

Food and water insecurity: Impacts on women's well-being during COVID-19

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Credit: RISE

Daily food and water insecurities are continuing to impact those living in low-socio economic countries, and women are paying the biggest price with their mental health.

A cross country and multi disciplinary group of researchers from Monash University, Emory University and Hasanuddin University,

assessed the link between food and water insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and depression rates among women living in Makassar, Indonesia.

The results of the research found depression is associated with joint resource insecurity rather than with water or [food insecurity](#) alone. The findings underline the importance of addressing food and water insecurity together, particularly as they relate to women's [mental health](#) and well-being. The work is published in *The Journal of Nutrition*.

Women living in low socioeconomic countries were particularly vulnerable to increased depression during the pandemic. These women, who are often living in urban [informal settlements](#), face increasing challenges as a result of economic hardships and physiological stressors linked to limited resources.

Food and water insecurity, as a result of market closures, forced isolation and economic hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic were among some of the factors that contributed to increased depression among women living in urban informal settlements.

Lead author of the research project, Isabel Charles says the research findings could have wider implications in a number of different areas.

"Our findings are important for policymakers, researchers and practitioners focused on global health, mental health, [urban planning](#) and resilience, particularly in relation to urban informal settlements. It's relevant for people working at the nexus of gender equity, food insecurity, water insecurity, and health or development," said Isabel Charles.

Associate Professor Becky Batagol, from Monash University Faculty of Law said this research is particularly important as informal settlements

play a pivotal role in urbanization.

"This is fundamentally a story about poverty and gender. Building on what we already know about the disproportionate impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had upon women and girls globally, this research shows that the greatest fallout of the pandemic was borne by women who experience both food and water insecurity," said Associate Professor Batagol.

"That should come as no surprise, given the very definition of poverty is not being able to feed oneself and meet basic cooking, cleaning and bathing needs. It is women who, often as primary caregivers, are most affected when household resources are limited. By listening to some of the most marginalized women on our planet, we can better understand how to meet our sustainable development goals globally," added Associate Professor Batagol.

Ruzka R. Taruc from the Faculty of Public Health, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia said women's access to mental health care is limited in informal settlements.

"The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted mental health disparities globally, and Indonesia was no exception. Women's access to health care, including [mental health care](#), is particularly limited in informal settlements. As a result, those who are impacted most by social, economic and political stressors may find themselves without the mental health support or treatment needed to ensure their well-being," said Ruzka R. Taruc.

Understanding how food and water insecurity can impact well-being during shocks and stressors such as COVID-19 can help inform urban policy and settlement upgrading initiatives, and more generally can provide insight into what factors strengthen resilience among residents

of urban informal settlements in the face of adversity.

The study used survey data collected from the households in urban informal settlements in Makassar, Indonesia through the Monash-led Revitalizing Informal Settlements and their Environments (RISE) trial. Makassar is the sixth largest city of Indonesia and is home to approximately 1.5 million people, with a third of that population living in poverty.

More information: Isabel Charles et al, Joint Food and Water Insecurity Had a Multiplicative Effect on Women's Depression in Urban Informal Settlements in Makassar, Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *The Journal of Nutrition* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.tjnut.2023.01.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tjnut.2023.01.010)

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