



WOW // Work and
Opportunities
for Women

Gender and acute food insecurity

Importance of meaningfully engaging women in
acute food insecurity prevention and response

Lora Forsythe

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Query Question:

1. What are the links between gender equality/women's economic empowerment and food insecurity, including responses to acute food insecurity? This should apply an intersectional lens and cover macro and micro considerations, such as longer-term prevention activities, national and local resilience and humanitarian response. Include a conceptual framework/mapping to represent these links.
2. Why is it important to meaningfully engage women in activities/efforts to prevent and respond to acute food insecurity and famine prevention, including for women's economic empowerment? What are the risks of not including women? The answer should reflect individual, household, community and national level, as well as any secondary impact.
3. Based on this evidence, what are the key policy implications and recommendations for FCDO to utilize its programmatic and diplomatic footprint to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment within food insecurity prevention and response in famine risk contexts? Recommendations should include evidence gaps to fill.

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Acronyms

CSP	Country Strategic Planning
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
G&I	Gender and Inclusion
GBV	Gender-based Violence
HLPE	High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition
HPC	Humanitarian Programme cycle
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDC	International Development Committee
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
n.d.	no date
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

RCT	Randomised Control Trial
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WfWI	Women for Women International

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Efforts to address underlying gender inequalities and support women's economic empowerment are central to food security policies and programmes in humanitarian contexts. This report provides a summary of evidence based on a rapid review of literature and six interviews, with the aim of supporting FCDO and the wider UK government response to acute food insecurity and famine prevention. Focused primarily on hunger hotspot countries, the review identifies a rich evidence base on the gender dimensions of food insecurity, with more limited evidence that provides learning from interventions relevant to acute food insecurity contexts. The review takes an in-depth look at the importance of meaningful engagement with women and women's leadership in food insecurity prevention and response.



IN EVERY REGION OF THE WORLD, WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE MORE FOOD INSECURE AND MORE VULNERABLE TO FOOD INSECURITY THAN MEN.

(FAO, 2023)

The review finds ample evidence of a global gender food security gap: in every region of the world, women and girls are more food insecure and more vulnerable to food insecurity than men, a gap that has widened since the COVID-19 pandemic (FAO, 2023). Moderate or severe food insecurity has increased from 1.7 to 4.3 percentage points from 2019 to 2021 for women – affecting 939 million women compared with 813 million men (FAO, 2023). Drivers of this gender gap are complex and exacerbated by factors including conflict, climate change, poverty and financial crises (IPCC, 2023; Carter & Kelly, 2021; UN & WB, 2018: 116; Bahgat et al., 2017).

MODERATE OR SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY HAS INCREASED FROM 1.7% TO 4.3% FROM 2019 TO 2021 FOR WOMEN – AFFECTING 939 MILLION WOMEN COMPARED WITH 813 MILLION MEN.

(FAO, 2023)

 **939**
MILLION

Gender inequality and food security exist in mutually reinforcing relationships, whereby gender inequality is both a cause and consequence of food insecurity. For example, due to gender norms and roles and increasing male migration in hunger hotspot countries, food insecurity increases pressure and responsibility of acquiring food on women and girls (IPCC, 2023). This situation has several consequences including higher risk of gender-based violence while looking for food, increasing the time burden on women and subsequently limiting their participation in employment and public life, and maladaptive practices such as sex-for-food (IPCC, 2023; Barclay et al., 2016). At the same time, gender inequality influences how food is distributed during crisis, with a bias towards male household heads, and limits women's access to agricultural inputs that negatively impacts on food production, further driving food insecurity at household to national levels (FAO, 2023).

This relationship is further established in all six components of the food security (HLPE, 2023):



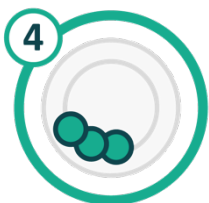
FOOD AVAILABILITY: There is a lack of recognition of women’s diverse roles, from food production to retail in food systems at household to global levels, contributing to women’s unequal access to the vital components required for food production with subsequent impacts on food availability (FAO, 2023; Forsythe, 2023; Jones et al., 2017; Plan, 2022; CARE, 2022; Ward, 2022; Bridge, 2014; Njuki et al., 2021; Daigle, 2022). While recognition of some of these roles are increasing in the humanitarian sector, it is not yet embedded in policy and practice. The rapid review indicates a gap in evidence regarding the role of gender in national-level food availability issues.



FOOD ACCESS: Women and girls have greater disadvantage in accessing food during food crises: they eat last and least, and are more likely to skip meals and more often compared to men (CARE, 2022; Plan, 2022; Blum et al., 2023). Male migration during crisis often increases food access for men and increases responsibility for household food provision among women (Kemei et al., 2023; Plan, 2022; Ward 2022; CARE, 2020; Bridge, 2014). Gender inequality in food access is reinforced and exacerbated when humanitarian agencies distribute food to male-heads of households with an assumption that food will be distributed equitably (IFRC, 2022; Oxfam 2016). The rapid review indicates a good level of evidence in this area, but lack of consolidation to inform acute food insecurity response.



FOOD UTILISATION: women’s (largely unpaid) roles in household food production and preparation significantly contribute to dietary and nutritional outcomes for their households, children and communities (Smith 2003 in Larson, 2019; Plan, 2022; Doka et al., 2014). However, women and girls can be restricted from protein-rich and other nutritious foods due to gender norms that regulate food allocation preferences to men and in some cases, boys, despite these foods being important at certain stages in the lifecycle such as pregnancy and menopause (Plan, 2022; Blum et al., 2023; Forsythe et al., 2015b, Haselow et al. 2022). The rapid review indicates a good level of evidence in this area; however, less in acute food security contexts and on how to engage men in improving food utilisation practices.



FOOD STABILITY: women and female headed households experience longer periods of hunger and are often responsible for managing food stability during these periods (Perez et al., 2015, Doka et al., 2014). Coping mechanisms can increase their risk of exploitation, and in severe circumstances, can result in practices such as sex-for-food, child labour, and reducing the number of meals and portion sizes (Jones et al., 2017; Al Zoubi, 2022; Ezeama et al., 2015). The rapid review indicates a gap in evidence regarding the role of gender in national-level food stability issues.



AGENCY: Women's general perceived low status, expectations regarding appropriate gender roles and the lack of recognition of the diversity of women's roles in relation to food result in entrenched barriers to women's decision-making regarding food, nature (land, water, trees etc.), income, credit, agricultural inputs etc. Lack of agency in turn exacerbates food availability (FAO, 2023). These barriers contribute to increased vulnerability to food security, including famine, food crisis and poverty ([Howe 2018:146](#), [Carter & Kelly, 2021](#)). Women who are food secure have greater agency and ability to participate in decision making ([World Bank, 2017](#)). The rapid review indicates a good amount of evidence in this area at the household and community levels, but not at national and global levels.



SUSTAINABILITY: gender roles in food production and preparation relate to different patterns of use of the environment depending on context (e.g., in rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa, women are often responsible for collecting firewood and water to prepare food, men often for herding large livestock) ([Forsythe et al., 2015](#); [CEPAL, 2021](#)). Despite this, sustainable livelihood interventions, such as training on managing degraded land, can be restricted to men ([Forsythe et al., 2015](#)). Environmental constraints and climate change in turn impact on the ability of women and girls to carry out their socially ascribed roles, such as the collection of food, water and firewood ([IPCC, 2023](#)), which are of vital importance in food insecure contexts. Inclusive initiatives can create income and food security gains, and improvements in environmental indicators, but tend to increase women's labour burden ([Call & Sellers, 2019](#); [Forsythe et al., 2015](#)). The rapid review indicates evidence in this area, however less in relation to acute food insecurity.

Food insecurity has a range of negative secondary impacts, such as poor physical and mental health outcomes for women and children, and increased risk of gender-based violence, including child marriage ([Plan, 2022](#); [Larson, 2019](#); [Logie et al., 2021](#)). The complexity and changing nature of humanitarian contexts make famine prevention and response a significant, but not unsurmountable, problem.

Meaningful inclusion of women in decision making has a positive impact on food security: women, in all their diversity, know their needs, interests and what works to help inform acute food insecurity and famine prevention and response (Lindley-Jones & Pattni, 2018; [Carter & Kelly, 2022](#)). It is also a key factor in increasing the potential for transformative outcomes by challenging structural inequalities and underlying gender norms at multiple scales that include and extend beyond food security.

However, women's inclusion and expertise is lacking in humanitarian contexts which risks ineffective and inappropriate acute food insecurity and famine response and planning. The risks are 1) not reaching significant populations, such as female headed households ([Barclay et al., 2016](#); [IFRC, 2022](#)); 2) increasing risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in the delivery of food assistance ([Rohwerder, 2022](#)); 3) delivering inappropriate responses/assistance – e.g. wrong type/quantity of food ([Lindvall et al., 2020](#)); 4) undermine existing capacity ([Lindvall et al., 2020](#); [Barclay et al., 2016](#); [Kevany & Huisinigh, 2013](#)), and 5) further contribute to the marginalisation of women and girls ([Barclay et al., 2016](#); [Oxfam, 2016](#)).

Evidence on *how* to meaningfully engage with women and support women’s leadership in acute food insecurity and famine prevention and response is limited. However, several lessons in can be drawn from existing literature:

- 1.** The importance of gender analysis (of which a range of tools are available) and flexible engagement strategies with women in diverse positions throughout the Humanitarian Programme cycle ([IASC, 2018](#)).
- 2.** The effectiveness of multi-sectoral interventions tackling multiple dimensions of gender inequality and food security, often under the umbrella of women’s empowerment programmes and can involve a suite of interventions involving cash transfers, social protection, women’s rights and skills training ([Jones et al., 2017](#); [Noble et al., 2020](#); [Gibbs et al., 2020](#)).
- 3.** Innovative interventions are connecting economic empowerment/livelihoods programmes with social norms programming involving households and communities, such as through engaging with local leaders, agricultural extension for example, to change harmful attitudes and behaviours ([Carter, 2021](#); [Crawford et al., 2020](#); [Aweke et. al., 2020](#); [Oxfam, 2016](#)).
- 4.** Working with women’s collectives to amplify voice(s) and action, including women’s leadership training, is shown to be effective means for increasing women’s ability to respond to multiple and intersecting needs of populations during humanitarian crisis ([Njeri & Daigle’s, 2022](#)). However, this mostly occurs at the front line and not change within humanitarian institutions ([Barclay et al., 2016](#); [Dietrich, 2022](#)).
- 5.** Several publications highlighted the need for meaningful engagement with women and women’s organisations in humanitarian institutional structures and operational processes (Lindvall et al., ([2020](#); [Botreaux & Cohenb, 2020](#))). This is because issues of **women’s agency is often addressed through working with women individually, without deeper critical examination of formal and informal institutions, and how they restrict women’s agency.** CARE’s Women Lead in Emergencies model provides an excellent example of an intervention aiming to change individual to institutional level processes in the humanitarian space, however, found institutional change a considerable challenge ([Dietrich, 2022](#)).

Recommendations for further research:

- a.** What works and where for addressing gender equality and food insecurity. Key evidence gaps include macro-level dynamics of food availability and food stability (trade, food policy), and sustainability, and ‘deep dives’ on specific gender and intersectional issues (e.g., women with disabilities) for acute food security prevention and response;
- b.** Effective pathways for women’s participation and leadership in acute food insecurity prevention and response decision making (particularly at the institutional level) institutional level), drawing on models from health, education, nutrition and WASH;

Programming recommendations:

- a.** Improve programme analysis, monitoring and learning tools and application of lessons. Examples include undertaking gender and feminist evaluations of programmes, and analysis of gender marker levels in Country Strategic Plans (e.g., WFP) triangulated with interviews;
- b.** Establish a community of practice to assist ongoing reflection and learning on applying a gender lens to acute food security response. The community of practice would provide long-term capacity strengthening between acute food insecurity, resilience strengthening and development policy and practice;
- c.** Co-design Country Strategic Plans, and key activities in the humanitarian programme cycle, with women's organisations and leaders;
- d.** Strengthen the capacity of women leaders drawing on lessons from civil society programmes in disaster risk preparedness and co-leadership with women's rights organisations;
- e.** Shared learning on best practice on GBV and food insecurity along the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
- f.** Integrate GBV prevention and response in acute food security and famine prevention and response, drawing on relevant key GBV in Emergency (GBViE) resources and guidance documents.
- g.** Build long-term perspectives in acute food insecurity and famine response through engagement with resilience strengthening and development initiatives.

Policy recommendations:

- a.** Facilitate strong commitment and funding towards gender transformative change in decision making bodies in acute food insecurity and famine contexts;
- b.** Enable leadership on a new transformative gender equality and food security agenda, with a focus on acute food insecurity and famine. This should include support to a cutting-edge piloting programme on gender transformative innovations and hotspot and inequality 'mapping' methodologies.
- c.** Advocate for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to recognise meaningful engagement with women, women's agency and leadership as a critical component in humanitarian action.

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Introduction

Acute food insecurity is increasing. The Global Report on Food Crises 2023 estimates that over a quarter of a billion people were acutely food-insecure and required urgent food assistance in 58 food-crisis countries/territories in 2022 ([FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises, 2023](#)). This increase is driven by complex and interrelated factors including conflict, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturn and a cost-of-living crisis ([Save the Children, 2022](#)). The global response to these crises has included a G7 commitment to improve global food security, building on the 2015 G7 Elmau Broad Food Security Commitment to 2030, the establishment of a High-Level Task Force on Preventing Famine and various United Nations initiatives.¹ The UK is committed to strengthening global food and nutrition security, and as part of the new International Development Strategy (May 2022) has committed to addressing the underlying drivers of humanitarian crises, including global food security and famine prevention. The International Development Committee (IDC)'s 2nd Report of Session 2022–23 commits an increase humanitarian funding for food assistance programmes.

The UK's International Strategy for Women and Girls acknowledges that **efforts to address underlying gender equalities and support women's economic empowerment is central to food security** ([FCDO 2023](#)). However, the UK government currently lacks a current and synthesised evidence base to support this. Moreover, an analysis of UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (FTS) data suggests that "gender-related" humanitarian funding, albeit growing in a context where humanitarian overall is falling, is failing to meet growing need ([Development Initiatives, 2022](#)).² This is particularly problematic given that a recent report by the [FAO \(2023\)](#) indicates that **women are more food insecure and more vulnerable to food insecurity than men in every region of the world – and the gender gap is widening**.

This query aims to provide an accessible review of the evidence to support efforts to strengthen gender considerations, women's opportunities and economic empowerment within the FCDO and wider UK government response to acute food insecurity and famine prevention. The rapid review is structured to provide a summary of evidence on the relationships between gender and food security (section 1); the importance of meaningful engagement with women in preventing and responding to acute food (section 2); and finally, recommendations on what the UK can do to leverage its development, humanitarian and diplomatic levers in programming and policy to promote positive outcomes for gender equality and food security (section 3).

¹ Global initiatives include: the G7 Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Compact; the G7/World Bank Global Alliance for Food Security; the Roadmap for Global Food Security; the International Financial Institutions' Action Plan to Address Food Insecurity; the UN Secretary-General's Global Crisis Response Group (GCRG) on Food, Energy and Finance; the Global Network Against Food Crises, and the World Bank's Famine Action Mechanism. Many of these are focused on tackling the longer-term issues related to food system strengthening, supply chains, and economic development. IRC argues that "what is missing is a robust safety net that kicks in, helps co-ordinate and focus international action before it's too late, when a country is headed towards the worst-case scenario of famine. Waiting for a famine declaration, or focusing on longer term food security, are not viable solutions".

² [Development Initiatives](#) undertook an analysis of "gender-relevant" international humanitarian assistance is based on a keyword search methodology applied to funding data reported to the UN FTS and consists of two major components: 1) Gender-specific funding: funding that is reported to support gender-relevant humanitarian programming, with a key focus on addressing gender-related needs and advancing gender equality. This includes all funding reported under the Global Protection Cluster Gender-based Violence Area of Responsibility and other financial flows that reference gender-specific goals in the flow description, such as 'women's empowerment' or 'sexual and reproductive health' and 2) Gender-mainstreamed funding: funding that references differing gender needs in programming, but where gender-related needs are not seen as the key focus.

Methodology

The rapid review collated and assessed grey and peer reviewed English-language literature (2013-2023) to answer the following questions:

1. What are the links between gender equality/women's economic empowerment and food insecurity, including responses to acute food insecurity?
2. Why is it important to meaningfully engage women in activities/efforts to prevent and respond to acute food insecurity and famine prevention, including for women's economic empowerment? What are the risks of not including women?
3. What are the key policy implications and recommendations for FCDO to utilize its programmatic and diplomatic footprint to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment within food insecurity prevention and response in famine risk contexts?

Key concepts

This review examines the evidence at the intersection of gender (in)equality and food (in)security, with an emphasis on acute food insecurity (refer to Glossary in Annex 1 for full definitions). Food insecurity involves multidimensional and interrelated processes, existing on a continuum, with starvation the most extreme experience ([Hendriks, 2015](#); [Carter & Kelly, 2021](#)).

Gender (in)equality is examined through an intersectional lens within the context of food security and focus on the transformative end of the spectrum to capture by the structural causes and symptoms of inequalities, according to the [Gender and Inclusion \(G&I\)](#) continuum (Prosperity Fund, 2020).³ This involves examining both the structural causes (underlying factors) and the symptoms of gender inequality and their multidirectional relationship with food insecurity. Where evidence allows, this review will focus on gender transformative change to capture structural causes and symptoms of inequalities.

Scope

The focus of the review is on acute food insecurity and at-risk famine contexts; however, given the overall dearth of related evidence and the focus of existing literature on the 'resilience building' end of humanitarian spectrum that journeys into the development sector, broader literature on food security is incorporated. However, these findings are drawn out to the acute food security context. The review is not a comprehensive or systematic review. It has focused searches on evidence from ten countries and one region (the Sahel) that are the Global Food Security Hub's priorities areas identified as "hunger hotspots": Afghanistan; Central African Republic; Democratic Republic of the Congo; Ethiopia; Nigeria; the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Chad); Somalia; South Sudan; Sudan; Syria; Yemen.

Methods

The identification of peer-reviewed and grey literature was conducted through Web of Science and Google Scholar with key search terms related to gender and food security in the timeframe 2013-2023. Several publications outside this timeframe were included to reference established gender theory (e.g., Kabeer, 1999) and humanitarian minimum standards (e.g., [Sphere, 2004](#)). Specific searches were then conducted for hunger hotspot countries. Several papers, particularly grey literature, was sourced through the researcher's networks and FCDO staff.

³ The PF Gender and Inclusion (G&I) Framework is based on Moser (2016). It highlights three different levels of ambition and types of entry points to support inclusive growth, gender equality and economic empowerment of women and other excluded groups that maps out a continuum for mainstreaming gender and inclusion. The framework starts with 1) minimum level of ambition addressing the basic needs of women and marginalised groups, progressing to 2) interventions that will build individual assets, capabilities, and opportunities, and finally 3) advances to the highest level of ambition focused on transformation.

Interviews were conducted with two FCDO staff with responsibility in hunger hotspot countries (Syria, MENA and Afghanistan), and with four academics/practitioners in the authors' own networks. These interviews helped to identify useful resources and provide insights into the review questions.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this review: 1) its limited scope due to the short timespan for the assignment, therefore only a limited the number of interviews could be conducted; 2) lack of evidence on acute food insecurity and famine contexts (therefore the review draws on more generalist literature); 3) the ambiguity in literature of food security concepts used (e.g., 'food insecurity' was referred to without indication of type or level), which is compounded by ambiguity in gender-related concepts (e.g., terms such as women's empowerment, decision making, and gender equality were used interchangeably without clear definition); 4) limited evidence using a gender and intersectional lens, particularly for Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and LGBTQI people, for example ([Barbelet & Wake, 2020](#)) and 5) limited evidence related to women's agency and leadership as relevant to acute food insecurity (section 2) was limited. Grey literature from humanitarian organisations provides more detail and thus helpful insights; however, the rapid review could not adequately represent the findings as a whole but provide illustrative evidence.

1. The relationships between gender and food insecurity

This section examines the relationships between gender and food security. Sub-section 1.1 provides an overview of global evidence on the gender food gap. Sub-section 1.2 presents the conceptual framework for the review and summarises the evidence in relation to the six components of food security. Sub-section 1.3 discusses the implications of the findings for the acute food security sector.

1.1. The problem of gender inequality and food insecurity

Women are more food insecure and more vulnerable to food insecurity than men in every region of the world, and gender gaps have widened since the COVID-19 pandemic ([FAO, 2023](#)). Moderate or severe food insecurity has increased from 1.7 to 4.3 percentage points from 2019 to 2021 for women – affecting 939 million women, particularly rural women, compared with 813 million men in the same age range ([FAO, 2023:13](#)) (Figure 1). Given the challenges in collecting data in these contexts, particularly among the most marginalised and vulnerable populations, the true number is likely to be higher⁴ ([CARE, 2022](#); [UNFPA and GBV AoR, 2022](#)). Gender inequality and food insecurity are further complicated and exacerbated by factors including conflict, climate change, poverty and financial crises ([IPCC, 2023](#); Carter & Kelly, [2021](#); [UN & WB, 2018: 116](#); [Bahgat et al., 2017: 185](#); [CARE, 2022](#)).

⁴ An example given during an interview for this review was that enumerators could not conduct face to face interviews to establish need in Northern Nigeria due to significant security risks. Phones were used instead, however given that many women in that context do not have access to a phone, they may be restricted in using a phone and/or communicating freely, this approach would have severely limited the needs and interests of women who were experiencing substantial risk.

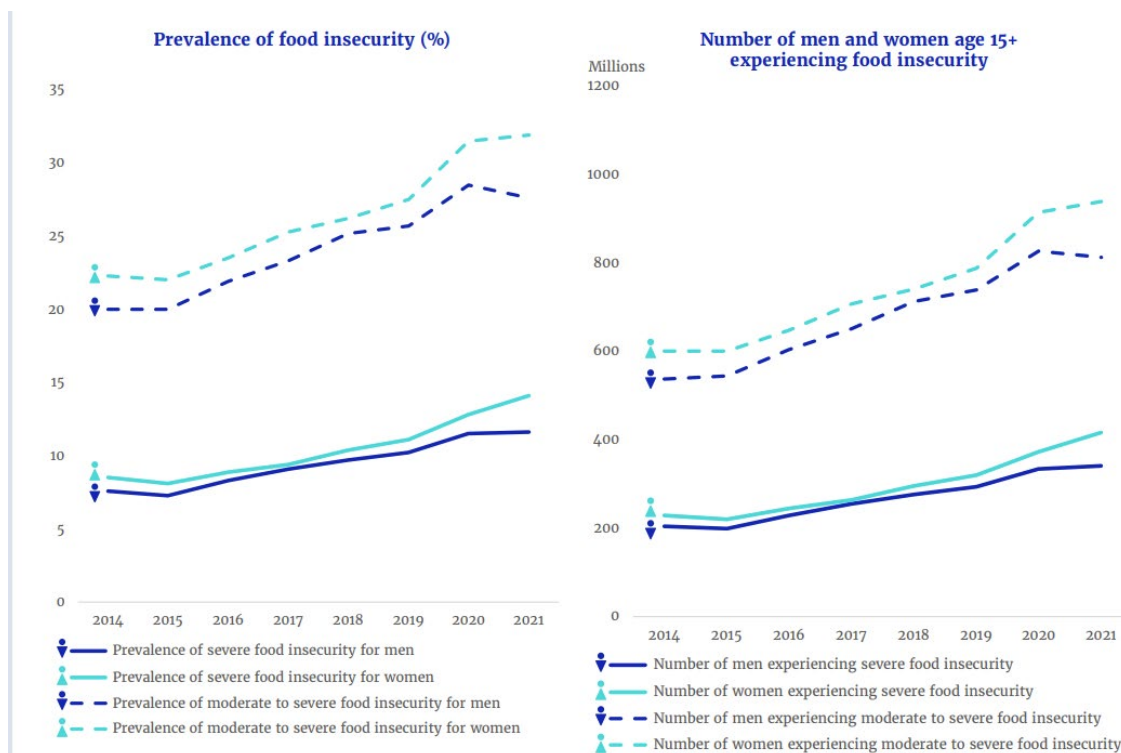


Figure 1 Gender gap in moderate or severe food insecurity 2014-2022 (FAO, 2023)

While there is limited intersectional research of food insecurity, existing evidence shows differences in vulnerability among women, including factors such as age, socio-economic status, (dis)ability, race, ethnicity, marital status and displacement status, for example (Barbelet & Wake, 2020; Carter & Kelly, 2021). Carter & Kelly's (2021) evidence review found, for example, that gender, ethnicity, age and displacement status influenced rates of malnutrition, morbidity and mortality, with young infants, elderly, displaced people and minority ethnic groups faring worse. Pakravan-Charvadeh et al.'s (2021) study with Afghan refugees in Iran found that older women fared much worse in food insecurity compared to other refugees. Gender and other intersectional factors combine in dynamic ways along the food security continuum and contribute to differential impacts that determine who is vulnerable and what ways are context and time specific (Howe, 2018:148; Devereux et al., 2017). Although context matters, there are common gender inequality and food security principles that can be applied to humanitarian programmes and policies.

There is a substantial evidence base in peer-reviewed and practice-based grey literature that evidences gender inequalities as a result of the food security gap (i.e. more women experience and are at risk of food insecurity compared with men), and the importance of gender in shaping experiences and coping strategies related to food insecurity. The literature also demonstrates how food insecurity creates contexts for gender inequality (e.g., in some contexts, food insecure households prevent girl's from attending school to perform agricultural or other labour). However, most literature is situated at an individual and household level, that are limited in its connection to broader structural issues, in addition to exploration of issues of how specific areas of food insecurity – such as food stability and availability are gendered.

Literature also reflects mainly the resilience end of the humanitarian spectrum, with limited analysis in acute food insecure contexts. The reason according to interviews is in part related to the difficulty in collecting data in these contexts (e.g., safety, political implications) and limited coverage of gender and intersectional factors in existing monitoring data. For example, key food security and famine early warning systems tend not to include data on individuals and social categories in the lead up to and during severe food insecurity and famines (Carter & Kelly, 2021). crises.

Furthermore, gender stereotypes of gender and social roles influence what data is collected.

Global datasets from also often tend to only reflect women’s reproductive roles (e.g., anaemia in women of childbearing age) and exclude data on children ([CARE, 2022](#); [Plan, 2022:28](#)). For example, [CARE's \(2022\)](#) review of the World Bank (WB) Gender Data Portal on food and women found that only sex-disaggregated food data is related to women’s roles in food preparation (i.e. the percentage of women who believe, or do not believe, that a husband is justified in beating his wife when she burns the food, and whether or not women are allowed to make decisions about what food to cook). Interviews also suggested that the culture within humanitarian organisations was sceptical of the relevance of a gender equality agenda in the humanitarian space given the urgent, lifesaving response that is necessary.

Interviews for this review found that **gender and social roles can vary considerably within contexts and often shift in times of acute food insecurity and protracted crisis**, which reaffirm the importance of collecting meaningful and accurate data. This is supported in the literature, for example, Daigle (2022:11) argues that there is often a “turn towards a more conservative and heteronormative notion of culture as a response to crises”. For example, in **North-West Syria**, a strongly patriarchal area of the country, women become de-facto household heads due to the conflict and male migration. This has shifted norms on women’s economic roles – depending on socio-economic status, cultural and religious beliefs; however, their mobility, decision making and broader recognition of their rights is lacking ([UNFPA and GBV AoR, 2022](#); [CARE, 2022](#); Yalim & Critelli, 2023). In contrast, in **North-East Syria**, women’s mobility and ability to work are traditionally much less restrictive historically. While national laws provide a basis of non-discrimination and equal inheritance of land for example, their realisation can differ between contexts.

1.2. Evidence on gender and intersectional differences in food insecurity

This rapid review draws on different concepts and conceptual frameworks. The review starts from the premise that gender and intersectionality characterise *food systems* - the complex networks of people and activities involved in food, from production to consumption. Social relationships, between people, and people with private sector companies, governments, technology, and with nature, embedded within food systems reflect power dynamics that determine the rights, privileges and restrictions that individuals and groups experience in relation to food production and consumption (Forsythe, 2023). For example, Kim et al., (2022) report the importance of social networks in providing food, cash, labour and shelter during Yemen’s protracted humanitarian crisis. Yemeni women and their social networks were critical factors in the capacity of their households to withstand numerous and concurrent shocks and played a role in supporting women to gain employment, facilitate reciprocal practices, and provide emotional support. In situations of acute food insecurity and humanitarian contexts, these relationships shape if and how people can cope and survive. Attention to these relationships and experiences of food insecurity has not been fully embedded in the food security sector, including in fundamental measures used ([Ward, 2022](#); [Plan 2022:3](#)).

The conceptual framework for the review combines two frameworks. First is the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) food security framework which outlines six concepts of food security, represented in the large blue outer circle in

Figure 3. These six dimensions of food security are reinforced in conceptual and legal understandings of the right to food and are defined in HLPE report ([2022](#)).

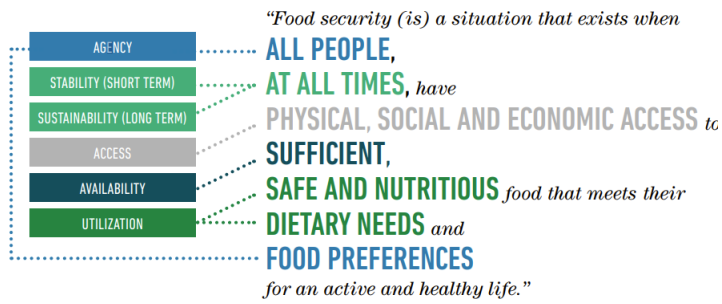


Figure 2 The six dimensions of food security in its current definition (HLPE report, 2022).

The second framework offers a gender and intersectional analysis, drawing on Moser (1993), and is applied to the six food security concepts. This includes: 1) gender and social norms; 2) gender and social roles – drawing on women’s ‘triple roles’ in ‘productive’, care and community spheres; 3) gendered access to nature, inputs and services; and 4) diverse women’s agency. This is represented in the orange quadrants in

Figure 3. Note the common element of agency between this framework with the HLPE – an important synergy for this review. Additional elements were added to emphasise differences in scale, governance and intersectionality, drawing on feminist political economic analysis to connect inequalities to structural issues.

It is important to note that the review could not identify literature in each domain of the conceptual framework, which indicate evidence gaps.

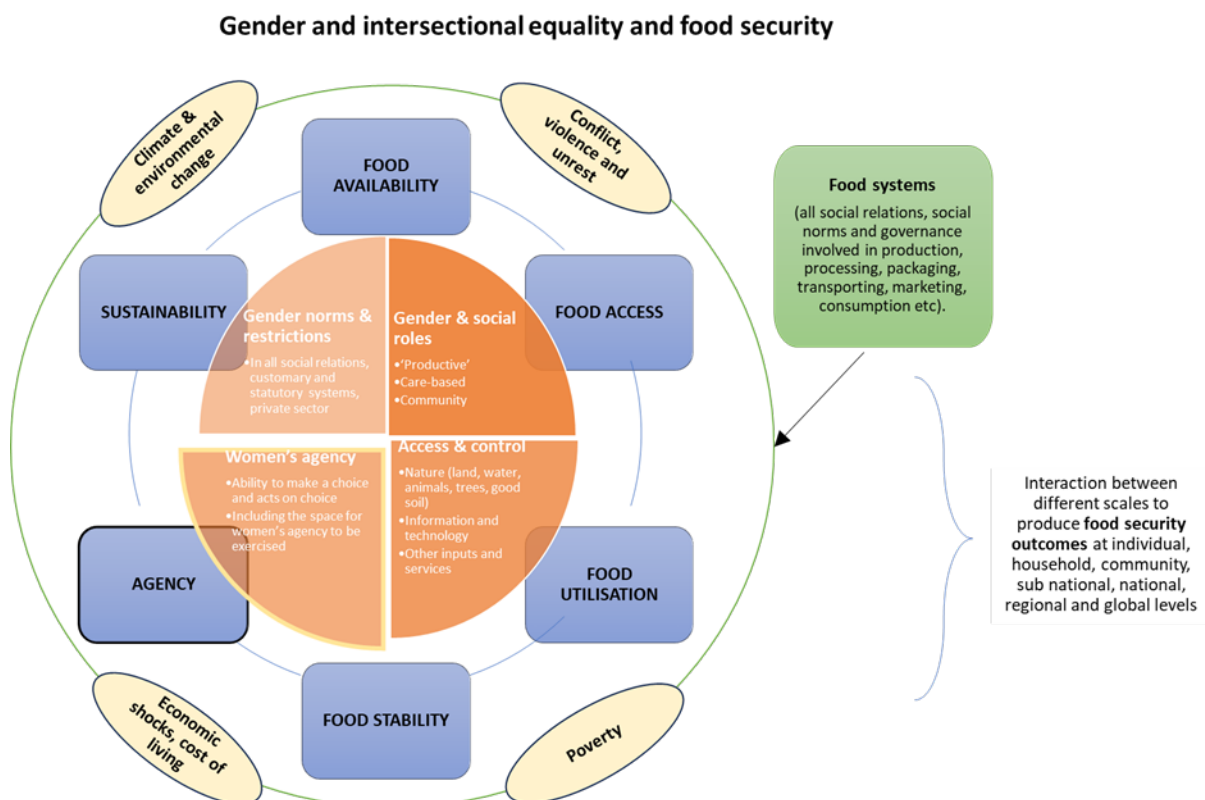


Figure 3 Conceptual framework, adapting the Moser framework and HLPE's definition of food security

The remainder of this section presents evidence organised around the six components of food insecurity (definitions provided in appendix), integrating the four dimensions of gender inequality (norms, roles, access and agency).

1.2.1 Food availability

Gender and social norms characterise governance structures and institutions ([Bridge, 2014](#)) which impact on food availability— particularly in terms of agricultural productivity (FAO et al., 2022; FAO, 2023). This is because norms and institutions fail to recognise women as farmers in their own right ([Jones et al., 2017](#); [Van de Velde, 2020](#)), exemplified by multiple barriers in access to resources required for income generation and food production including land, water, forest, inputs (fertilisers, seeds, livestock, technology, technology), and services (training, advisory and extension services, credit and financial markets) ([Jones et al., 2017](#); [Plan, 2022](#); [CARE, 2022](#); [Ward, 2022](#); [Bridge, 2014](#); [Njuki et al., 2021](#); [Daigle, 2022](#)). Women are mainly considered only in terms of unpaid care work related to food ([CARE, 2022](#)) and not in the contributions of women to the agricultural sector overall. However, women are major actors in food systems, particularly in food production, processing, trade and retail, at household to national levels and subsequently their efforts are vital for food security (FAO, 2023; Forsythe, 2023; [CARE, 2022](#); [Plan, 2022](#)). While recognition of these roles is increasing in humanitarian and development sectors, it is not yet embedded in policy and practice.

Although global statistics need to be interpreted with caution⁵, women's structural exclusion from land access and ownership in customary and state land systems is widely documented and is particularly acute in dryland contexts ([Forsythe et al., 2015](#); [Quan et al., 2021](#); [CARE, 2022](#); [Plan 2022](#)). Land that women can access is often smaller and lower quality ([FAO, 2023](#)). Even in farming systems whereby women and men farm separately, women's access to land is often smaller, lower quality, and women are expected to labour on both their plots and their partners' ([FAO, 2023](#); [Forsythe et al., 2016](#)). Tensions within communities around land and food security can grow with agricultural commercialisation, especially along age and gender lines (Ghana – [Mariwah et al., 2019](#); Southern Nigeria – [Forsythe et al., 2016](#)).

Aweke et al.,'s ([2020](#)) mixed-method study (n=400 households) of food security in Babile district, Ethiopia found that women's exclusion from large livestock ownership and agricultural extension due to patriarchal norms, resulted in female headed households having significantly poorer food access compared to male-headed households. Also, women experienced more months of food shortage (two months on average).

1.2.2 Food access

Women and girls experience disadvantage in accessing food during crisis: they eat last and least, and are more likely to skip meals and more often compared to men ([CARE, 2022](#)). Married adolescent girls, in particular, are vulnerable to the denial of food by husbands, in-laws or other wives ([Plan, 2022](#)). This is related to the perceived low status of women and girls, relative to men and boys, and due to lack of decision-making authority to distribute food equitably in the household.

However, gender roles and decision-making authority change during crisis. Evidence from **Niger, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Syria and Afghanistan** found that male migration to find work or absence

⁵ CARE (2022) cites evidence that worldwide women are said to own just 15% of the land even though they constitute at least 43% of the agricultural labour force. However, as Doss (2018) explains, country level statistics vary widely.

due to conflict, resulted in women becoming de facto heads of households. This resulted in increased responsibility of women and girls for decision making in food production and acquisition – in contexts of crisis where the challenges of food access are significant (Plan, 2022; interviews). This results in increased care work for women and girls, and in contexts where women’s mobility, employment and access to credit are restricted, further exacerbate challenges to obtain food (Ward, 2022; CARE, 2020; Bridge, 2014).

In contrast, men’s mobility gives them greater access to both food and work, as found in a mixed-method vulnerability assessment by Oxfam (2016) during the 2015 **Ethiopian** drought (n=179). A qualitative study with IDP children in **Ethiopia** found that men migrated to cities for work and women and children remained in IDP camps, where food access was severely limited. The separation of family members and support networks exacerbated food access (Kemei et al., 2023).

Women’s paid employment improves food access, allowing them the means to purchase food. For example, an analysis of secondary economic data and a household panel study (n= 461 households) in Senegal showed that households in which women were employed had 11.3% lower probability of food insecurity but men’s employment made no difference (Van den Broeck et al., 2018). Evidence from CARE (2022) finds that men’s roles did not shift to take up unpaid care work, as a response to women’s paid employment. Yalim & Critelli (2023)’s study with Syrian refugees provides further warning that women’s paid work may not always result in empowering, satisfying or safe experiences for women.

In contrast to the large body of evidence on women’s increased responsibilities for accessing food before, during and after crisis, there is also evidence in some contexts of men’s increased role in decision making about food access. For example, a study by CARE in Yemen found that the COVID-19 pandemic increased the likelihood of men acting as the sole decision maker for food purchases from 27% before the pandemic to 41% at the time of writing. At the same time, 26% of women respondents reported that they are the sole decision maker for purchasing food at the time of writing, compared to 39% prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (CARE, 2021).

Humanitarian food distribution also risks bias towards men, related to the assumption that men are the head of household and will distribute food equitably in their household. For example, food supplied to flood survivors in Northern Nigeria was distributed to men more often than women (IFRC, 2022). Oxfam’s (2016) gender and vulnerability assessment in **Ethiopia** found that polygamous households (84.4 percent of 179 households in Somali and Afar) had less access to food distributed by humanitarian assistance, as supplies were given based on a single household and left to the male head to distribute food. Not only does this risk limiting access to food for women and girls, but it undermines women’s decision-making role about food access.

1.2.3 Food utilisation

Food utilisation is highly gendered given that women’s roles in (unpaid) care labour, involving household food production and food preparation, and make significant contributions to dietary and nutritional outcomes for children (Smith 2003 in Larson, 2019; Plan, 2022). For example, an Oxfam study (Doka et al., 2014) on the lessons from the 2012 food crisis in the Sahel found that women’s involvement in supplying cereals and processing food enabled food diversification. This contributed to nutrition and the provision of more affordable food for rural households.

Gender and social norms can also restrict the types of food that women and girls can consume, which increases girls’ and women’s vulnerability to hunger and malnutrition. Restrictions on protein-rich and other nutritious foods for women and girls is more common, which are particularly important at certain stages in the lifecycle, such as during pregnancy and menopause. For example, in **South Sudan**, Haselow et al., (2022) found that women and young children did not consume adequate food, particularly protein and vegetables to meet their nutritional needs, due to inequitable intrahousehold food distribution. Protein-rich and other nutritious foods are often

prioritised for male household heads and in some contexts, male children ([Plan, 2022](#); [Blum et al., 2023](#); [Forsythe et al., 2015b](#)).

Furthermore, gender dynamics around food utilisation impact on household outcomes. [Godecke et al., 's \(2018\)](#) global study of hidden and chronic hunger found poor food utilization for women determined household nutritional outcomes, even after controlling for GDP. Moreover, [CARE \(2022\)](#) reported that in food insecure contexts, women's paid employment did not result in corresponding shifts in men's roles in care work. This resulted in poor diets of women and children.

In contrast, in Ghana, Malapit and Quisumbing (2015 in [Larson, 2019](#)) found that women's control over the use of credit is correlated with higher women's dietary diversity and girls' weight for height.

1.2.4 Food stability

There is illustrative evidence underscoring the importance of gender in food stability at a household level. Evidence on the role of gender in food stability during acute crisis is closely related to issues mentioned in food access (Section 1.2.2). For example, a mixed-method study found that in West Africa, female headed households were more food insecure compared to male-headed households, experiencing five or more hunger months than male-headed households ([Perez et al., 2015](#)). An Oxfam study ([Doka et al., 2014](#)) on lessons learned from the 2012 food crisis in the **Sahel**, finds that women were responsible for household food security during the hungry season, from their own income. Households in which women have greater participation in decision making regarding food are more resilient.

Coping mechanisms to ensure food stability women often take up informal work during food shortages that can increase their risk of exploitation, and in severe circumstances, resorting to practices such as sex-for-food (Jones et al., [2017](#)). Child labour and reducing the number of meals and portion sizes are strategies for food stability more likely used by female household heads in informal Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon, in addition to collecting left over crops in fields, processing condiments and making ovens to bake bread ([Al Zoubi, 2022](#)). Maternal buffering, reduction in the number of meals in a day and limiting portion sizes were also strategies of mothers during food shortages in Anambra State, Nigeria ([Ezeama et al., 2015](#))

The role of women in communities during crisis is mentioned as important for providing food access to vulnerable groups in times of crisis ([Lindley-Jones & Pattni, 2018](#); [Picchioni et al., 2021](#)) (this is discussed more in the next section). Women actively respond to protection risks (e.g. in the **DRC** women make markings on trees signal safety risks), collectively organise into informal groups (e.g. in **Syria**, women provide childcare for others within a block of flats that enable others to work or obtain food distributions), and are involved in women-led organisations that are involved in longer term work but respond to emerging crises ([Lindley-Jones & Pattni, 2018](#)).

1.2.5 Agency

While other components demonstrated how gender inequality influences food insecurity outcomes, the agency component illustrates how food insecurity increases gender equality. Jones et al., ([2017](#)) found that care work responsibilities – including the labour involved in sourcing and preparing food-- contribute to women's lack of time and low involvement in decision making. Coping mechanisms to poor food security can contribute to the further marginalisation of women and girls. Ward ([2022](#)) relates unequal food access to women's disproportionate representation in lower paying, insecure jobs and/or unpaid care work, with less autonomy over household decisions. Evidence on how lack of women's agency influences food insecurity is also well established. Women's low status, expected gender roles and failing to recognise the diversity of women's roles in food result in entrenched barriers to women's access and decision-making regarding food, nature (land, water, trees etc.,) income, credit, agricultural inputs etc. These barriers contribute to increased vulnerability to food security, including famine, food crisis and poverty ([Howe 2018:146](#), [Carter & Kelly, 2021](#)).

1.2.6 Sustainability

There is scant evidence on how gender inequality directly influences sustainable food security. However, there is relevant learning from existing literature. For example, gender roles in relation to food production and preparation practices relate to different patterns of use of the environment, having direct environmental consequences (CEPAL, 2021). Sustainable livelihood interventions, which have a long history in development practice, have tended to exclude women. Initiatives that are inclusive to women have documented income and food security gains as well as improvements in environmental indicators in the short-term. However, these initiatives have increased women's labour burden without corresponding gains in income (Call & Sellers, 2019). In contrast, a qualitative study in Kenya found that when women are engaged with organisations and have access to government support, women can facilitate transformative and sustainable responses to climate change (Liru & Heinecken (2021)).

Also, the introduction of new technology for sustainable agriculture, such as irrigation, can bias towards men. For example, in Mali, the introduction of irrigation accessible only to men allowed them to increase the value of their total production and marketed surplus and to partially offset the negative impacts of climatic shocks. Similarly, farm assets such as motorized tillers increased men's agricultural production; women were excluded from accessing these assets (Dillion & Gill, n.d.).

1.2.7. Secondary impacts

Vulnerability to food insecurity, of which women are more likely to experience, has a spectrum of secondary negative impacts.

Impacts on survival, wellbeing and development of women and children

Women's low status results in their limited agency to advocate for **food access** for themselves and their children, contributing to poor health and nutrition outcomes (Plan, 2022).

- There is considerable public health literature that demonstrates women's higher vulnerability in famine and food crisis, related to their low status and gender roles as providers for household food provision, and how this contributes to poor maternal and child health outcomes. This exacerbates trends of poor short- and long-term child nutrition outcomes, particularly among poor households, throughout sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Smith, 2003 in Larson, 2019).
- Plan's (2022:40) review of evidence cited how malnutrition among adolescent girls and pregnant and breastfeeding women contributes to miscarriage, maternal mortality, stillbirth, new-born deaths, low birth weight and child stunting, leading to an intergenerational cycle of malnutrition. WHO (2020) estimates that **maternal under-nutrition contributes to an estimated 2.4 million neonatal deaths a year**. The low status of women and girls result in shorter time female infants are breastfed on average and the receipt of smaller quantities and less nutritious food compared with boys (Plan, 2022:40). The lack of access to nutritious food among prenatal/lactating women and for children during early childhood has significant impacts on brain development, which undermines educational attainment, health, and economic outcomes (Plan, 2022).
- Lindvall et al., (2020) describes a lack of understanding of the health needs of IDPs in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia, particularly with reference to the interrelated issues of malnutrition, GBV and mental health, and that needs assessment and essential health services are lacking.
- Logie et al., (2021) cites evidence linking food insecurity to anxiety and depression among displaced people in Uganda, and Kemei et al., (2023) among IDPs in **Ethiopia**, and Zahidi et al., (2022) in Kabul, Afghanistan, among women of reproduced age.

Girls' education

[Plan \(2022\)](#) found that girls' education is de-prioritised in contexts of high food insecurity as children's support is needed for domestic and income-related work. Early marriage for girls is often used to cope with stresses and shocks; families may marry their daughters in an attempt to lessen the burden on their constrained food allocations ([Girls not brides, n.d.](#)). The number of girls affected by early and forced marriages related to food insecurity is significant. For example, a UN led Humanitarian Response Plan for **South Sudan** reports that, linked to food insecurity, 4 million girls were affected by early or forced marriage in 2022, an increase from 2.7 million in 2021 ([Plan^b, 2022](#)). The practice can also perpetuate the cycle of food insecurity and malnutrition as girls who marry early are more likely to experience anaemia and malnutrition, and children born to adolescent mothers are more likely to have low birth weight, suffer from poor nutritional status, and experience stunting ([Girls not brides, n.d.](#)).

Gender based violence

The factors that cause food insecurity are the same factors that shape GBV risk, according to Ward ([2022](#)): 1) unequal access to and ownership of assets, including land rights and productive resources; 2) disproportionate representation in lower-paying, insecure jobs, with less autonomy over household decisions, or no income; and 3) discriminatory gender norms that restrict women's freedom of movement and assign them with unpaid caring responsibilities.

GBV is a driver of food insecurity when women have less power and resources. For example, when women eat less because they fear retaliation from their male partners or are deprived of food by male partners or family members. Food insecurity can also increase women and girls' risk of violence. Research conducted by Plan (2022:3), in 8 countries, including **Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan**, found that GBV risks escalate among girls and women in their attempts to secure food and earn income often due to travel. A CARE report (2022b) demonstrated that in food insecure contexts, limited coping mechanisms impact women and girls disproportionately, whereby increased stress due to food insecurity contributes to IPV. In other situations, women are forced into transactional sex as a coping mechanism for hunger, increasing their risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

A Randomised Control Trial (RCT) in **Afghanistan** found a link between violence against women and food insecurity. The study found that out of 932 of the women interviewed, 14% of women experienced mother-in law physical violence and 23% of women experienced physical spousal violence in the previous 12 months (7% of women experienced combined). Physical violence was associated with food insecurity and having to borrow for food, being in a polygamous marriage, in addition to living with their mother-in-law and province of residence. Rates of violence were less among women with their own income ([Jewkes et al., 2019](#)). The same factors were found to influence women's experience of intimate partner violence (IPV) from husbands in Tajikistan (Erich, [2015](#)). Another RCT in Afghanistan (n= 1461) found that both food insecurity and women's childhood trauma increased the likelihood of poor mental health among women and the use of corporal punishment against their children ([Ndungu et al., 2021](#)).

Logie et al., ([2020](#)) found in Kampala, Uganda, urban refugee adolescent girls and young women had 7-fold higher odds of experiencing violence when food insecure. Poverty, food insecurity and unemployment produced stress and increased SGBV. Economic insecurities and the limited agency of women over their relationships and limited financial independence exacerbated inequitable gender norms and led to increases in early marriage and transactional sex.

[Sommer et al., 2017](#) undertook a qualitative study on safety and risk within community spaces among parent/caregivers and adolescent girls in South Kivu, **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, and found fear of SGBV within IDP environments. The authors found that girl's access to support was

constrained due to the domination of public space by men and boys. Perpetration was not only conducted by men and boys living in the IDP camp and by humanitarian staff.

2. Engaging women in the prevention and response to acute food insecurity and famine prevention

This section explores how meaningful engagement with women and women's leadership are fundamental pathways to addressing the interrelated drivers of gender inequality and food insecurity, including in acute food insecurity and humanitarian contexts. Section 2.1 presents key literature on meaningful engagement and women's leadership: what it means, what it involves and why it is important for addressing the drivers of gender inequality and food insecurity described in Section 1. Section 2.2 draws out the implications from the evidence for acute food insecurity and famine prevention.

2.1 The importance of meaningful and intersectional engagement with women and diverse women's leadership

Women's **meaningful participation and leadership is a human right**, which is outlined in global human rights commitments and the minimum standard in humanitarian food and nutrition aid and action ([Sphere, 2004: 108-109](#)), however, it is **also an essential aspect in strengthening food security outcomes**.

The FAO's (2020) review of gender transformative approaches found that women's agency within the household and leaderships in groups were a key component of approaches to improve food and nutrition security. Women's participation in household decision making, particularly decisions on food purchases, is also shown to increase food access ([Harris-Fry et al., 2020](#); [Jones et al., 2017](#); Forsythe et al., [2016](#) – Nigeria). A quantitative study in Cote d'Ivoire found that an increase in income from female-controlled crops by 10% corresponded to an increase in household food purchases by 4%, and meat purchases by 5%, whereas a similar increase in income among men was associated with a 0.3% decline in food purchases and no rise in meat consumption (Duflo & Udry, 2004 in [Harris-Fry et al., 2020](#)).

Positive outcomes are also found beyond the household to the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions. Carter & Kelly's ([2021: 25](#)) review of measures supporting women's participation and leadership in famine and food crisis prevention and response found: "when women are involved in prevention and crisis response, it leads to better humanitarian outcomes", including "improved food access and food security, particularly among women and children" ([Lafrenière et al., 2019: 187](#); [Barclay et al., 2016: 11](#) citing findings from UN Women, 2015:33). [Barclay et al., \(2016\)](#)'s report found that women played greater roles early warning and evaluation processes prior to humanitarian crisis, such as floods and droughts, and undertook rapid needs assessments. Their effectiveness was attributed to participation in training and committees prior to the disaster.

Furthermore, a [2022 report by UN-Women](#) shows that countries with higher numbers of women leaders and active participation by feminist organizations in democratic decision-making are more effective in responding to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The land portal ([2022](#)) article from

Chad shows the effectiveness women’s social movements with land reform, which is an important factor in food security ([World Bank, 2014](#)).

Women’s participation and leadership is effective in strengthening food security outcomes, including the policy environment around food security. There is strong evidence that women understand and respond to the specific needs, interests, priorities and expertise of women and girls and other vulnerable groups (e.g. [Kemei et al., 2023 in Ethiopia](#); [Mariwah et al., 2019](#) in Ghana; Lindley-Jones & Pattni, 2018). Women have unique insights in what works and knowledge of crucial pathways for humanitarian management strategies in famine prevention and response (Sherwood and Pearce, 2016 in [Rohwerder, 2017: 13](#)). Therefore meaningful engagement is a vital method to rapidly *understand* interests, priorities and needs in a dynamic environment – which links back to the minimum standard guidance in Food Security, Nutrition and Food Aid ([Sphere, 2004: 108-109](#)).

Kemei et al.,’s ([2023](#)) study of IDPs in **Ethiopia** found that due to the effectiveness of women’s organisations in outreach, some organisations are tasking women to deliver humanitarian assistance received in the IDP camps, including food aid. The authors found, however, that there was a need to build confidence amongst IDPs in governmental efforts. Additionally it is important that responsibility and workloads do not shift onto already stretched women’s organisations ([UN-Women, 2022](#)).

Limited evidence supports that women’s participation and leadership as an essential part of gender transformative outcomes in humanitarian settings, going beyond food security. Women’s leadership can enable institutional change to address the systemic barriers to women’s empowerment at multiple scales, including gender norms, and to be present in spaces where they are excluded ([Moser, 1993](#); [UN Women, 2014](#)). It offers opportunity to strengthen their economic opportunities and vice-versa, generating a “self-reinforcing cycle of inclusion” ([World Bank, 2017](#)). [Barclay et al., \(2016\)](#) report impact of women’s leadership in humanitarian response – that it “fosters a sense of self-confidence and empowerment which can help transform gender power relations over the longer term and address the barriers that have traditionally excluded women from decision-making and leadership”.

Despite the importance of meaningful engagement with women and women’s leadership, it is often not recognised and/or acted on in the food security and broader humanitarian sectors. In the humanitarian sector more broadly, Daigle ([2022](#)) reports a lack of a recognition of norms that underpin inclusive leadership and practices. Women’s expertise “remains largely untapped in humanitarian crises and they often lack funding and organisational capacity” (Sherwood and Pearce, 2016 in [Rohwerder, 2017: 13](#)). Women’s leadership roles as “early responders and promoters of community resilience are still not fully acknowledged or utilised”, and there is chronic underfunding of gender equality programming ([Lafrenière et al., 2019:188](#)). Representation and leadership of women in minority social groups, such as women with disabilities, is more constrained as they are likely excluded from both the humanitarian and civil society movements (Sherwood and Pearce, in [Rohwerder, 2017](#)).

Global food security governance has, and continues to today, exclude the voices of the food insecure, particularly women ([Botreaux and Cohen 2020](#)). This is compounded by the lack of women’s representation in food system governance and humanitarian sectors ([Patel et al., 2020](#); [Global Food 50/50](#)). In terms of programmes, agricultural interventions have tended to focus on “‘market-ready’ farmers, who usually are male” (Oxfam, 2019). While there has been a proliferation of women’s empowerment programmes that aim to address food insecurity, there is still a lack of awareness of the importance of women’s leadership and agency beyond household and community levels ([Njuki et al., 2023](#)).

Many failures in food security programmes and policies are related to an assumption that the needs and interests of large groups of people are homogeneous ([IASC, 2022](#)). Not meaningfully engaging with women, or supporting the leadership of women, in acute food security response will risk **ineffective support and reinforce inequalities that contribute to poor outcomes, specifically:**

- Not being able to reach parts of the population, particularly the most vulnerable e.g., female headed houses (Oxfam, 2016 in Ethiopia). This is related to the specific social networks that take place along gender lines, and other factors of social difference ([Barclay et al., 2016](#)) and the often flawed assumption that men (particularly male heads of households) will provide information relevant for reaching women and meeting women's needs ([IFRC, 2022](#)).
- Increasing risks of sexual exploitation and abuse in delivery of food assistance ([Rohwerder, 2022](#)). In Rohwerder's (2022) cited research that women and girls face heightened risk of exposure to different forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, due to 1) the lack of food; 2) the search for food; and 3) access to food aid (including risks posed by aid workers and others involved in food assistance).
- Delivering inappropriate responses/assistance - e.g. wrong type/quantity of food ([Lindvall et al., 2020](#)). For example, an Oxfam Interagency gender analysis report of the Ethiopian Drought Response (2016) found that humanitarian food delivered to families was not appropriate for infants and children. Grains were provided, and without a means to mill the grains, infants and children were not able to digest the food. Furthermore, in some areas of the country, cultural restrictions prevent women from eating certain food types, such as food prepared from an animal's tongue, brisket, head or hump. Discussions with women regarding their local food system may have prevented this issue.
- Increase women's marginalisation ([Oxfam, 2019](#); Barclay et al., 2016). Programmes can risk using assumptions and stereotypes to guide programming and use gender-bias channels for information and communication that reinforce patriarchal norms. For example, not working with women to decide how best their engagement with drought-response planning could take place in Ethiopia, is likely a factor of why women's groups were non-functional ([Barclay et al., 2016](#)). The lack of engagement with women can also undermine women's existing capacities and knowledge, including women's existing decision making power in customary structures ([Lindvall et al., 2020](#); [Barclay et al., 2016](#); [Kevany & Huisinigh, 2013](#)).

2.2 What does meaningful engagement with women and women's leadership mean, and what does it involve?

Drawing on lessons from Nancy Fraser (2008), there are three fundamental components to meaningful engagement with women, and women's leadership, with acute food insecurity response from the household to the policy level. First, the need to **recognise** women's diverse lived experiences, interests, needs, priorities and expertise in acute food security prevention and response – and their impact on saving lives, particularly children. Second, the need to **represent** women by women to reflect these experiences, interests, needs, priorities and expertise at multiple levels in the development/humanitarian nexus. Third, is the need to **redistribute** resources towards the needs, interests and priorities of diverse groups of women, including resources from food aid and agricultural inputs, to ensured budgets and monitoring towards gender equality objectives at institutional levels.

Fraser (2008) and others (e.g., [Moser, 1993](#)) underscore the **importance of scale** (household to global levels) **and structural change** for gender transformation. There are individual initiatives at different scales and focus, as described in the next section, but in-depth analysis of what it means for the humanitarian sector was not found in this review.

As a result, it's important to think of pathways for the dual goals of gender equality and food security within humanitarian action in a more systematic way: from the delivery of food aid at the household level, to the multi-sector initial rapid assessment (MIRA) and Humanitarian Response Plans at Cluster

levels. It also requires working with women from an **intersectional perspective** across socio-political landscapes: recognising women as leaders, as members/leaders of women-led groups, women-led Departments of Peace Operations, female aid workers, female researchers etc. These determine how individuals and collectives are positioned within power relations in different contexts, resulting in different levels of privilege and marginalisation.

Furthermore, women have limited access to negotiation processes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, which often take place **through informal spaces and networks** ([Lindley-Jones et al., 2018](#)). Therefore women's participation and influence must be supported in the most crucial foundational decision-making moments (e.g. national food security needs assessments, action plans and monitoring; humanitarian response plans and monitoring), in addition to their participation and influence in day-to-day formal and informal political life ([OECD, 2021](#)).

2.3 Lessons from evidence for prevention and response

This sub-section will summarise how women's decision making and leadership have been supported at different scales in acute food security interventions.

Humanitarian Programme cycle (HPC)

Meaningful engagement with women and women's leadership is relevant throughout the cycle of humanitarian prevention and response to acute food insecurity crisis, from needs assessment to monitoring and evaluation ([IASC, 2018:29](#)). While an important end in itself, it also improves cost-effectiveness, targeting, appropriateness of delivery, and the anticipation of negative impacts such as corruption ([UN Women, 2014](#)).

The needs assessment process and monitoring and evaluation of support are fundamental components for strategy design in sudden onset emergencies and protracted crisis. There are a range of gender analysis tools available to support this process and use in humanitarian emergencies improves inclusive humanitarian response ([IASC, 2018](#); [Huxtable & Gillingham, 2020](#)). However, in practice, engagement with women is often tokenistic and lack an intersectional lens ([Carter, 2021](#); [Carter & Kelly, 2021](#); [UN Women, 2014](#); [Patel et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, in many contexts, such as in **Afghanistan** and Northern **Nigeria**, male enumerators conducting needs assessment and monitoring cannot speak to women. Data collected by mobile phones will also exclude as many women do not have access to mobile phones. Delivering support to and with women in these patriarchal contexts may be viewed as inappropriate ([IFRC, 2022](#)).

However, interviews indicated that using more meaningful and flexible engagement strategies with different members of the community during the needs assessments and monitoring is important to ensure effective delivery, and can be facilitated through a range of methods (storytelling, walks with individuals or group discussions), a focus on speaking with older women, who may be less restricted in speaking to people outside their community, and matching gender and age characteristics of enumerators/field workers for example. Key Informant Interviews with a wide range of women will help humanitarian actors to understand the needs and interests of women, children and the community at large, including the appropriateness delivery mechanisms ([IASC 2018: 34-37](#)). For example, in contexts where women's mobility is restricted due to disability and/social norms in traveling to the market, cash transfers for food purchases will have limited effectiveness, and in that case a food bundle would work. In other cases, access to cash would offer more choice over the food most appropriate for that household.

Supporting women's agency in households and communities in multi-sectoral resilience programming

Cash transfers are often used as a mechanism to address food insecurity in particular contexts of acute food insecurity; however, there is limited evidence and mixed findings on its potential for women's empowerment in humanitarian settings (Carter, 2021:3-4). Cash or in-kind transfers remain too small and/or irregular, and often do not sufficiently recognise gender norms that limit women's access to productive inputs and resources, resulting in gender-unaware programmes that too often benefit men only (Jones et al., 2017). This likely reflects the difficulty in addressing household power relations to support women's decision making in humanitarian response dependent on these modalities.

Evidence from programmes that use multi-sectoral or component interventions at addressing food insecurity in addition to improving women's agency in household decision making are still limited to the resilience end of the humanitarian spectrum as opposed to acute food insecurity (CARE, 2022; Carter & Kelly, 2021:28; Aladuwaka & Momsen, 2010; Ward, 2022). According to an interview with an NGO executive in northern Nigeria, grassroots initiatives have been responding to the dual needs of women's agency and food security issues. This has been done through including food security and agripreneur components in their women's leadership programme under the Basileia Vulnerable Persons Rights Initiative – BVPRI, for example. These are often under the umbrella of women's economic empowerment interventions and aim to support women and households in managing shocks and stresses and prevent food insecurity. Jones et al., (2017)'s review of social protection in the agriculture sector found increasing focus on women's economic empowerment – with interventions focused on increasing income, access to saving and credit combined with support to increase women's role in financial decision making. Interventions have led to benefits in family nutrition, school enrolment, uptake of maternal and child health services, and reducing the need for poor households to resort to adverse risk-coping strategies such as distress sales of assets and forced migration.

Although not specific to addressing food insecurity but having indirect effects, WfWI's women's social and economic empowerment programme was found by RCTs and qualitative research in the DRC and Afghanistan to lead to positive results in terms of women's agency and food security. A 'bundled approach' aims to address women's economic stability, health and wellbeing, family and community participation and decision making, and social networks through activities such as financial income-generating activities and training; ways to improve health and wellbeing; women's rights, decision making and negotiation, civic action and advocacy; vocational skills; a monthly cash stipend (US \$10), formal and informal savings vehicles, and referrals to health, legal, and financial services; and connections to other women.

The RCT in DRC (n=1,793 at endline) found that the programme increased women's savings, assets and access to credit; worth and net earnings, and improve women's health, participation in household in decision-making, and *household diet diversity* (Noble et al., 2020). Gibbs et al., (2020) RCT in Afghanistan (n=1,210 women at endline) found that the intervention improved livelihoods, created more gender-equitable relationships as there were some improvements to women's decision making and gender-equitable attitudes, and increased women's mobility. The authors surmise that these benefits were related to improvements to *food security* benefits among households who were *moderately food insecure compared with those with severe food insecurity*. However, the intervention had limited impact on IPV and depression. While there were improvements in women's decision-making power within the household, "incremental advances may not amount to a tangible increase in women's power, especially for young women".

However, the focus of these programmes on women-focused empowerment and food security can distract from the root cause of inequalities, such as gender and social norms. For this reason, approaches that address multiple scales, such as individual-household- community and national level policy may be more effective (Daigle, 2022). As found in the Gibbs et al., (2020) in a mixed method RCT of a women's socio-economic empowerment programme in Afghanistan, working individually

with women may not contribute to substantial change in restrictive contexts given limitations in renegotiating power in the household or the decision to implement a new livelihood strategy. As such, the authors underscore the importance is working with whole households.

Community-focused programming on changing attitudes, behaviours and social norms in multi-sectoral interventions in resilience programming

It is increasingly recognised that to address gender inequality and food insecurity requires a programme shift of focus from the capacity of women to take individual actions in isolation, to gender-transformative approaches that “explore underlying causes of inequality and build consciousness, social capital and solidarity between women and men” (CARE-USA, 2020:7 in [Carter & Kelly, 2021:28](#)).

Innovative intervention models are connecting economic empowerment/livelihoods programmes with social norms programming ([Carter, 2021](#)). Addressing restrictive gender norms is a critical component of this work. This has been explored in What Works evaluations that focus on preventing violence against women and girls through community engagement, targeting attitudes, behaviours and social norms change show promise; however, few evaluations have been completed and none during more acute phases of emergencies ([Crawford et al., 2020](#)).

There are promising experiences of inclusion in community-based services, such as supporting gender-based violence service providers to include people with disabilities, and women with disabilities and caregivers in village savings and loans groups, in conflict-affected communities (Pearce, 2015). Learnings from these approaches would benefit the humanitarian sector.

In **Ethiopia**, a study on food security prevalence among female and male headed households in Babile district found norm change to be an important area to improve food security for female headed households, involving religious leaders, clan leaders, agricultural development agents, health extension workers and Women’s Affairs Officials ([Aweke et al., 2020](#)). However, the authors stopped short of mentioning the importance of women’s involvement in these conversations. A gender needs assessment conducted by Oxfam ([2016](#)) in **Ethiopia** found the importance of local leaders in addressing violence against women.

Working with women’s collectives to amplify voice(s) and action

In the context of acute food insecurity prevention and response, women’s organisations have the necessary outreach and information to facilitate multi-directional communication channels and enabling humanitarian organisations to respond to need. In particular, when access to different areas of a country become limited, relationships with these organisations are key sources of information, their reach and responsiveness to affected populations and trusted community relationships are vital for relief and recovery ([Lindley-Jones et al., 2018](#); [Costa, 2021](#)).

According to the experience of an interviewee women’s organisations can lack specific skills required in acute food insecurity prevention and response (e.g., understanding of the type of data required) as they are mainly advocacy-focused organisations. To address these and other capacity related issues, some organisations such as ActionAid, have developed capacity strengthening programmes for women leaders in emergency response ([Barclay et al., 2016](#)).

Women’s collective action provides means for greater bargaining and negotiation power aligned with diverse needs and interests. In all fragile contexts there are women activists working at multiple levels to promote women’s rights, and donors, governments and practitioners have an important role in supporting their agendas through meaningful engagement ([OECD, 2021](#)). Representation and power dynamics within collectives is important.

Njeri & Daigle's (2022) qualitative study with 18 women leaders involved in the humanitarian response during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya and **South Sudan** shows that Women's Rights Organisations have proven important for people facing multiple and intersecting exclusions – impoverished women and girls, women with disabilities, displaced women, and people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics. National and sub-national WROs often remain operational when international actors are focused to withdraw. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the study found that scaling up and diversifying their services to meet increasingly complex needs were significant challenges that were not met with additional funding or capacity, and at increasing risk to their own health and security. They also translated and disseminated public health information to ensure accessibility across languages, platforms and disabilities, and combatted stigma against people with Covid-19 in their communities.

However, Anderson and Wozniak (2023) show that direct funds reaching local and national organisations reported to the Financial Tracking Service of the OCHA declined during the pandemic from 4.9% of total gender funding in 2018 to 2.9% in 2020. A similar report found WRO's experienced significant financial and organisational strain exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly due to the withdraw of many international actors (Njeri & Daigle, 2022). IRC's (2023) review of humanitarian funding for WRO's in Afghanistan, DRC, and Ukraine, found "pervasive systemic barriers" that prevent access humanitarian funding, and result in WROs/WLOs receiving 3.5% of the total some of funds allocated to Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) in 2021.

In Barclay et al.,'s (2016) case study of **Ethiopia**, women's groups were "a key enabling factor for women's leadership in humanitarian action" in response to severe drought and mass water and food shortages. Women's savings and credit cooperatives were found to provide loans to non-cooperative members who were affected and most vulnerable to the drought" (Barclay et al., 2016: 27). However, the research found that women perceived their leadership to be hindered by lack of education, illiteracy and significant unpaid workloads, as well as exclusion from leadership positions in local disaster preparedness committees (Barclay et al., 2016).

Institutional, policy and process change within humanitarian organisations

Several publications highlighted the need for meaningful engagement with women and women's organisations in humanitarian institutional structures and operational processes. Lindvall et al., (2020) stated that the voices of communities – particularly women - are seldom heard in national and regional level discussions in humanitarian work and their in-depth knowledge of local conditions is not considered, which was a point reiterated by Botreaux & Cohenb (2020) in relation to global food security governance specifically. This is further demonstrated by CARE's (2022c) hunger response policy review found limited policy engagement with gender. They argue that recognition of the challenges women and girls face is required in all food security analysis and response plans, that investment is needed for gender analysis and data collection to inform response, and targeted interventions need development for gender equality in holistic food security programs, GBV service provision, multi-sectoral response, targeted assistance, and risk assessment for food security initiatives.

The shifting global geopolitical landscape of multi-sector collaboration to address food security, such as the 2022 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, however, offers hope. As it has, for example, recognised that in their integrated responses food security (point 43), gender equality and the participation of women and girls in decision-making, implementation and leadership will need to be strengthened (point 27) (GPDRD, 2022).

CARE's Women Lead in Emergencies (Women Lead) model provides a concrete and highly innovative example of potential approaches for meaningful engagement with women and women's leadership in emergency preparedness, response and recovery. The approach incorporates a five-step method

for engagement, dedicated budget for women's groups, and the opening of spaces for women to participate in decision making in humanitarian and community leaders through CARE's position. The approach has been piloted in 15 locations (including hunger hotspot countries Niger and Mali) since 2018, and in 2020 alone the programme worked with 804 women's groups. An evaluation ([Dietrich, 2022](#)) found the programme highly successful particularly at individual and group level and effectively mobilised affected women to take collective action. However, extent of women's influence in humanitarian decision making was found to be limited by the evaluation, which is an expected result for higher level impact. This was explained as due to the limited opportunities and spaces to influence, women's groups focus was often how they could meet their own needs and not humanitarian actors, and the need for greater efforts in institutionalising participation. This indicates that more focus is required on systems and institutions for meaningful change.

Carter ([2021](#)) and [Carter & Kelly \(2021\)](#) emphasise improved decision making processes within humanitarian organisations and coordination efforts for more effective partnerships with local organisations to reach excluded groups. Palmer et al., (2019) in Carter ([2021](#)) suggest the use of task forces embedded in existing humanitarian structures set up prior to crisis to include hard-to-reach groups in humanitarian response. Carter & Kelly's ([2021](#)) review also highlighted the need to address perverse attitudes and behaviour of SGBV among both humanitarian and communities, and identified good practice such as a "speak-up" culture, diversity in the workforce, inclusive and participatory training involving senior leadership and follow-up; and listening to survivors' voices.

The World Food Programme's efforts towards gender equality have increased, with positive momentum found in the Strategic Plan 2022-25 and 2022 Gender Policy, such as improving data to inform gender responsive and transformative programming, improve the quality of gender analysis and generate and systematise evidence and knowledge. The Gender Policy mentions also the importance of engaging with women and women-led organisations. This is put in the context of women as being often "best positioned to first respond". Given the findings of a recent WFP evaluation, this commitment is important given the long standing issues of limited partnership and leveraging of expertise within WFP and Country Strategic Planning, particularly with NGOs" ([WFP Office of Evaluation, 2023:22](#)). The evaluation further finds process towards cross-cutting issues – including gender equality – in the WFP Strategic Plan 2022–2025 with increased resources and guidance. However, moving forward it will be important for WFP to work with Country Strategy Plans in track expenditures adequately, undertaking meaningful gender analysis and addressing the difficulty some country offices experience in implementing their commitment to gender as found by the evaluation.

3. Key policy implications and recommendations for FCDO

This section identifies priority gender and women's economic empowerment evidence gaps (sub-section 3.1), and recommendations on how FCDO can leverage its programmatic (sub-section 3.2) and diplomatic footprint (sub-section 3.3) to promote gender equality within food insecurity prevention and response in famine risk contexts.

3.1 Recommendations for further research

The following are recommendations for further research to be conducted with **women and women's rights organisations taking a leading role**:

- A. Given the rapid nature of this review, a **robust systematic evidence review is needed to identify and assess evidence on what works and where for addressing gender equality and food insecurity from an intersectional perspective**. Given gaps in literature, learning from practice through stakeholder engagement exercises will be valuable. Drawing on the HLPE's six components of food security framework, areas identified as **significant gaps are macro-level dynamics of food availability and food stability**, particularly in terms of trade, food distribution and management, and **sustainability**. Case studies presenting **'deep dives' on specific gender and intersectional issues for acute food security prevention and response** (e.g., women with disabilities), would be highly valuable. Intersectional perspectives are important in identifying differences in vulnerability and therefore differences in appropriate support modalities.
- B. **Identification of effective pathways for women's participation and leadership in acute food insecurity prevention and response decision making** (particularly at the institutional level). A comprehensive understanding of the type of interventions and their impact on women's participation and leadership is needed, particularly at the institutional and policy level. There is a strong evidence base on the importance of a gender lens and the need for women's leadership in health, education, nutrition and WASH which can be drawn upon. This research can focus on learning from practice, supported by a comprehensive evidence review – particularly with grey literature where the experience and knowledge of civil society organisations is often situated. It is important that both research and action extend beyond women's perceived gender roles and include focus on shelter, camp management etc.

3.2 Programme recommendations

- A. **Improve programme analysis, monitoring and learning tools and application of lessons.** Possible actions include undertaking gender and feminist evaluations of programmes, particularly of gender marker levels in Country Strategic Plans (e.g., WFP) and triangulating desk-based evaluations with meaningful engagement with women in communities, partner organisations and responding institutions. Effective gender analysis and sex-disaggregated programme data that draws out roles, status, positions and privileges of women, men, girls and boys is needed. Using more meaningful and flexible engagement strategies with different community members during the needs assessments and monitoring is important to ensure effective delivery (e.g., consulting older women, youth organisations etc.). The timing of data collection should have clear links to key decision-making entry points in acute food insecurity and famine prevention and response.
- B. **Establish a community of practice to assist ongoing reflection and learning on applying a gender lens to acute food security response.** This can provide long-term capacity strengthening on joint analysis and implementation of changes as a result of monitoring and evaluations. A key objective may be building evidence and approaches to understand intersectional perspectives.
- C. **Co-design Country Strategic Plans and key activities in the humanitarian programme cycle, with women's organisations and leadership.**
- D. **Strengthen the capacity of women leaders, in co-leadership with women's rights organisations** will be a long-term strategy. A long-term strategy, this will involve supporting data collection and information exchange, as well as the creation of effective information

channels that will inform emergency response and crisis prevention that are often different for women.

- E. **Shared learning on GBV and food security research and interventions along the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.** Food insecurity in both humanitarian and development contexts is linked with increased risk of GBV. Certain drivers of GBV are likely to be more significant in increasing acute food insecurity (e.g. increased stress) and in development contexts (e.g., norms), and GBV-related interventions have to be designed accordingly. Exchange between sectors on the nature of these risks and what works to address them would be of benefit. While there is considerable evidence of high prevalence of GBV during humanitarian crises, the dynamics of acute food insecurity and famine, and in resilience building in food systems, is less established. In these contexts, GBV risks may be more likely to occur within the household due to increased stress.
- F. **Integrate GBV prevention and response in acute food security and famine prevention and response.** This can start with a GBV analysis to understand possible threats and violence that an intervention may trigger, drawing on relevant key GBV in Emergency (GBViE) resources and guidance documents (e.g., gbvaor.net/). Logie et al., (2021) cites several papers with recommendations on how to address SGBV in displacement contexts: increase the evidence base of strategies for reducing SGBV among adolescent girls and young women in humanitarian contexts; evaluation of system level approaches including referrals, justice and legal aid, safety and risk mitigation (e.g. lighting at water sources); livelihoods and social asset development, mentorship, safe spaces; and gender and age tailored strategies for refugee adolescent boys and young men.
- G. **Build long-term perspectives in acute food insecurity and famine response through engagement with resilience strengthening and development initiatives.** Gender transformative change requires long-term efforts in formal and informal institutions. There is an opportunity for collaboration across humanitarian and development sectors to address the causes and consequences of gender inequities and food insecurity, recognising broader contextual drivers such as conflict and climate change. While the decline of humanitarian funding in many contexts is a serious impediment to effective support, funding for food security is increasing in the development sector. This funding could potentially be leveraged to support efforts around acute crisis.

3.3 Policy recommendations

- A. **Commit to gender and social transformative change in decision making and leadership in acute food insecurity and famine contexts.** The complexity and intensity of current crises require substantive collaboration and innovation, requiring leadership to 'co-create' policy with women and women's groups from an intersectional perspective. Cluster-based responses are a valuable area for this to take place, with strong leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator and through the CBPF-NGO Dialogue Platforms. This is supported by the OECD (2022), who recommends formal commitments to inclusivity in policy change processes, and women's engagement within these channels, along with the need to include gender experts in technical work, and the support of women-only spaces.
- B. **Demonstrate enabling leadership on a new transformative gender equality and food security agenda,** with a focus on acute food insecurity and famine. Through investing a policy agenda (linked to research and practice) and working with the UK's strong multilateral alliances and local partnerships, the UK can amplify its diplomatic footprint in acute food security response and beyond. This can include drawing on reflective and social learning approaches, and include different agencies, divisions and levels of humanitarian and development stakeholders to

identify priorities, address evidence gaps and share learning. Social learning processes are inherently participatory and interactive and help support capacity strengthening, learning-by-doing and deepening collaboration between stakeholders. Some examples of what could be achieved as a result of enabling policy are:

- **Support a cutting-edge action research and piloting programme that informs strategic investments and scalable gender-transformative innovations in the acute food insecurity and famine sector.** Drawing on the model and lessons from the first phase of the What Works for ending Violence Against Women, invest in a multi-stakeholder platform to co-develop transdisciplinary research and piloting programmes. This can include pilots that support joined-up implementation, without dilution of individual aspects and expertise. This can support the full scope of equity-economic-health impact pathways, including mental health and GBV. Intervention opportunities in the development food security and health sectors can be drawn upon to make funding go further.
- **Map food security ‘hotspots’ within counties linked to ‘inequality’ hotspots** (e.g., conservative gender norms, limited mobility for women, high rates of polygamy), drawing on methods used in climate change research that uses gender and intersectional methods. This can help raise awareness in humanitarian planning and response towards the differences in vulnerability from a gender and intersectional perspective.

- C. **Advocate for the IASC to recognise meaningful engagement with women, women’s agency and women’s leadership as critical components in humanitarian action in their own right.** The IASC offers guidance, policies, tools, and statements to promote best practice and coordinated action. Guidance is needed for humanitarian stakeholders on how to shift cultural practice institutionally, along with key entry points and mechanisms for how meaningful engagement with women, and support women’s leadership.

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Annex 1: Glossary

Acute food insecurity is when the severity of insecurity threatens lives, livelihoods or both, regardless of the causes, context or duration – or Integrated Food Security Phase Classification/Cadre Harmonisé (IPC/CH) Phase 3 or above (see definition of IPC/CH below).

Famine involves “(s)tarvation, death, destitution and extremely critical levels of acute malnutrition” (IPC, 2020: 1). Famine and severe food insecurity are **multidimensional and interrelated processes**, existing on a continuum, with starvation the most extreme experience (Hendriks 2015; [Carter & Kelly 2021](#)).

Food insecurity: when an individual occurs “when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life” ([FAO, 2023](#)). This can be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food. The FAO has a scale that assesses different levels of severity, from mild to severe, with the latter described as when someone has run out of food and gone a day without eating ([FAO, 2023](#)).

The High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) for Food Security and Nutrition (2020) further define food security as consisting of the following components:

- **Food availability** Having a quantity and quality of food sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture, supplied through domestic production or imports.
- **Food access (economic, social and physical):** Having personal or household financial means to acquire food for an adequate diet at a level to ensure that satisfaction of other basic needs are not threatened or compromised; and that adequate food is accessible to everyone, including vulnerable individuals and groups (HLPN 2022:10)
- **Food utilisation:** Having an adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met.
- **Food stability:** Having the ability to ensure food security in the event of sudden shocks (e.g. an economic, health, conflict, or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (e.g. seasonal food insecurity).
- **Agency:** Individuals or groups having the capacity to act independently to make choices about what they eat, the foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed and distributed, and to engage in policy processes that shape food systems. The protection of agency requires socio-political systems that uphold governance structures that enable the achievement of FSN for all.
- **Sustainability:** Food system practices that contribute to long-term regeneration of natural, social and economic systems, ensuring the food needs of the present generations are met without compromising the food needs of future generations.

Gender transformative: “Gender transformative research focuses on understanding, with a view to changing, gender-based power relations, structures and discriminatory practices in households and communities, or wider institutions, that underpin gender differences. Participatory approaches may be used to engage communities in reflection about gender norms and behaviours and practices and encourage community members to initiate change, individually or collectively” (CGIAR, 2017:ix). For this paper, we use the above definition with emphasis on critical examination of the root causes of

inequality, norms and dynamics and the aim for structural changes in power, norms and policy, as iterated by IDRC (2019) and USAID (2017), examining social differences between and among women to prevent homogenization.

Integrated Food Security Phase Classification/Cadre Harmonisé (IPC/CH): categorises the level of risk of famine in five categories based on the % of the population. It is used principally to inform decisions on resource allocation and programming globally and within countries. <https://www.ipcinfo.org/>

Intersectionality: Intersectionality can be defined as: “the interacting influences of multiple identities in a given person as they interact with marginalizing or empowering structures, norms and narratives’ Colfer et al., (2018:2). This can be illuminated further with their citation from Hankivsky (2014:2, as cited in Colfer et al., 2018:1): “- the interaction of different social locations (e.g. ‘race’/ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion). These interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (e.g. laws, policies, state governments and other political and economic unions, religious institutions, media). Through such processes, interdependent forms of privilege and oppression shaped by colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism and patriarchy are created”.

Social norms: the unwritten rules guiding behaviour; they encompass what we do, what we think others do and what we think others believe that we should do (UNICEF, 2021).

Women’s agency: the ability to make choices and to act on them. It can be exercised in different ways, individually and collectively, and in a variety of forms including “bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis” (Kabeer, 1999: 438). However agency is the underlying component to decision making all levels: individual, household, community, national and beyond. Agency is fundamentally linked to women’s empowerment, but cannot be equated to: “the ability to make decisions might at face value look like empowerment, but it can actually reinforce women’s subordination and traditional gender roles” ([Includovate](#), 2019). Agency is a critical component of empowerment yet inherently difficult to measure and identify, and the ‘observable’ changes such as mobility, are often of focus instead of changes in consciousness and/or the range of options that are available to women to make a choice ([Includovate](#), 2019).

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