

Pandemic Shocks and the Food Security of Somali Migrants and Refugees in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered severe shocks to food security for marginalized populations in urban areas. Somali migrants and refugees in Nairobi's Eastleigh neighbourhood faced disproportionate impacts due to strict containment measures, disrupted food supply chains, and the shutdown of informal markets. These disruptions exacerbated existing socio-economic inequities, leading to heightened food insecurity. This paper examines the multi-dimensional effects of the pandemic on the food security of Somali migrants and refugees, focusing on their access to informal food networks and the broader socio-economic factors influencing their livelihoods. Utilizing a household survey and in-depth interviews conducted in August 2022, the study reveals the compounded impacts of income loss, remittance disruptions, and restricted mobility on food access and consumption. By situating these findings within the context of South-South migration and urban food security, this research offers critical insights into the intersectional vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic. The study highlights the need for resilient, inclusive food security policies and governance frameworks that specifically address the vulnerabilities of urban migrants in times of global crisis.

Keywords

COVID-19, food security, socio-economic impacts, urban refugees, migration

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Cover Image

Vegetable vendor in the Eastleigh neighbourhood of Nairobi. Credit: Zack Ahmed



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Introduction

Antonio Guterres (2023), the Secretary General of the United Nations, has characterised urban areas as the 'ground zero' of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 90% of the reported cases concentrated at these locations. Urban areas, especially large cities, have been the hotspots of the coronavirus because of a common set of conditions, such as high population concentrations, overcrowding, and poor health and living conditions (Florida et al., 2021). In major African cities such as Nairobi, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges for urban migrants, especially those with limited mobility due to lack of legal documents (Luiu et al., 2022). Migrant pandemic vulnerability was further compounded by preexisting socio-economic inequities, exclusionary government responses, and residential segregation (Hitch et al., 2022; Sonono, 2021).

In Kenya, there were 343,786 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 5,689 deaths between January 2020 and July 2023 (WHO, 2023). In response to the pandemic, the Kenyan government implemented a series of public health measures to mitigate the spread of the virus. These measures included a nationwide dusk-to-dawn curfew, social distancing mandates, and restrictions on movement between counties (Wangari et al., 2021). The curfew was imposed on March 27, 2020, and a formal lockdown placed over the Nairobi Metropolitan Area from April 6, 2020, to July 6, 2020. Public spaces, schools, non-essential businesses, and religious institutions were closed to limit transmission. The government also prioritized mass testing and expanded health services, particularly in urban areas where densely populated informal settlements posed a heightened risk of infection (Asamba, 2020). However, while these measures were essential in curbing the virus's spread, they disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations, including migrants, refugees, and informal economy workers. These groups, heavily reliant on daily wages from informal markets and with limited access to formal social protection systems, encountered heightened challenges because of these restrictions (Lusambili et al., 2020).

Pandemic curfew measures led to reduced mobility, increased travel costs, and loss of income, worsening poverty and economic vulnerability (Luiu et al., 2022). A series of Kenyan Rapid Response Phone Surveys (RRPS) documented the economic shocks triggered by the pandemic (Pape et al., 2020, 2021a, 2021b). Unemployment increased five times from 4% in late 2019 to 18% a year later, and urban unemployment was even higher at 25%. The situation was particularly dire in informal settlements, where overcrowding and lack of basic services made adherence to containment measures difficult (Kibe et al., 2020). Pinchoff et al. (2021) have also highlighted the gendered effects of the pandemic, with women in informal settlements experiencing higher rates of food insecurity, household violence, and forgoing necessary health services. Other research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to food price inflation and food supply chain disruptions affecting urban lives in

terms of food availability and consumption (Kunyanga et al., 2023).

The economic impacts of the pandemic were closely tied to food security challenges, especially for marginalized urban populations. The pandemic triggered significant food price inflation and reduced food diversity, both of which undermined urban livelihoods (Kunyanga et al., 2023; Varma & Sutradhar, 2023). For migrant communities, whose survival depends on informal food markets and networks, the disruption of supply chains proved disastrous (Ahmed et al., 2023; Khoso, 2023). The closure of informal markets due to lockdowns exacerbated food insecurity, further demonstrating the crucial role of unregulated economies in sustaining urban migrant populations. As a result, migrant populations were particularly susceptible to the adverse socio-economic effects of the pandemic, particularly concerning access to food and basic services. Among the hardest-hit areas was Eastleigh in Nairobi, a densely populated migrant and refugee enclave in Nairobi. Eastleigh, known for its vibrant economy driven by informal trade, was disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 containment measures.

On May 6, 2020, the government imposed a full lockdown on Eastleigh as well as Mombasa's Old Town following a surge in COVID-19 cases in both localities (Nation, 2020). This decision came in the wake of an alarming situation in Eastleigh, where an Imam, despite knowing his COVID-19 positive status, continued leading prayers and making house visits until his death on April 16, contributing to the area's rapid transmission rates (Saya, 2020). The lockdown led to the closure of all businesses, shopping malls, markets, and public spaces, effectively isolating the neighborhood. Residents were barred from leaving their homes except for essential purposes, and the police had a heavy-handed presence in enforcing the regulations and the initiation of mass testing campaigns to contain the outbreak (Kinyua, 2020; Yussuf, 2020). Many residents from urban slums in the Kamukunji constituency, where Eastleigh is located, who were already economically marginalized and often depended on daily labor, suddenly found themselves cut off from their sources of income. The shutdown of markets and businesses caused thousands of traders to lose their primary source of income, plunging many households deeper into poverty and food insecurity (Odenyo, 2020). The lockdown's impact on Eastleigh extended beyond economic deprivation. Residents also faced significant social and health challenges. With many households relying on informal food markets for affordable essentials, the closure of these markets led to severe shortages of basic goods. Meanwhile, disrupted supply chains drove up prices for the limited food available (Njeru, 2020). This deepened pre-existing food insecurity in the area, where many households were already struggling to meet daily nutritional needs (*The Conversation*, 2020).

This paper assesses the overall impact of COVID-19 on the food security of these Somali migrants using a household survey and in-depth interviews in Eastleigh. By documenting the pandemic-related food access and consumption experiences of Somali migrants, this paper aims to contribute

to the emerging body of case study evidence assessing the adverse outcomes of the pandemic shock on vulnerable migrant populations in African cities. It particularly focuses on the challenges they faced in consuming sufficient quantities and variety of nutritious food during the pandemic. While there have been several studies of the impact of the pandemic on food security in Nairobi's informal settlements (Chege et al., 2021, 2022; Merchant et al., 2022; Kimani-Murage et al., 2022; Onyango et al., 2024; Shupler et al., 2021; Solymari et al., 2022), this is the first to systematically examine the implications for Somali households in Nairobi.

The paper addresses three main questions: first, how did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the food security and livelihood strategies of Somali migrants in Nairobi's Eastleigh neighbourhood, particularly in the context of South-South migration and urban food systems? Second, how did the pandemic disrupt informal food networks and remittance flows, and what were the resulting implications for household food security? And third, how did intersectional factors such as gender, migration status, and socio-economic class exacerbate food insecurity among Somali migrant households during the pandemic? By answering these questions, the paper adds a crucial layer to our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable urban populations, highlighting the need for more informed policies and programmes to support the food security of urban migrants and refugees in African cities.

Methodology

This study was designed to collect accurate and representative data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Somali households in Nairobi. The mixed methods approach comprised a survey of 268 Somali migrant households and 30 in-depth interviews with a sample of participants. The survey questions covered critical aspects of the lives of the participants, including household demographics, economic

conditions, food security, access to clean water and medicine, and other basic needs. The survey instrument also included a series of questions related to the socio-economic conditions of the household during the COVID-19 pandemic period. In addition, the survey sought to gather information on the frequency of going without enough food to eat, clean water, medicine, electricity, cooking fuel, cash income, loss of income, illness, remittances, food access and food prices.

A team of trained local research assistants with requisite language skills administered the surveys and conducted the in-depth interviews face-to-face with participants. This exercise was conducted in Somali, English, or Swahili, depending on the preference of the participant. The in-depth interviews were designed to gather detailed qualitative information about migrant and refugee household experiences during the pandemic. The in-depth interviews were conducted using an open-ended interview guide, which allowed participants to convey their personal experiences and feelings about the pandemic using their own words. The data collected through the survey and interviews were analysed using descriptive statistics which allowed us to summarise and present the data in a meaningful way. Moreover, thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns circumscribing the experiences of the participants, to gain in-depth and nuanced understanding of the pandemic-related experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Migrant Profile

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the respondents and surveyed households. Around 59% of the study participants were male and 41% were female. Just over half (54%) were married, 24% were single, and 15% were divorced. Participants resided predominantly in flats or apartments (92%), reflecting the urban environment of the Eastleigh neighborhood. Only 7% lived in a house. In terms of the household structure, 39% of participants were part of

		No.	%
Sex of household respondents	Male	157	58.6
	Female	111	41.4
Marital status	Married	144	53.7
	Single	63	23.5
	Divorced	41	15.3
	Widowed	11	4.1
	Separated	8	3.0
	Abandoned	1	0.4
Housing type	Flat/apartment	246	91.8
	House (bungalow)	19	7.1
	Semi-permanent informal dwelling	2	0.7
	House (maisonette)	1	0.4
Household structure	Nuclear	104	38.8
	Male-centred	78	29.1
	Female-centred	27	10.1
	Extended	59	22.0

nuclear households, although 22% were living in extended households. Most participating households were male-centred (29%). The male-centred households were 29%, with 10% being female-centred, that is, with a female head without a male spouse or partner.

Pandemic Impacts

The pandemic severely impacted Somali households in Eastleigh, Nairobi, with far-reaching consequences for their food security, livelihoods, and overall well-being. The combination of lockdown measures, economic disruptions, and social vulnerabilities created a precarious situation for migrant households already reliant on informal economies and remittance flows. One respondent described the situation as follows:

COVID-19 really affected our household, especially in 2020 and 2021. I lost my job working as a shop-keeper in Eastleigh, Nairobi, due to COVID-19. I could not also move freely to look for a job due to COVID-19 containment measures. Police used to arrest and beat people who are found walking outside. For someone like me with refugee documents, I could not move freely as I could easily get arrested. Therefore, I had to stay at home for most of the pandemic period. In addition, the living condition is now harder than before the pandemic. Everything is expensive, and the price of foodstuffs has gone up. The tough economic conditions have had negative effects on my household's food security situation (Interview No. 16).

This testimonial illustrates the compounded nature of the pandemic's impacts on someone with legitimate documentation. Migrants with irregular legal status faced even greater mobility restrictions and economic hardship. The lockdown measures disproportionately affected migrants whose livelihoods were intertwined with informal economies. For many Somali migrants in Eastleigh, informal work and access to informal food markets are critical for survival. The pandemic's disruption of these lifelines exacerbated already fragile socio-economic conditions, pushing many households deeper into food insecurity.

Table 2 provides a stark reminder of the general economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Somali households in Nairobi, corroborating the broader narrative of financial hardship during this period (Gama et al., 2022). Three-quarters of the participants perceived their economic circumstances as worse or much worse since the onset of the pandemic. This collective sentiment underscores the general financial strain experienced by the Somali community. This finding is consistent with more general patterns, as the pandemic has disproportionately affected vulnerable groups, exacerbating existing inequities (Perry et al., 2022). The impact of the pandemic on the poor has been particularly severe, with a substantial reduction in income and savings (Dang et al., 2020). As such, the ability to meet daily household needs has declined, leading to a reduction in mobility and increased household expenditure (Ashari & Nugrahanti, 2021). This

has led to a decline in living standards, including income, employment, and food security, in low- and middle-income countries (Egger et al., 2021).

Table 2: Perception of Pandemic Changes in Household Economic Conditions

	%
Much worse	46.6
Worse	28.1
Much better	13.8
Better	7.8
Remained the same	3.7

Economic Disruptions and Loss of Income

The economic consequences of the pandemic for Somali households were dramatic. Eighty percent of survey participants reported that their household experienced income losses in 2020 and successive years of the pandemic (with 28% 'strongly agreeing' and 52% 'agreeing') (Table 3). Almost half of the households experienced job loss, with members becoming unemployed and unable to find work. The high level of job losses reflected the closure of businesses and the massive slowdown in economic activities as a result of lockdowns and other restrictions. The repercussions of widespread income loss were profound, significantly affecting the ability of households to meet their basic needs:

Before COVID-19, I worked in a wholesale food shop to support my wife and our four kids. I was the sole breadwinner of my family, and my income was essential for us to survive. When the pandemic hit, the shop was closed due to lockdown measures, and I lost my job. With no income, we really struggled to put food on the table. Every day was a battle to find enough to eat and make ends meet. The situation was dire, and I often felt helpless. Our savings quickly ran out, and there was no work to be found. The impact on our lives was devastating, and it felt like we were trapped in an endless cycle of worry and hardship (Interview No. 19).

Despite the economic hardships for most households, a smaller subset of 22% reported that there was an improvement in their household financial status, largely because of their adaptive resilience strategies such as diversifying income sources or increasing reliance on social safety nets, including remittances.

Rising Food Prices and Access to Informal Markets

The pandemic's disruption of supply chains and informal food networks had significant consequences for the food security of Somali migrants. Two-thirds of the Somali households experienced an increase in food expenses during the pandemic, which they attributed to the disrupted international and local supply chains and the subsequent food price inflation (Table 4). In May 2020, Eastleigh was designated a COVID-19 hotspot, leading to a complete lockdown

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Members of the household experienced income losses	27.6	52.3	1.1	14.9	4.1
Members of the household became unemployed and could not find a job due to COVID-19	27.0	21.7	33.7	1.1	14.6

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Members of the household had increased food expenses	65.0	2.0	1.9	28.8	0.4
Members of the household found it difficult to access food from informal food vendors	54.4	30.8	9.0	1.1	4.1
Members of the household had less food to eat	30.7	18.0	38.2	9.0	4.1

of the neighbourhood for a month, during which all markets and food stores were closed (Hiraan Online, 2020; Lusambili et al., 2021). For communities like those in Eastleigh, which rely heavily on informal markets for affordable food, the closure of these food sources during lockdown was devastating. Informal food vendors, who played a critical role in supplying affordable groceries and fresh produce, were shut down, leaving many households with limited options. The policy left many households unable to access the food they relied on daily, leading to increased reliance on more expensive, formal supermarkets or food aid.

As many as 85% of households said it was harder to obtain food from informal food vendors during the pandemic. As one respondent recalled:

We rely heavily on informal food vendors for our daily sustenance, buying cheap groceries and fresh produce to feed our families. However, during the pandemic, Eastleigh was considered a hotspot, and the government closed all food vending shops. This made it incredibly difficult for us to access food. The closure of these vendors, who are our primary source for affordable and fresh food, left us struggling. We couldn't buy the groceries and produce we needed, and the alternatives were either too expensive or inaccessible. It was a challenging time for all of us, and at times went hungry because we simply couldn't afford the higher prices in the formal supermarkets (Interview No. 23).

The closure of informal food markets not only affected consumers but also had negative implications for informal vendors themselves. Many vendors, themselves migrants or refugees, lost their primary source of income during the pandemic and were unable to support their own households. One vendor noted how market closure and lost income was compounded by food price hikes:

Before the pandemic, I worked as an informal food vendor, selling meat and groceries in Eastleigh's Jam Street. This job was our main source of income and helped me support my family. When COVID-19 hit, everything changed. The market was shut down, and movement was heavily restricted. I couldn't sell produce anymore, and our income disappeared overnight. To make things worse, the cost of food went up significantly. As a vendor, I saw firsthand how the disrupted supply chains and increased market prices affected everyone. People who used to buy from me struggled to afford basic groceries. My family was no different; we had to pay more for the food we needed, but we had no income to cover these expenses. It was a constant struggle to make ends meet, and every day felt like a battle for survival (Interview No. 30).

Food Insecurity and Household Deprivation

Food inflation in Kenya exacerbated the challenges faced by migrants, who typically have limited financial reserves and rely heavily on the informal sector (Ahmed et al., 2023). As a result, food scarcity became a more pressing issue, with nearly half of the households having less food to eat during the pandemic (Table 5). The table is based on questions drawn from the Lived Poverty Index (Mattes & Patel, 2022) and provides a disarming picture of the extent of household deprivation during the COVID-19 pandemic, with significant sections of the Somali migrant community facing critical shortages. Almost 50% of the households frequently lacked cash income, reflecting the economic turmoil and job losses reported worldwide during the pandemic (ILO, 2021). Additionally, 44% of households reported frequently going without sufficient food and almost half struggled with inconsistent access to clean water and medical treatment.

Table 5: Frequency of Household Deprivation during the Pandemic.

	Always (%)	Many times (%)	Several times (%)	Just once or twice (%)	Never (%)
How often did this household go without enough food to eat?	15.0	29.2	6.4	1.1	40.8
How often did this household go without clean water for home use?	0.4	48.3	21.1	14.0	16.2
How often did this household go without medicine or medical treatment?	0.8	48.9	10.2	26.3	13.9
How often did this household go without electricity in your home?	13.6	44.2	23.6	8.6	10.0
How often did this household go without cooking fuel (kerosene or gas) your home?	20.0	47.4	6.4	11.2	15.0
How often did this household go without cash income?	2.0	33.5	12.0	29.7	24.1

In many instances, households experienced multiple, overlapping deprivation as further evidenced by the narrative of this respondent:

In Eastleigh, we usually live in a densely populated neighbourhood that is both commercial and residential. We purchase everything, including food, water, and electricity. During COVID-19, there was a heavy crackdown with strict restrictions on movement in and out of the neighbourhood. This made life extremely difficult for us, as we were deprived of most essentials. We frequently went without sufficient food, and getting clean water became a struggle. The prices of everything went up, and there were times when we had no electricity because we couldn't afford to pay for it. The restrictions isolated us from our usual sources of support and supply, leaving many families in a state of constant need and anxiety (Interview No. 25).

The high levels of deprivation across these needs suggest a broader systemic failure to protect the most vulnerable during the crisis.

Intersectional Vulnerabilities and Gendered Impacts

The intersection of gender, migration status, and economic precarity created unique vulnerabilities for female-headed households, many of whom were already struggling to provide for their families even before the pandemic, deepening their financial vulnerability, food insecurity, and caregiving responsibilities during the crisis (Arora & Majumder, 2021; Levine et al., 2021; Mohapatra & Nigania, 2024; Pedraza & Yarris, 2023; Wu & Kilby, 2022).

The pandemic underscored the intersectional vulnerabilities that exacerbate food insecurity among Somali migrant households in Eastleigh. Gender emerged as a critical factor shaping the pandemic's impact, with female-headed households disproportionately affected by the loss of income and access to informal food networks. As noted by Pinchoff et al. (2021), women in Nairobi's informal settlements –

especially those heading households – faced heightened food insecurity, increased household violence, and reduced access to health services. These challenges were amplified by structural inequalities in access to informal economic opportunities and social protection mechanisms.

For female-headed households, the closure of informal markets and loss of remittances was particularly devastating. These households often relied on daily informal work to sustain themselves and their families, and the cessation of these activities left them with few alternative income sources. As one respondent described:

I'm a single mother with three children, and we survive on the small income I make from selling vegetables in the market. When the market was closed during the pandemic, we had no way to earn money, and things became very difficult. The prices of food went up, and I couldn't afford to buy enough to feed my children. We often had to skip meals, and it was a very difficult time for us (Interview No. 17).

The gendered impacts of the pandemic highlight the need for more inclusive and intersectional governance approaches that account for the specific vulnerabilities of women and other marginalized groups in urban migrant communities. As the pandemic revealed, existing social protection systems were not equipped to address the compounded challenges faced by female-headed migrant households and other vulnerable groups. Therefore, future policies aimed at strengthening food security and social protection in urban contexts need to consider the diverse experiences and needs of different sub-groups within migrant communities.

Migrant Remittances

Remittances are a crucial lifeline for recipients, providing income for basic needs and influencing household behaviour in positive directions (Mishi, 2014). They also enhance the resilience of households, enabling them to cope with various challenges and plan for the future (Sikder et al., 2017). Beyond financial impact, remittances serve as a symbol of

the emotional bond between migrants and their families, reflecting a complex typology of relationships (Kaur, 2022). Refugees and asylum seekers are often embedded in multi-directional transnational remittance networks involving several countries of origin and destination where their relatives are placed (Zuntz, 2021). This pattern is also applicable to the research cohort in Nairobi who receive remittances from abroad and themselves remit to support family in Somalia. These complex remittance networks play a vital role in sustaining refugee and migrant households but were badly disrupted by the pandemic.

There has been a contentious debate on whether remittances decreased or increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, much of it conducted at the country-to-country level (Crush & Ramachandran, 2024). A decrease in remittance receipts has substantial negative implications for recipient households, particularly for food security and the ability of households to cover their basic needs (Owusu & Crush, 2024; Smith & Floro, 2021; Sulemana et al., 2023). Data from the Central Bank of Kenya and other reports indicate that there was an initial slowdown in remittances to the country in the first few months of 2020 but overall, defying predictions remittances to the country remained strong and resilient during the pandemic increasing by 10.7% from USD2.8 billion in 2019 to USD 3.09 billion in 2020, and by 20.2% to reach USD3.72 billion in 2021 (Handoo & Odhiambo, 2021; *Trading Economics*, nd.; World Bank, 2021).

Remittances represent a crucial financial lifeline for Somali migrants in Nairobi, even more so at times of crisis. However, Table 6 shows that many of the surveyed Somali households—71% in all—received less in cash remittances during the pandemic. The remainder had not experienced a decrease, suggesting that there were variations in the ability of the Somali diaspora to remit to Kenya, some managing to maintain or increase their remittances to help out the recipients, while most were forced to curtail their remitting. One respondent noted how a fall in remittances from a relative in the US had a profoundly negative impact on her family in Nairobi:

I receive monthly financial support through remittances from my brother in the US to support my livelihood here in Nairobi. This money is crucial for paying rent, school fees, health expenses, and, most importantly, purchasing food for my family. When COVID-19 hit, my brother initially stopped sending me money because he lost his job due to the pandemic. This had a devastating impact on my ability to cover basic needs for my family. We struggled to make ends meet, and I had to borrow food on credit. However, it wasn't always possible due to the strict lockdown measures, which made it difficult to even find someone willing to lend us food. The situation was dire, and I felt helpless as I watched my children forego some meals (Interview No. 12).

The mixed picture that emerges from Table 6 underlines the complex dynamics at play within transnational remittance networks during the pandemic. This calls for a nuanced

understanding of how global crises can differentially impact the economic lifelines of migrant communities, necessitating targeted policy interventions that support both senders and receivers of remittances in times of global economic upheaval (Olivie & Santillán O'Shea, 2022).

Table 6: Impact of COVID-19 on Remittance Inflow

Household received less cash remittances during the pandemic	%
Strongly agree	41.4
Agree	29.9
Strongly disagree	17.2
Disagree	10.4
Neither agree nor disagree	1.1

Conclusion

This study has explored the multi-dimensional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic shock on Somali migrants and refugees in Nairobi, with a focus on food security, livelihood strategies, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The pandemic significantly disrupted the informal food networks and remittance flows that the migrants rely on for survival, leading to severe food insecurity. Informal networks and remittances, traditionally buffers against economic shocks like job losses, were critically undermined by the pandemic. The findings provide a comprehensive response to the primary research question: How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact the food security and livelihood strategies of Somali migrants in Nairobi's Eastleigh neighbourhood? The paper reveals that job losses, reduced remittances, and disruptions to informal economies heightened food insecurity, with nearly half of respondents reporting going without sufficient food, further exposing the structural weaknesses in urban food systems during COVID-19 (Boadi & Billah, 2024; Crush & Si, 2020; Klassen & Murphy, 2020).

The second question addressed how the pandemic disrupted informal food networks and remittance flows for Somali migrants. Participants described how the shutdown of informal vendors left families without affordable food options, pushing many deeper into food insecurity (Ahmed et al., 2023). The economic downturn in countries where their relatives lived further compounded the issue, as remittances—a crucial financial lifeline—decreased, limiting household ability to purchase essential goods. These disruptions underscore the fragility of informal urban food systems during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic when they tend to be treated by hostile governments as exacerbating rather than mitigating the situation (Boyacı-Gündüz et al., 2021; Carey et al., 2020).

The third question asked how intersectional factors such as gender, migration status, and socio-economic class exacerbated food insecurity. Gender, migration status, and socio-economic class were critical factors that compounded the vulnerabilities faced by Somali migrant households. Female-headed households, already dealing with structural inequalities, were severely affected by market closures and

movement restrictions, which increased their food insecurity as they struggled to provide for their families (Pinchoff et al., 2021; Lusambili et al., 2021). Migrants with irregular legal status faced additional barriers in accessing employment and food, while lower-income migrants were hit hardest by economic shocks, further diminishing their ability to meet basic needs. These findings highlight the need for inclusive governance frameworks and shock-responsive social protections that address the compounded vulnerabilities of marginalized migrant communities, particularly during global crises (Crush & Si, 2020; Doss et al., 2020; Levine et al., 2021; Nyandiko, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global, national, and local food systems which were especially hard on marginalized urban migrants (Chikanda et al., 2020; Klassen & Murphy, 2020). The crisis underscores the urgency of building resilient, equitable, and sustainable urban food systems that can withstand future shocks (Béné et al., 2021; Carey et al., 2020). Addressing these gaps will not only strengthen urban resilience but also provide a more equitable foundation for migrant populations in the Global South. In the Kenyan case, as elsewhere, the implications of the findings go beyond the pandemic. As Africa continues to navigate the pandemic's aftermath, the experiences detailed by Somali migrants in Nairobi serve as a poignant illustration of the challenges that lie ahead for such communities. They underscore the need for policies that address not only immediate food distribution and health concerns but also the underlying structural inequities exposed by the pandemic. The evidence presented here highlights the need for targeted interventions designed to bolster food security and foster economic resilience within urban refugee populations. These interventions need to address the multi-layered impact of the pandemic, acknowledging the vulnerability of migrants to the shutdown of informal economies and the subsequent tightening of food environments. Future research is imperative and should aim to build on these findings, enhancing our strategies to ensure the well-being of migrants. Such work should not only offer relief during global crises but also pave the way for long-term resilience and stability, providing a roadmap for the recovery of migrant communities in the Global South and beyond.

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