale farmers to owners of small agribusinesses to people working in food industries, catering services, and restaurants. The volume is divided into four sections: (1) Food insecurity; (2) Care work in families, households, and communities; (3) Intersectional

¹ [https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic)

inequalities in the food system; (4) Beyond COVID: moving forward with policy and research.

As indicated above, the contributions are short and few of them build on comprehensive in-depth research concerning the topic in question. Data collection was, as many of us have experienced, difficult during the pandemic, a problem that is addressed by the volume's editors and by some of the individual contributors. Quite a few of the authors have relied mainly on public resources and their own previous research to elaborate their chapter case, supplemented by online interviews with a few past study participants. An example of the latter is Hout and Jensen's informative chapter 'Gender Implications of COVID-19 in Cambodia', which reports on the challenges of Cambodian female small-scale farmers in dealing with COVID-19. It describes a situation where the farmers had trouble accessing markets and simultaneously experienced a decline in the prices of their products, leading to a sharp decline in their income and hence increased food insecurity for their families. Several chapters are based on inputs from, or are co-authored with, members of local organisations working in the area in question. This is the case of Reyes et al.'s chapter from Honduras, which shares the experiences of the indigenous grassroots organisation AMIR (Association of Renewed Intibucan Women). In the chapter we learn about the hardships that AMIR members faced in selling their products during lockdown, and the strategies employed by the organisation to mitigate the effects of the crises, from organising bartering exchange systems in villages to negotiating a new project with OXFAM Honduras. Finally, some chapters are based solely on secondary sources (published research, reports from the UN and international NGOs, etc.). An example of the latter is Nkengla-Asi et al.'s chapter 'Beyond COVID-19: Building the Resilience of Vulnerable Communities in African Food Systems'. The chapter presents data on job loss, food insecurity, and exacerbated gender inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa during COVID-19, proposing a broad range of measures that African governments should adopt to secure greater food security and develop more gender-equal societies.

As mentioned above, the volume chapters are short, and, as readers, we sometimes miss depth and detail in the presentation of the individual case studies. Taken together the chapters nevertheless form a whole that is able to reveal the important consequences that the COVID-19 crisis had for a variety of actors and communities involved in the production, distribution, and serving of food, as well as enduring underlying patterns of inequalities and injustices. The volume makes visible local – global food related interdependencies and, very importantly, it shows how the mobility of food and the mobility of people interacted in complex ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, restrictions imposed on local mobility made smallholders unable to travel to markets to sell their products, which undermined their own food

security as well as their ability to secure investment capital for the next harvesting season. This situation is nicely demonstrated, for example, in the above-mentioned chapters on Cambodia and Honduras. Secondly, as discussed among others in Leder et al.'s chapter on gender and small-scale farming in Nepal and Hansda's chapter on small-scale farmers in Adivasi communities in India, the COVID-19 outbreak led to job loss among migrant workers, many of whom subsequently returned to their home villages. This led not only to a loss of remittances in families but also to more mouths to feed at home, and consequently fewer resources to share and more female care work to be conducted.

Female care work during COVID-19 is the main focus of two of the chapters: Kayla Yurco's chapter on female pastoralists in Kenya whose caring efforts extend to both human beings and animals, and Bugde and Shortall's chapter on female farmers in Scotland. The latter interestingly discusses women's roles as guardians of family members' mental well-being and the increase in (female) mental labour that the pandemic caused. It also demonstrates how an increased presence of both husbands and children in the household made the women experience a regression in previously gained levels of gender equality.

The volume reveals and addresses aggravated injustices faced during the COVID-19 pandemic by groups and individuals in the food industries and services who were already marginalised owing to their race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or citizenship status. Particularly powerful in this regard is Emily Southard's chapter on migrant workers in the US meatpacking industry. In this chapter she demonstrates, among others, the horrendous health outcomes of the pandemic on (mainly male) migrant workers, claiming that 'the state, at best, failed to protect the workers, and at worst, knowingly sacrificed workers' lives to maintain the agricultural economy' (p. 85).

Finally, the volume highlights the spaces of resistance and pathways taken by individuals, communities, and, to some extent, states and international actors to cope with the immediate effects of COVID-19 and to 'build back better' after the pandemic. Initiatives range from strengthening local food networks (Honduras, Nepal) to informal support and trust building among food vendors and business owners (Vietnam), to fierce political protest against discriminatory legislation (India) and racial injustices (United States). The importance of robust local food systems for enhancing both food security and people's ability to care for themselves and others is emphasised in several of the chapters and in the book's conclusion: 'Accounts of community-based networks and organisations to provide goods, services and care provide hope as they are both inspirational and aspirational as models of resilience' (p. 149).

I find that the volume makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the gendered consequences of COVID-19 in rural communities and of the hardships faced by various actors in the food-related labour force, be it farmers, industrial workers, or

service providers. Several of the chapters take an intersectional view and zoom in on the unfortunate and unjust outcomes of COVID-19 for people marginalised on the basis of race or ethnic identity and for queer people involved in food production and services. However, the bulk of the chapters place a focus on women's struggles as such. With the exception of the chapter on migrant workers and meatpacking, little attention is paid to gendered vulnerabilities experienced by male food producers, although such vulnerabilities clearly exist, as demonstrated, for example, in M. Alston's research in rural Australia (Alston 2012, 2014; see also Hammersley et. al. 2021 from rural Ireland). These limitations taken into consideration, I find that the book is recommendable, not only for those interested in learning about the gendered effects of COVID-19 on farmers and rural communities, but also for those who would like to gain insight into the injustices and vulnerabilities and the spaces of hope unfolding at various levels in the food chain.

References

- Alston, M. 2012. Rural Male Suicide in Australia. *Social Science and Medicine Social Science & Medicine* 74: 515–522.
- Alston, M. 2014. 'Gender and Climate Change in Australia and the Pacific.' Pp. 175–188 in M. Alston, K. Whittenbury (eds.). *Research, Action and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change*, edited by M. Alston and K. Whittenbury. Cham: Springer.
- Hammersley, C., N. Richardson, D. Meredith, P. Carroll, J. McNamara. 2021. 'That's Me I Am the Farmer of the Land': Exploring Identities, Masculinities, and Health Among Male Farmers in Ireland. *American Journal of Men's Health* 15 (4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/15579883211035241>.