



Reducing inequalities for food security and nutrition - HLPE consultation on the report's scope

Response and recommendations from CARE 30 April 2022

Inequity in Food Systems

The issue of equity has recently become a focus among the international development community, culminating in targeted efforts to establish fair and just access to opportunities, resources, and distribution of benefits under the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. This effort is consistent with the long-standing recognition that [development is a human right](#), one which is individually owed to every human person and one in which all peoples are collectively entitled to participate, contribute to, and enjoy. First set forth in the Declaration on the Right to Development, adopted in 1986 (54 State Parties) and since reiterated in international human rights instruments (e.g. [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), [UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas](#)), **the right to development includes “equity” as an essential element. It is also inextricably linked to all other human rights in food systems, [including the right to health, freedom from slavery and forced labour](#) and the [right to adequate food](#).**

Despite efforts to adapt food systems and [development goals](#) to address the needs of those most marginalized first, certain groups are continuously being left out and left behind. Women, small-scale farmers, peasants, fisher folk, Indigenous Peoples, and racial and ethnic minorities continue to face disproportionately high rates of hunger and malnutrition and associated health complications. **Food insecurity and malnutrition are not randomized conditions, but rather are the results of social and economic systemic inequalities from local to global levels.** Unequal relationships and power dynamics in markets, in households, and in policy processes, determine who has access to resources and who does not, shaping who is hungry and malnourished and who is not. **This unequal access to food is rooted in inequalities of income, inequalities of political and economic power, and gender and social inequalities – leading to inequitable distribution of outcomes.** And these [inequities in our food system](#) exist across both vertical and horizontal lines with vertical inequalities based on measured outcomes at household level (such as income) and horizontal inequalities affecting certain groups of people who are marginalized due to social exclusion. Often individuals and groups face an intersection of multiple disadvantages which can result in some of the most extreme forms of marginalization. For example, a person's gender, ethnic identity, and spatial location can all

intersect in a manner that excludes them from a country's economy, political system, and food system.

Transforming food systems therefore requires addressing these underlying inequalities and restoring fair, or equitable, access to and ownership of resources, including water, land, and seeds, as well as access to information, technology, and justice. **Adopting a [human rights-based approach](#) to this transformation will help to reveal the inequalities, discriminatory practices, and unjust power relations that are often undermining sustainable development efforts. Mainstreaming human rights will further reinforce that all food system actors are entitled to decent work, livelihoods, and safe and adequate food.**

Many forms of inequity exist in food systems, however gender-based discrimination is one of the biggest sources of inequity. **Women frequently face intersectional challenges** – they face time poverty, low (or no) pay, denial of access to resources – and all the while shouldering reproductive and care responsibilities. Women and women farmers are key actors in every aspect of food systems. They have extensive skills and capacities and their roles are critical to global food production, natural resource management, household and community resilience, and to the way families eat. They have been key architects of community solutions to the pandemic. However they are undervalued, unpaid or underpaid, and constrained by systemic limitations on their access to natural and productive resources and labor market opportunities. Women are exposed to higher risks of famine, gender-based violence, and other forms of exploitations and abuse, in peacetime and in conflict, and they often eat last when food is scarce. CARE studies have shown that women are eating less frequently and less nutritious food than men, especially in areas of heightened conflict. In Afghanistan, men reported eating fewer meals three days a week, while women are eating fewer meals four days a week.

Evidence shows that land tenure and other natural resource rights are strongly associated with [higher levels of investment and productivity in agriculture](#) – and therefore with higher incomes and greater economic well-being. Land rights for women are correlated with better outcomes for both them and their families, giving women greater bargaining power at household and community levels, improving child nutrition, and lowering levels of gender-based violence. Yet, while rural women produce up to 80 percent of food consumed in households in developing countries, they make up fewer than [15 percent of all smallholder landowners](#). Women struggle to not only secure land titles but also to obtain credit and insurance, purchase seeds and equipment, and access agricultural training. Women are often excluded from decision making spaces, comprise a large percentage of seasonal, part-time, and low-wage work, and are primarily employed in the informal sector. On a household level, women's food security and nutritional needs are neglected in countries and regions where discriminatory cultural and social norms exist. The culminating effect of all these barriers is a systemic gap between what women can contribute to food systems and what they are able to do today. This gap is only widening due to the pandemic, which is rolling back 50 years of progress in gender equality —both in the workforce and at home. Gaps in women's leadership and in supporting women's unpaid care burdens mean that the pandemic and the proposed solutions are furthering inequality.

Gender inequity harms not only women and girls but entire households. **Countries where women lack land ownership rights have an average of 60% more malnourished children. When women are empowered , entire communities are lifted out of poverty.** Research shows that if women had equal access to rights such as land and labor rights, their yields would increase 20-30% and an additional 150 million people annually could be fed. Tackling gender inequities will help dismantle the barriers women face —boosting productivity, promoting good nutrition, and leading to better outcomes not only for women, but for everyone in the food system.

Inequity across gendered lines plays out at the international level, too—global solutions consistently ignore women, their rights, and the critical role women play in food systems. Furthermore, reports and policies on hunger itself leave women behind. Of 84 global policies and plans designed to address hunger released between September 2020 and December 2021, only 4% refer to women as leaders who should be part of the solution or provide funding to support them. 39% overlook women entirely. CARE’s review confirms that, despite women’s and girls’ significant roles in food systems, global responses to hunger crises are still either ignoring them or treating them as victims who have no role in addressing the problems they face. Women aren’t just left out of creating solutions to end hunger; the organizations tasked with supporting them actually make them invisible. This makes it nearly impossible to determine the full scope of the problem. Of all available global datasets and dashboards on hunger or gender equality – only one—from UN Women—provided sex-disaggregated data, and that is only for 2019.

To make food systems more equitable, all actors—including governments, as well as development and humanitarian organizations—should prioritize responding to the needs and impact areas that women themselves have prioritized as critical: livelihoods, food security, mental health support, and health services. Immediate and medium-term livelihood recovery and food assistance is critical at all levels. There also must be increased efforts to create partnerships and work with women leaders and local Women’s Rights Organizations to ensure inclusive and gender-responsive policies and decision-making at all levels. All actors should also work with women’s groups, listen to women, and ensure they are targeted in recovery programs and funding. It is critical to create accountability mechanisms that guarantee women’s voices in any COVID-19, conflict, or food security related response. Global solutions are not keeping pace with the magnitude of the problem because they continue to overlook the importance of gender equality. Global policies must work towards equality if we ever hope to end hunger, not just this year, but into the future. That requires investing money, time, and training in women leaders; listening to their voices; and honoring their right to be at all tables where decisions are made.

For equitable and just food system transformation we must adopt transdisciplinary, inclusive, and rights-based approaches. This implies that we should ensure **integrated, participatory, rights-based approaches to governance** and policymaking at all levels to address the structural inequities and power imbalances in food systems. This includes building processes and policy platforms on democratic principles, transparency, accountability, and inclusive participation to ensure that policies are both evidence- and rights-based.

Successful Programs and Policy Initiatives

Successful initiatives to reduce the inequality gaps are ones that strengthen the capacities, skills, and confidence of women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples in food systems so they can collectively challenge social norms; increase ownership and control of resources and assets, increase access to markets and services; and strengthen their voice to promote equitable power relations in households and communities.

Successful response strategies:

- Have a cross-sectoral response and clear indicators and targets that promote women and marginalized groups rights to food, decent work, reliable markets, and healthy environments.
- To combat gender inequity strategies must include tools and models to engage men and boys in all relevant protocols and interventions in food systems to enhance male responsibility in sharing production and reproduction burdens and to advance the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence.
- Provide *non-conditional* financial and capacity-building support to women's organizations, social movements, networks, and women's collective action, including legal and negotiation training skills. This could be done through farmer/pastoralist/fisher schools and other social learning models.

There must be a demand for policies that place gender justice at the center for transformative change and increase investments into understanding, implementing, and strengthening equitable livelihoods in food systems.

- Affirmative action at organizational, policy, and legislative levels to promote women's leadership, is critical to ensure equal participation and representation, and to allow women's voices to be heard at local, national, and international levels within food systems discourse and decision-making processes.
- Policies that support women's access and ownership over productive resources, and guarantee access to public goods and services (such as biodiversity, water and sanitation, and public health) to advance food security and nutrition are successful at enhancing food systems' role in the reduction of inequalities.
- An adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach is also critical by ensuring health, education, climate and environment, social development, local government, and other relevant ministry budgets are planning for, and in coherence with, gender and indigenous people's equality investments and plans in food systems.
- Ensuring national and global accountability mechanisms and processes for all duty bearers in food systems are functioning and transparent.

Most recent references to be considered in this report.

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