

# Comment



MAJORITY WORLD/CIC/ALAMY

A group of women struggles to get rice in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which faced a severe food shortage after a devastating cyclone in 2007.

## To ease the world food crisis, focus resources on women and girls

Elizabeth Bryan, Claudia Ringler & Nicole Lefore

The global effects of the Ukraine war hit girls and women the hardest, exacerbating inequalities. Aid programmes must adapt.

**I**n the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine, the global community is scrambling. The World Bank, the G7 group of the world's largest developed economies, the European Union and the United States have collectively pledged more than US\$40 billion to avert food and humanitarian crises (see Supplementary information). Yet these massive funds are unlikely to get women and girls the help they need. The investments might even exacerbate inequalities.

Crises hit women and girls especially hard, particularly in low- and middle-income

countries. It is estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed an additional 47 million girls and women into extreme poverty, reversing decades of progress<sup>1</sup>. Data from 40 countries show that 36% of women stopped working during the pandemic compared with 28% of men<sup>2</sup>, as shutdowns of schools, childcare centres and local markets kept women at home rather than earning income. Getting enough to eat has become more difficult, too. In 2021, at least 150 million more women than men were experiencing food insecurity, and the gap is growing<sup>3</sup>.

With the war raising prices of food, fuel and

farming supplies, women and girls are most likely to bear the brunt. When resources are scarce, entrenched power imbalances mean that women have a tougher time growing and selling crops, running small businesses, accessing health care and education, and just leading their lives. As budgets shrink, women frequently act as ‘shock absorbers’, eating less to leave food for others in their household. In many cultures, women’s assets (including productive ones such as small livestock) are sold off before those that are controlled and used by men to generate income (such as farm machinery or cropland). Higher costs for fuels used in cooking and transport often mean that women have to spend more time gathering firewood and might need to walk, cycle or use public transport to take children to school or travel to markets or jobs.

Yet aid programmes tend to favour men. Subsidy and voucher schemes often target male-dominated commercial agriculture over the plots on which women grow food to feed their families and to sell informally. Obtaining subsidies often requires property deeds and digital platforms, both barriers for the most marginalized women in particular. This means that, although plots farmed by men might have sufficient support, those farmed by women end up with even fewer resources than they normally would.

As global efforts have geared up to combat the food crisis, we and others became alarmed that few were considering the particular needs of women and girls. With that in mind, the International Food Policy Research Institute (where C.R. and E.B. work) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) brought together funders, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN agencies and other experts, including this article’s co-signatories, at a round-table discussion in June this year. We collated lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2007–08 global food-price crisis, and developed concrete strategies that can buffer women and girls against short-term hardships and reduce long-term gender inequalities.

### Gendered risks

Crises including the pandemic, climate change and civil wars have disproportionately eroded women’s income, savings and assets. These losses have compounding effects on women’s well-being: whether they can get healthy food or paid work, whether they are building savings or facing violence.

Evidence from the 2007–08 food crisis shows that rising food prices caused

households to adjust purchases, often reducing consumption of nutrient-rich foods<sup>4</sup>.

Even before the pandemic, an estimated 60% of undernourished people were women. Those who are single, especially mothers, are at greater risk; within the same household, women and children are more likely to be undernourished than men, including in households that are not classed as poor<sup>5</sup>.

In 2021, just before the war on Ukraine began, between 700 million and 830 million people were chronically hungry, up by 150 million people since 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The gender gap in food insecurity also grew (see ‘More hunger’).

The impacts on women and girls can be passed down generations. For example, the children of women stunted by poor nutrition in childhood are more likely to have dangerously low birth weights and slow growth.

As COVID-19 shutdowns affected urban workers in countries across the world, many men migrated to rural areas to re-enter agriculture, displacing women in remunerative farming and trade. At the same time, small agribusinesses and informal food markets that women relied on for their livelihoods were forced to close<sup>2</sup>.

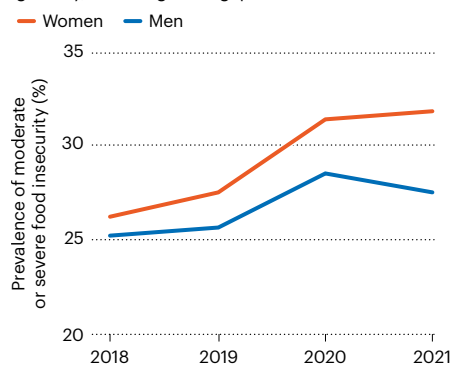
**“It cannot remain standard practice to ignore how policies affect people differently.”**

Crises also make women and girls less safe. It becomes harder to access services such as schools, medical care and agricultural education programmes. A study of COVID-19 impacts in six African countries found that women and girls experienced more gender-based violence and less access to safe spaces and services. As school classes and meals were suspended, 71% of adult survey respondents noted there was more economic and sexual exploitation of girls<sup>6</sup>. Girls who missed school as a result of school shutdowns for COVID-19 are also less likely to return than boys are, putting their reproductive health, job opportunities and well-being and their children’s welfare at risk. Older girls, in particular, are more likely to be married off or pulled out of school to work at home when budgets are tight<sup>7</sup>.

Governments that are strapped for cash are often quick to cut social-assistance programmes designed to benefit women and children. Most schemes implemented during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns were

### MORE HUNGER

Food insecurity is higher for women than for men globally, and the gender gap has increased.



halted in less than five months<sup>8</sup>. When governments reduce expenditures on education and health, the burden of providing these services is often transferred to households and communities, putting extra pressure on women and reinforcing conventional gender roles<sup>9</sup>.

Now, trade disruptions stemming from Russia’s war on Ukraine have caused already-inflated prices to spike even higher for food, fuel and agrochemicals (fertilizers and pesticides). At the round-table discussion, Hannah Wachira, a farmer from Kenya, explained how cutting back on increasingly expensive agrochemicals and fuel for farm machinery meant lower yields as a result of more labour-intensive practices, including a rise in back-breaking manual weeding and watering, mostly done by women and girls.

Price hikes also raise the costs of doing and restarting business. Extension services (government-sponsored advice for farmers) might lack the funds to visit farmers’ fields or villages. And because women are less likely to have access to mobile Internet (see ‘Digital disparity in India’ and [go.nature.com/3jn3wjt](https://go.nature.com/3jn3wjt)), they are less able to access this advice remotely for information on coping with shortages of fertilizers, pesticides and fuel.

Responses to the current crises are urgently needed, and we recognize that ensuring gender equity in interventions adds time and complexity. But it cannot remain standard practice to ignore how policies affect people differently – with inequality on the rise, that must stop. This includes providing resources to help women and girls cope with crises in the short term, and challenging the systems that perpetuate inequality. Here’s how.

### Gather evidence

Gender-responsive approaches require data that are broken down by sex, and this information must be more timely, accessible and

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localized than it is now. Few programmes track how crises affect men and women differently; for example, whether businesses that shut down during crises were owned by men or women, or whose assets and savings were used when a shock hit. Whether programmes reach and benefit women is also not regularly monitored, but it is important to know whether, for instance, subsidized fertilizer is spread on fields farmed by men or women, or whether extension agents reach women.

Research institutes, government agencies, NGOs and grassroots organizations can collect and analyse these data. This has already begun in some places. For instance, India's sudden COVID-19 shutdown in March 2020 caused urban informal workers to migrate to rural areas in huge numbers. At that point, grassroots organizations – such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the largest women workers' trade union in the country – started to provide the government with data on the number of women who had returned by district, as well as other information on these overlooked workers.

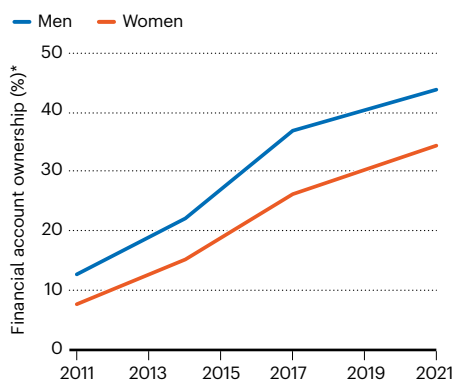
### Extend anti-violence schemes

Crises raise the risk of gender-based violence both inside and outside the home. As an example, child-marriage rates have more than doubled in the past year in the most drought-stricken parts of Ethiopia as families struggle to feed children (see [go.nature.com/3pnksi3](https://go.nature.com/3pnksi3)). Health, trauma and legal services are essential for the people affected, but so is prevention.

Targeted incentives can also help. For instance, cash transfers might mean that parents are able to feed their children and feel less pressure to marry off daughters. A multi-year programme in Bangladesh gave cooking oil to families who kept girls under 18 years old out of marriage, and provided the girls with confidence-building and other training. For girls aged 15 whose families received the cooking-oil incentive, child marriage was

### FEWER BANK ACCOUNTS

More women have accounts than ever, but gender-based disparity persists.



Women in drought-affected Kilifi, Kenya, prepare meat from a slaughtered cow.

reduced by 19% and teenage births by 12%; education rates were also boosted<sup>10</sup>.

Authority figures can also help get to the root of gender-based violence. In Uganda, religious leaders encouraged couples to take a 12-session course on making decisions jointly. Violence against intimate partners decreased among participants of the programme compared with those who were on a waiting list for it. And the more the programme was endorsed by religious leaders, the greater the reduction<sup>11</sup>.

### Expand social protection

A systematic review of 32 programmes suggests that those supplying fortified food or nutritional supplements can reduce stunting and anaemia by targeting women and mothers of young children<sup>12</sup>. Both the 2007–08 food-price crisis and the ongoing pandemic demonstrate that targeted programmes help households to meet basic needs as food prices soar<sup>13</sup>. They protect the most vulnerable effectively, including women who are pregnant, single mothers, disabled, older or refugees, as well as young children at risk of malnutrition.

In the face of the current crisis, expanding these programmes should be a priority, especially to women who are not formally in the

labour force and those whose businesses were forced to close or are struggling.

### Increase opportunities for work

An effective way to help women is to support them to reopen businesses that closed during the pandemic, and to open new ones. Since 2013, the government of Kenya has reserved 30% of public procurement contracts for women. In response to COVID-19, Senegal prioritized purchases from women farmers to buy cereals for its emergency food basket programme.

Centres that offer training and access to finance can reach rural women best if they are located in the communities where women are most affected. This saves on high fuel costs and aligns with cultural norms. Women's economic opportunities can be greatly boosted by support services. For example, many NGOs and factories are now establishing childcare centres for garment factory workers to enable them to work outside the home without having to leave their children far away.

### Support women's groups

Existing social networks and women's groups can help governments and NGOs to target training, information and resources, including agricultural inputs, where they are most

needed. Women's groups also boost resilience by providing a platform for collective action, sharing labour and childcare responsibilities, organizing transport, accessing credit and savings, and disseminating information. For example, in India, SEWA has set up 160 cooperatives and 15 economic federations to support informal women workers, including vendors, farmers, labourers and artisans, as well as to provide credit, childcare and legal services. During the pandemic, SEWA served as an intermediary between female farmers and the government, helping women to sign up for government relief.

Informal networks are equally important during crises. For instance, in the conflict in Yemen, women's social networks have enabled them to share food, shelter, information and emotional support<sup>14</sup>. Input from such groups and networks is essential to ensure that relief programmes address women's needs in their specific context.

### Tailor financial services

Efforts to reduce gender disparities in financial services have been successful, as seen in the expansion of mobile money accounts in regions such as East Africa and parts of South Asia. Still, the proportion of women with bank accounts remains lower than for men<sup>15</sup> (see 'Fewer bank accounts'). Conventional financial products often fail to reach women because they require land or house titles as collateral. Expanding access might mean waiving or reducing registration fees, or accepting non-conventional forms of collateral, while increasing financial literacy. One of us (N.L.), a round-table participant, has worked with PEG Africa, a private firm providing solar systems to rural households, and noted how the company was attracting female clients by reducing the collateral and down payments required. The firm also worked with women to build their creditworthiness and capacity for financial documentation.

Both the public and private sector should work to provide financial products tailored to women's needs, such as affordable micro-credit, more asset-based financing and insurance bundles. Affordable micro-finance can serve women particularly well. During the 2008 food-price crisis in Bangladesh, microfinance programmes greatly improved women's livelihoods, for instance, helping them to rent more land so that their families could grow food<sup>16</sup>.

### Broaden access to information

Women are less likely to be approached by extension agents and less likely to receive information through mobile phones, television or radio. Access worsened during the pandemic. Agricultural extension services must therefore take care that messages reach women and are useful to them. For instance,

women who lose access to expensive agro-chemicals are in particular need of information on farming practices that require fewer inputs and are less labour-intensive.

Certain types of information, such as on safe food storage, are particularly helpful for women. For example, in Ghana, the Post-Harvest Loss Innovation Lab has worked with female poultry and maize (corn) farmers to improve practices and encourage technologies that reduce spoilage, thus increasing safety and profitability.

Finally, increasing female ownership of mobile phones and training on how to use them is also essential. Both agricultural and market information are increasingly being delivered through digital platforms.

### Promote women's leadership

Stakeholders should shift rhetoric away from women as victims and support the ways they are finding to respond to crises: in their homes, fields and businesses. This includes supporting women as leaders.

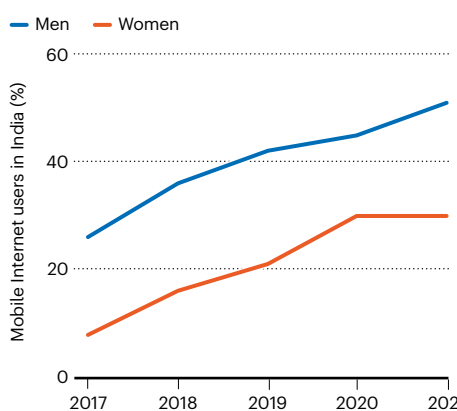
**“To build more equitable food systems, responses to the global food crisis must do better than in the past.”**

Women often demand a seat at the table. In Kenya, the grassroots women's organization GROOTS brought female farmers together to advocate for policy change. Several have gained positions in county governments, where they have a direct voice in making sure programmes serve their needs – for instance, making sure that meetings are held at convenient times for childcare and promoting greater access to finance and investment that support female farmers.

As we write, funders and governments are planning how to implement, coordinate and monitor their response to the food crisis. If women are formally represented across this

### DIGITAL DISPARITY IN INDIA

The proportion of women in India using mobile Internet has stalled since 2020.



process, programmes will be more effective at meeting women's needs and improving gender equality.

To build more equitable food systems, responses to the global food crisis must do better than in the past. There is no place for responses that reinforce an unjust status quo and widen gender inequality.

This food crisis is not the last crisis the world will face, but it should be the last one in which women and girls carry this grossly unequal burden. Now is the time to transform the food system to create more opportunities for women and girls, leading to greater gender equality.

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