

Starving for Equality

Josh Estey/CARE

Two numbers set the frame for the food security situation in the world today. [282 million people](#) are very hungry in the world (acutely food insecure). [84.2 million](#) more women and girls are hungry than men and boys. Food insecurity is a huge global problem, and it's highly unequal. It's obvious why that's bad for women and girls: women and girls are more likely to go without food, or not to know where their next meal is coming from.




In the hungriest parts of Honduras, 61% of women are in food crisis, but only 11% of men are.¹ That's a

staggering gap that's forcing women to bear the brunt of hunger. Gender inequality isn't just a woman's problem; it's also bad for men and boys. The [research](#) also shows that inequality literally makes men and boys hungrier, too. The [most recent research](#) shows that moving from perfect gender equality to perfect inequality could increase the likelihood of food insecurity from 57% to 100%.

In fact, if you take the **same man** from a country with high equality to a highly unequal country, he's more likely to be food insecure. Let's take an example:



A 40-year-old man, with secondary education, employed, middle income, and living in a rural area with his wife and one child. He has personally experienced a disaster in the past five years, and he is very worried about severe weather events.

	GINI & GII	Food Insecurity Probability
If he lives in Honduras – which has high income inequality with a Gini ² of 48.2 and high gender inequality with a GII ³ of 0.431 – his probability of moderate or severe food insecurity is 87%. In the words of one man in Honduras, “You no longer eat what you want, but what you can.”	GINI 48.2 GII 0.431	
Moving to a place with better gender equality, although still high, would increase his chances of getting the food he needs. If he lives in Brazil (high income inequality with a Gini of 53.4, high gender inequality with a GII of 0.39), his probability of moderate or severe food insecurity is 78%. That's true even though income inequality is higher in his new context.	GINI 53.4 GII 0.39	
Going to a place that has better gender equality and better income equality is the best outcome of all. If the same man lives in Albania – which has a relatively low income inequality with a Gini of 33.2 and low gender inequality with a GII of 0.144 – his probability of moderate or severe food insecurity is 55%.	GINI 33.2 GII 0.144	

1 Women are the Early Warning: Food Insecurity and Gender in the Dry Corridor of Honduras. CARE 2024 (publication forthcoming).

2 Gender Inequality Index <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>

3 The Gini Index is a measure of income inequality within a country. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?skipRedirection=true&view=map>

All of this is true even though the economies are growing in each of those countries. In the post-COVID world, economic growth is not enough to solve hunger. In economies where GDP is growing, but inequality is high, hunger goes up, not down. Globally and within countries, inequality and food insecurity are both [growing](#). In 57 economies around the world, GDP is growing and so is [hunger](#).

That tells us that the solutions the world has been chasing for years—economic growth to end hunger—are not going to do the job. They won't solve hunger for anyone, not men or women.

Why?

Structural inequality is driving hunger for everyone. If you control basic factors like education, income, and access to information and resources, women are not hungrier than men. Women are hungrier than men because they are less likely to complete their education, they consistently have lower incomes, and they can't access the same services and support that men can (like loans, agricultural inputs, or extension services). To take just a few examples:

- Globally, 50% of women are employed, compared to 69% of men.
- 2.4 billion women worldwide do not have the same [economic rights as men](#).
- 740 million women around the world don't have [bank accounts](#), and the finance gap for women entrepreneurs is [\\$1.7 trillion](#), and that burden falls disproportionately on women.

In parts of the Dry Corridor of Honduras, one of the areas in the world most vulnerable to climate change, 92% of women said that they don't have enough savings to cover one month of spending, compared to 62% of men.

Social norms and expectations make it harder for women to eat. For example, a man will have the same food security no matter how many children are in the family. For a woman, the more children her family has, the less likely she is to be food secure. That's because caring for the children, including making sure they have enough to eat, is usually considered to be a woman's role, so the more kids there are, the less she eats. In Honduras, a woman told CARE, "In remote communities, women do not know their rights; men only know to say 'I was raised to believe that women should serve me,' and women say 'I was raised to believe I must serve the man.'"



"I'm having nightmares about being able to find enough to feed my children from one day to the next. I used to feed my household three times a day, [now] we only eat once ...I've had to do without certain things, such as changing my eating habits, and this has certainly had an impact on my physical health." [Judith Nijimbere, Burundi](#). Despite all that, Judith finds ways to lead in her community and her savings group. "The group is not only a space for savings and loans. Yes, the loans help our small businesses so that we can generate income, but it is also a place where our members, especially women, can flourish. For me, my VSLA is a place where we can discuss and raise awareness in all aspects of life, including women's rights, health, children's education, nutrition, and different issues that help us to develop."

Inequality means people are growing less food. If we closed the gender gaps in food production and in incomes for people in food systems, we could feed 45 million people. Women having more equality in farming consistently translates into more food available, and people eating better, healthier diets—even in [crisis](#). In Honduras, 92% of women said they don't have enough savings to cover one month of spending, compared to 62% of men.² That means they can't put any extra money into producing food.

Climate change is hitting women harder. Extreme weather events continue to reduce how much food people eat for at least 5 years after. Women are losing 8 percentage points more income than men [because of extreme heat](#), and 3 percent more production due to flooding. Because women are more likely to be growing food crops that people eat at home and buying the food that gets on the table, women losing production and income spells less food for everyone.

² CARE, publication forthcoming

In the wake of massive flooding in Burundi in April 2024, here's what women have to say about their choices to earn an income: "with the rising waters of Lake Tanganyika, fishing areas have become inaccessible. To venture there is to risk your life. Crocodile and hippo attacks are frequent. [For] agriculture: the fields have been flooded. The large farms belong to the men."

Policies and leadership leave women out. In 2022, 28% of policies designed to address the global hunger crisis ignored women entirely. Only [35% of policies propose concrete actions to resolve gender inequality](#). In crisis response, gender equality is losing ground. The number of Humanitarian Response Plans that finance gender priorities dropped from [95% in 2021 to 83% in 2022](#). At all levels, people don't see women as leaders, so they leave women out. A woman in Honduras explains,

"Machismo is a big barrier, sometimes we participate, but we don't make decisions. [...] We are still valued as the weaker sex."

Conflict burdens fall on women. Conflict is the number one cause of [acute hunger](#), and women are more likely than men to face [hunger than men during conflict](#). Women are also stepping up to take over household incomes and food when conflict impacts livelihoods and migration. "Before the crisis my husband and I used to take decisions together, but now I am the sole decision maker because he is away from home most of the time." - Woman, Syria

What can we do about it?

There are some critical solutions we can start now to get to a brighter, better-fed future.

Focus on growth AND equality. Growth is not enough. Economic growth helps resolve hunger ONLY when growth comes with income and gender equality. Economic growth policies must build in plans to improve equality, and to reach those who are most likely to face food insecurity and climate change impacts.

Stop designing agricultural and livelihoods projects that ignore gender equality. Solving food insecurity in the long run means designing holistic programs that address equality because food insecurity is ultimately shaped by factors outside of the food system. In [Burundi](#), working to shift gender norms while also building livelihood skills and market access, achieved significant improvements in food security, wealth, and women empowerment scores. It's also the most cost effective.

It showed a \$5 return for every \$1 invested, compared to a \$2 return for every \$1 invested in an agriculture program that ignored gender equality.



"My name is [Zemzem Nori](#), I live in Ethiopia. I am a mother, a farmer, and an entrepreneur. We have faced many crises in recent years – the pandemic, locust invasions, severe drought, and armed conflict. Before I joined my savings group, I was just a farmer growing sorghum. I struggled to feed my family and send my kids to school. Now, I can buy what I need, and what my children need. I can send my children to school. I can buy nutritious food and clothes for them. Now, I can buy oil, potatoes, tomatoes, sugar, and lentils. I can also buy sanitary pads. These are all things that I could not buy before, but I can now. Now I see what I am capable of, which motivates me. It means I can do more. I want to keep going and keep moving forward.

I am so proud that now I have harmony with my husband. Through the savings group, I saw a path. We could save money and come back together. We are moving forward together and solving our problems. I don't expect anyone to just give me money or give me things. I don't want to beg. That's not what I want or need. **I have plans for the future.** We will never go back. We will never be what we were before. We will always go forward. That is what we want, to go forward."

Work with the private sector so businesses include women in growth. The private sector at all levels has a major role to play so women can access market opportunities. It is possible. Major national banks in Pakistan, Peru, and Vietnam unlocked [\\$154.9 million in loans](#) for women by changing their own policies. The largest dairy companies in Bangladesh building their supply chains worked to suppliers. Thinking about the market system as a player that must include women—and helping align the incentives and processes that the private sector uses to work with clients—

we can unlock massive potential that helps reduce hunger and grow economies equally.



“Doors are closed to us. We are seen as weak. We are seen as incapable.” [Maria Magdalena Rivera](#) farms tilapia in central Honduras. She helped found a cooperative for 22 independent producers to sell fish into the market. Despite incredible challenges—including COVID-19, two hurricanes in two weeks, and the ongoing food and inflation crisis—Maria and her co-producers are making it work. They’re continually expanding their business, their income, and their leadership. “We feed the fish,” Magdalena says. “We take care of them at night. It’s a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week job. We do it, and we are demonstrating that women can do it; we are capable.” Maria’s message to other women: “**...fill yourself with hope and strength and show what you are made of. Do not sit there with your arms crossed. You can be an entrepreneur.**”

Give women a seat at the table. Including women in decision making makes a better response to hunger when it happens. South Sudanese women fleeing conflict made sure that food distribution was safer for everyone, and more accessible for women and people with disabilities. To do that, they had to [fight for a place in decision-making](#),

because the original plans put food distribution too far away. In Niger, women got [water set up in refugee camps](#) when male leaders did not prioritize it, and the men had not been successful getting water to people in the camp.



[Selwa Alice](#) ran for election in the refugee camp where she lives in Uganda. “I have seen that as women, we are left behind, and for that, things are not well with us women. I used to have that fear, that shyness whereby I cannot be able to stand up like I am doing today. My fellow women will see that this is a lady, and she’s standing with us. I see myself like Rebecca Kadaga, the speaker of parliament!” Alice is one of 17 women elected to public office in her camp so she can make sure women are getting what they need.

Support women leaders. In Niger, 69% of women are very likely to work with other women to benefit their communities as part of their [leadership training](#). Savings groups are one powerful tool to promote women’s public participation. 78% of women report being more engaged in public decisions after being in savings groups. That number is 61% for savings groups alone, and [98% for savings groups](#) that include some training and support on advocacy and leadership.

Look at equality within households. The Where the Rain Falls (WtRF) program in Bangladesh, India, and Thailand from 2011 – 2020 analyzed gender roles in agriculture and created a community Gender Action Plan. Within 9 months, equal labor sharing rose from 22% to 67%, and women in WtRF groups [freed up 2 to 4 hours a day](#), which they committed to agriculture, increasing household food security.

Judith in Burundi, Zemzem in Ethiopia, Maria in Honduras, and Alice in Uganda all show us that change is possible. They are the kind of leaders whose potential can help put us on the path for growth that means everyone can eat, even when times are hard. Acknowledging, supporting, and unlocking that potential gives everyone—men and women—the chance to have a better future.