

COVID-19 impacts on the health and wellbeing of older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa: A case study from Uganda

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected the health and wellbeing of vulnerable populations such as older adults; no population group was more vulnerable than seniors in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the location of the fastest-growing senior adult population in the world and one of the most vulnerable according to the UN Research Roadmap. This research investigated the health and wellbeing of older adults in SSA during the pandemic, using Uganda as a case study. A cross-sectional survey (n= 288) with adults aged ≥60 years in rural Uganda in the acute phase of the pandemic (late 2021-early 2022) documented access to resources to meet daily needs (water, sanitation, hygiene, food, health care) as well as experiences of the pandemic in terms of psychosocial health and wellbeing. Findings indicate some of the highest levels of emotional distress reported in the published literature (87% of respondents) and low scores on an index of wellbeing (33% of respondents). These experiences emerge from the intersection of pre-existing socioeconomic disadvantage, disruptions to basic livelihoods induced by the pandemic, and uncertainties around disease impacts. This research highlights the fragility of vulnerable communities to disruptions caused by public health emergencies, underscoring the intersectionality of structural determinants of health. Future disruptions (health, climate, civil) can be lessened through the development of stronger social protections, enhanced emergency preparedness, and mental health services for at-risk groups.

Key Words: COVID-19; health and wellbeing; older persons; Sub Saharan Africa (SSA); WASH; feminist political ecology of health

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