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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE & FOOD INSECURITY: What we know and why gender equality is the answer

“Homes living in peace are able to cope better [with food scarcity] because they are able to find solutions together. But in homes where there is violence, it becomes hard; even what food is available is left for the husband. When there is less food in the home and that home is experiencing violence, violence tends to increase.”

CARE’s partner the Rwanda Men’s Resource Center

This brief delves deeper into **the relationship between food insecurity, gender inequality and gender-based violence (GBV)**, calling attention to the specific ways in which violence intersects with food insecurity and women’s experience of hunger, particularly within their homes. It highlights how **investing in gender transformative approaches** doesn’t just make women safer—it helps them access food, helps their families eat more, and can even increase food production overall.

GBV is rooted in gender inequality, and violence is often utilized to reinforce male privilege, power and control. Additional stressors both exacerbate and amplify this violence—we saw this during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we continue to see this as communities struggle with the compounding impacts of climate change, conflict, resource scarcity, increased commodity costs and deepening food insecurity.

This brief is divided into two parts.

- ➔ **GBV & food insecurity: critical challenges rooted in inequality** provides a snapshot of how food insecurity is relevant to GBV, outlining some of the specific impacts for women and girls.
- ➔ **Taking action against GBV: an imperative to ensure access to food for women and girls** highlights CARE’s experiences in addressing GBV and how this has positively impacted women’s ability to cope with the challenges they face from the current global food crisis.

COVID-19 has already set back progress on gender equality and increased GBV.¹ Food insecurity, often intersecting with numerous other challenges, has contributed to increasing levels of intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence, sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, and child marriage,² putting achievement of the global Sustainable Development Goals further out of reach.³ All actors addressing current global challenges have a critical role in tackling GBV by, at minimum, **ensuring programming both assesses and mitigates GBV risks**. Ultimately, this should go further to **incorporate proven GBV prevention approaches that address the root causes of violence**.

Moreover, proven approaches to reducing or preventing GBV—such as challenging harmful social norms and promoting communication and cooperation within relationships—also have a positive impact on women’s experience of hunger and on overall food insecurity.ⁱ From sharing meals equally to increasing food production, **addressing the root causes of violence is helping women, girls, their families and communities to be more resilient**.

If we don’t address gender inequality, women will continue to be both hungry and at risk of violence. However, if we do address the root causes of inequality, not only will women be safer and more likely to have food, they are also more likely to produce more food so *everyone* is less hungry. Read on for examples of how CARE has done this and our recommendations for other actors aiming to address the causes and consequences of food insecurity, GBV and worsening poverty.

PART 1

GBV & food insecurity: critical challenges rooted in inequality

“Conditions of inequitable gender norms not only contribute to both food insecurity and GBV, they also link the problems of GBV and food insecurity. Where females have less power and resources, GBV can serve as a driver of food insecurity for women and girls... Food insecurity can also increase the risk of exposure to violence for women and girls.”

GBV AoR: GBV Risks, Food Insecurity, and the Integrated Food Security Classification – What Are Basics that Food Security and GBV Actors Need to Know? (August 2022)

How increased food insecurity is relevant to GBV

Evidence shows there are direct links between food insecurity, hunger and GBV.⁴

Gender inequality makes women more likely to be hungry

The gendered consequences of hunger crises are compounding and well documented; the current global food crisis is no different. Data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) shows that globally, women are more likely than men to experience moderate or severe food insecurity.⁵ Often women are eating last and least, meaning they are more likely to be facing hunger than men; our analysis estimated 150 million more women were hungry than men in 2021.⁶ The situation is expected to worsen, and trends indicate that 44.7 million more women than men could miss meals in the next 6 months.⁷



ⁱ For example, when the Win Win project in Burundi prioritized addressing gender and social norms, building women’s solidarity, and engaging men on gender equality, this led to households more than doubling their rice production, with women being 26% more likely to have enough food to eat.

Gender inequality makes women more vulnerable to violence

GBV is also rooted in gender inequality, which reinforces unequal power relations between women and men, gender roles, and social norms that lead to the acceptance of violence. The constraints which affect food access for women and girls—including unequal control over resources, less autonomy in household decisions and discriminatory norms which restrict their freedoms—also contribute to women and girls’ vulnerability to GBV.⁸ This means the women and girls who are most at risk of going hungry are also more likely to experience violence.

There are 150 million more women facing food insecurity than men, but hunger isn’t the only challenge they face.

Food insecurity amplifies GBV risks

The complex challenges which contribute to food insecurity are amplifying GBV risks for women and girls, particularly for those already vulnerable to violence. Income insecurity, often combined with exponential increases in the cost of basic commodities, can spark or heighten violence, particularly IPV, or lead families to adopt heart-breaking coping strategies, such as child and forced marriage. Climate change has been shown to exacerbate or amplify pre-existing risk factors for GBV—including poverty, rigid gender roles, and personal and community conflict—while increasing tension within households.⁹ Conflict stemming from scarcity of food and water can lead to increased incidents of violent behavior by men or result in displacement, which poses additional protection challenges and needs for women and girls.¹⁰

The impact of harmful gender norms

We know from the COVID-19 pandemic that women and girls in Bangladesh were sacrificing food in favor of men, elders and children;^{*} in countries such as Sudan and Nigeria, reports show it is predominantly women who, due to social norms and power imbalances, are reducing what they eat and therefore are more food insecure than men.^{**} UN Women’s Gender Equality Attitudes Study 2022 found that overall, 25% of respondents agree that ‘in times of food shortages, priority should be given to men’. In Nigeria, this was as high as 46%.^{***}

The social norms and power dynamics behind this are often the same norms which limit women’s voice and role within the household—norms which are at the root of their vulnerability to violence from intimate partners or other family members.

^{*} CARE: SHOUHARDO recurrent monitoring study ^{**} CARE: [Food Security & Gender Equality](#) (Jul 2022) ^{***} UN Women: [Gender Equality Attitudes Study 2022](#) (Aug 2022)

What this means for women and girls

Women and girls around the globe are feeling the effects of these increased risks, which are leading to exponential increases in GBV. In Somalia, for example, reports from those displaced by drought indicate a 200% rise in GBV cases, particularly intimate partner violence and rape, compared to the same period in 2021.¹¹

Access to food aid and the search for food have been shown to heighten risk of exposure to different forms of GBV for women and girls when they are outside their homes, particularly in conflict and crisis settings.¹² The risk of being sexually harassed, assaulted, or even coerced into exchanging sex for food when going to emergency food distributions can prevent women and girls from accessing food. Drought is forcing women and girls to walk further to obtain basic resources including water, making them more vulnerable to sexual violence.^{13 14}



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Lack of food in the household—regardless of the cause—is also making women and girls around the world more vulnerable to violence in their homes,¹⁵ and this requires urgent attention and action.

Domestic and intimate partner violence

Less access to food leads to increased **tension and conflict within households**, resulting in more reports of violence in the home.

In the Central African Republic over the last two years, reports of intimate partner violence have increased in the lean season, during drought periods and in areas where food insecurity is higher.¹⁶ In 2021, CARE gender assessments related to food insecurity in Somalia showed that 1 in 4 women reported violence in homes as one of their primary concerns¹⁷; by 2022, those reporting domestic violence as a key safety and security concern had risen to 1 in 3.¹⁸ These fears—and the increase over time—are echoed by adolescent girls.

Rising food costs globally are having a similar impact on women’s vulnerability to violence. A recent survey in Bangladesh found households have seen a significant increase in the cost of household essentials. As a result, 61% of households failed to meet food expenses. Women reported a 21% increase in violence at household level as a result of price hikes.¹⁹

Child, early & forced marriage

When families are unable to meet their basic needs, the **risk of child marriage increases significantly for girls**.²⁰ Girls married early in exchange for money, food or other assets, or simply to reduce the number of mouths to feed, is not new or uncommon as a coping strategy,²¹ but is currently on the rise across numerous regions.²²

In West Africa, food scarcity and hunger have driven up the number of early and forced marriages.²³ Across the East Central African region, child marriage has reportedly risen in some communities, with families’ marrying off young girls to lessen demands on their own resources and to have money that they can use for food and other necessities.²⁴ In regions of Ethiopia worst affected by the drought, UNICEF reports that child marriage on average has more than doubled in the span of one year according to local government figures.²⁵ In Somalia, CARE gender assessments related to food insecurity in 2021 showed 1 in 5 girls reported that parental pressure to marry early was their biggest concern²⁶; by 2022, this had increased to almost 1 in 3.²⁷ A recent CARE survey on Afghanistan shows a spike in early and forced child marriages; nearly 1 in 8 households surveyed indicated having to marry one of their girls under 18 due to the food crisis.²⁸

“I wanted to continue at school and participate in the girls’ group, but I surrendered to the pressure from family, hoping their economic problems would be improved with one less mouth to feed.”

13-year-old girl, Ethiopia

These increases have far-reaching effects. As well as being less likely to be in school and more likely to experience teen pregnancy, girls marrying young increases their risk of experiencing other forms of GBV throughout their lives. Globally, girls married before the age of 15 are almost 50% more likely to have experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence than those married after 18.²⁹

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Harmful gender norms

Unequal power dynamics can result in hunger itself becoming an expression of GBV in some instances. Women in violent partnerships may be food insecure because their partners control access to food.³⁰ In Bangladesh and India, women reported that they ate less (and often last) to avoid IPV.³¹ Women and girls in a 2019 assessment in Syria reported that denial of resources, including food, is an increasingly prevalent form of violence that women are facing a decade into the conflict.³²

PART 2

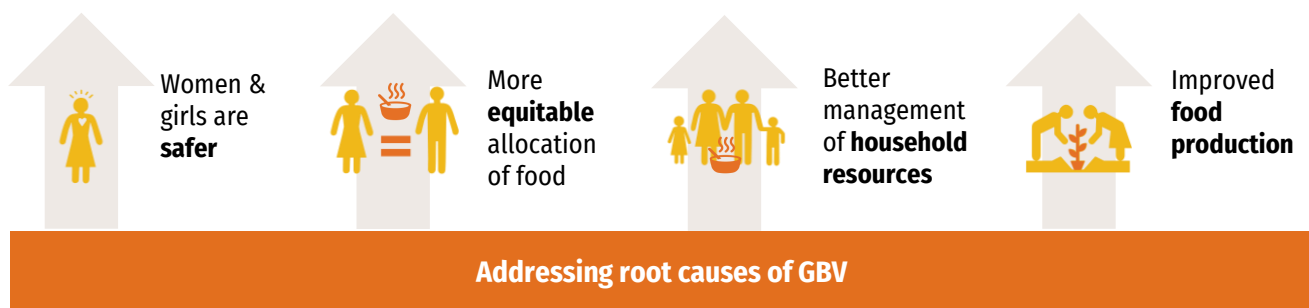
Taking action against GBV: an imperative to ensure access to food for women and girls

“Though we are in tough times, we try to eat well and be happy. For those who didn’t attend the training, you find them fighting due to the meals cooked, but for us who attended the training, we share the little we have.”

Olive, Indashyikirwa project participant, Rwanda

We need to take action against the spiraling levels of GBV to prevent further erosion of the rights and safety of millions of women and girls around the globe.

CARE’s experiences highlight the ways in which **intentional efforts to address GBV can have positive impacts on all aspects of women’s lives**—including the challenges they face from the current global food crisis.



Here’s what we’ve learned through our programs.

Deep engagement on gender equality can make women safer *and* help people eat more

In Rwanda, engaging couples in dialogue on power and gender led to a **55% reduction in women’s risk of IPV**. Alongside this, participants also reported increases in their odds of having cash income and household food security, accompanied by overall reductions in household scores for hunger.³³

In Burundi, addressing gender and social norms, building women’s solidarity, and engaging men on gender equality led to **households more than doubling their rice production**, with women being 26% more likely to have enough food to eat. At the same time, the proportion of men engaged in the project who believe domestic violence is never acceptable also doubled. The project saw a higher return on investment for groups which had a deep focus on women’s agency and social norms compared to those with a superficial or no focus on gender equality, with a return of \$5 for every \$1 invested (compared to a return of \$2 for every \$1 invested for programs that didn’t focus on gender).³⁴

“From cooperation with my husband, there is better management of our resources and we are no longer in the lowest category of poverty ranking... We sell our harvest so as to be able to afford other foods like rice which is not grown in this area.”

Clementine, Indashyikirwa project participant, Rwanda

Recommendation: Prioritize approaches which address root causes of gender equality in GBV, food security and related programming, as this can reduce GBV, reduce household hunger and increase food production.

Resources: The [Empowerment, Knowledge & Transformative Action \(EKATA\) model](#), the [Social Analysis in Action \(SAA\)](#) approach and participatory approaches promoting household dialogue such as [Indashyikirwa’s Couples’ Curriculum](#) can support deep engagement on GBV and gender equality.

“We have not reduced what we used to eat but rather put in place an agreement with my wife to each contribute to food costs. I usually contribute lunch costs and my wife dinner costs.”

Augustin, Indashyikirwa project participant, Rwanda

Social norms approaches can reduce the gender food gap

Interventions which aim to reduce GBV by focusing on social norms and household power dynamics can impact women’s experience of hunger in many ways. When the SHOUHARDO project in Bangladesh took steps to reduce the domestic violence young brides experience by focusing on household power dynamics, anecdotal evidence showed it had knock-on effects for their dietary intake. Social norms and household dialogue approaches led to young brides dining together with their husbands and in-laws rather than eating last and least.

“I thought that adolescent girls should eat after the men and not eat certain foods such as egg, fruits, milk and meat because this would encourage them to search out boys and become sexually active. I now know that these views are a reflection of society’s cultural taboos, ones that discriminate against girls.”

Kababush, Abdiboru project participant, Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, efforts to reduce the vulnerability of adolescent girls used social norms approaches to address cultural taboos, such as women facing censure for eating before men and the traditional view that certain nutritious foods should not be eaten by adolescent girls as they increase sexual arousal. As a result, girls are eating better food.³⁵

Recommendation: Ensure GBV, food security and related programing explicitly address harmful social norms which limit the voice and influence of women and girls.

Resources: CARE’s [Social Norms Design Checklist](#) supports programs to design and implement norms-shifting interventions.

Child marriage may be increasing as a result of food insecurity, but we already know what works to combat this

In Ethiopia, strong social norms integration alongside other components like sexual and reproductive health and economic empowerment achieved a 44% reduction in child marriage for the [Abdiboru](#) project,³⁶ similar approaches used by the [Projeunes](#) project in Benin led to rates of child, early and forced marriage more than halving.³⁷ In Bangladesh, the [Tipping Point](#) initiative’s social norms approaches have reduced the hazards of child marriage by 63%.ⁱⁱ Originally developed in Nepal and Bangladesh, the Tipping Point model has now been adapted for Mali and Niger and is being piloted in Syria for use in emergencies.

Recommendation: Replicate and scale-up proven social norms approaches to addressing child, early and forced marriage, targeting areas facing acute food insecurity and areas where increased food prices are impacting rates of child marriage.

Resources: Tipping Point’s [program resources](#) include tools, technical briefs and overviews to support social norms change, girl-led activism, and intergenerational dialogue approaches for adolescents’ rights.



ⁱⁱ Among girls who attended 36-40 sessions.

Women are the best source of information and solutions

We know that women themselves are best placed to understand the challenges they face and what will be most effective in resolving these, so it is crucial to actively **promote women's leadership and participation**. CARE's [Rapid Gender Analyses](#) and initiatives such as [Women Respond](#) ensure our understanding of global crises is centered on the needs of women and girls; approaches such as [Women Lead in Emergencies](#) ensure actions are led by their priorities.

The collective actions undertaken as a result of centering women's voice and leadership show just how intertwined issues such as GBV and food security are—and how women-led solutions are creating many positive changes. In Uganda, women in a refugee settlement had to walk nearly 10km to the nearest food distribution point, placing them at increased risk of GBV along the way. The leader of a women's group helped organize a peaceful boycott to successfully advocate for the food distribution point to be moved closer to the community. As the Women Lead in Emergencies model is scaled up, a next step is to pilot a combined approach specifically focused on addressing GBV in Emergencies.



Recommendation: Support women and women's groups to participate in and lead efforts in programming that addresses food insecurity—across sectors including humanitarian, climate change and agriculture—to enable community-led actions against GBV.

Resources: The [Women Lead in Emergencies overview](#) outlines the five steps of the Women Lead in Emergencies approach and how this brings gender transformative practice into humanitarian assistance.

Mitigating GBV risks across all programs is vital

Underpinning all programming, in development and humanitarian settings, is the **need to follow minimum requirements for mitigating the risks of GBV**. There are many ways GBV can be a barrier to women accessing food or increasing their food production. Identifying and reducing GBV risks, while preparing staff to respond appropriately if someone discloses they have experienced GBV, ensures interventions will not cause harm. **Taking proactive steps both increases women's safety and helps ensure food reaches the most vulnerable.**

In development settings, GBV integration is particularly important for programs promoting women's participation in agricultural or income-generating activities where this may challenge traditional roles and gender norms. Preempting negative backlash from husbands or community members and monitoring changes in GBV risk as projects progress has proved important for ensuring women experience the full benefit of interventions.

In humanitarian settings, GBV risk mitigation should include conducting a participatory GBV risk analysis with community members and local women's groups before food distributions to identify factors which could place women at additional risk and taking action to address these—such as seeking recommendations from women for safe distribution locations and providing clear information on how to report any concerns about harassment or coercion around food distributions.

Evidence related to Cash Voucher Assistance (CVA) suggests that when used alongside food and other assistance it can contribute positively to GBV prevention, mitigation and response.³⁸ When appropriate and well-coordinated, CVA may support action plans to protect those who are at risk and support survivors in their own recovery. For example, CVA can help women and girls meet basic needs such as buying food and thereby decreasing the likelihood of risky and harmful coping strategies, such as exchanging sex for food or forced marriage. CARE learned through its COVID economic recovery programming in Zimbabwe that CVA targeting women to re-enter markets *without* addressing GBV was not effective. However, combining CVA with addressing social norms and GBV was impactful in achieving positive outcomes for women vendors.

Recommendation: In development programs, particularly those relating to food security, climate change and livelihoods, integrate attention to GBV considerations at all stages to both increase women’s safety and boost household food security.

In humanitarian settings, integrate GBV risk mitigation actions in line with the IASC GBV Guidelines across all stages of food security programming. Mitigate potential GBV risks through conducting GBV risk assessments and regularly consulting women and girls on which food aid modalities (e.g., CVA, in-kind, hybrid) and implementation strategy (e.g., selection of distribution points, composition of food basket, etc.) they would find most appropriate and safest for a given context, solicit feedback and adjust programs accordingly.

Resources: For development programming, CARE’s [GBV Guidance for Development Programs](#) includes 10 practical steps to follow when integrating GBV across the project cycle. For humanitarian programming the [GBViE Guidance Note](#) outlines how CARE approaches GBV risk mitigation, response and prevention in emergency settings. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee [GBV Guidelines](#) includes specific thematic guides for [Food Security & Agriculture](#), [Livelihoods](#), and other sectors, as well as the [Cash & Voucher Assistance and GBV Compendium](#), which offers practical guidance on integrating GBV Risk Mitigation into CVA interventions.

Conclusion

It’s clear we must continue to focus on addressing GBV in the face of rising food insecurity if we want to prevent further erosions of gender equality and reduce the risk of violence.

This means **ensuring food relief efforts adequately address GBV risks** and **taking action to address the specific challenges faced by women and girls** as a result of rising food insecurity.

More than this, we must continue to **invest in comprehensive programs which address the underlying causes of GBV**.

CARE is an acknowledged leader in placing gender and equity practices at the heart of our work;³⁹ we believe **gender transformative approaches are integral to addressing the interrelated global challenges faced by women and girls**. Programs addressing the root causes of inequality and violence have proved successful in reducing levels of GBV and improving women’s food security overall. This requires continued commitment and investment to ensure such approaches are adopted, replicated and scaled to meet the current food crisis and avoid worse in the future.

CARE is not alone in pushing for gender transformative approaches to address the interrelated global challenges faced by women and girls.

The [GBV AoR](#)’s brief on [GBV Risks and Food Insecurity](#) references the need for gender-transformative approaches to address both acute and chronic food insecurity.

The [report](#) of the **UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences** highlighted the need to integrate a gender-responsive approach for addressing the climate crisis.

[UN Women’s Gender Equality Attitudes Study 2022](#) highlighted that discriminatory social norms and attitudes continue to hinder progress for women and girls everywhere.

Learn more about CARE’s programming to address the root causes of gender-based violence at care.org/GBV.

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