



**WOMEN'S RIGHT TO FOOD –  
PUTTING GENDER JUSTICE  
ON THE TABLE**

Photo: Marcus Lundstedt



Three billion men, women and children cannot afford enough healthy food to eat. Globally, women have a 27 per cent higher risk than men of facing severe food insecurity.

## Facing the facts

# WOMEN'S RIGHT TO FOOD – PUTTING GENDER JUSTICE ON THE TABLE

An estimated 80 per cent of the world's poorest people live and work in rural areas. Half of them are small scale farmers and 20 per cent are landless. According to the Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition 'gender relations and cultural norms are among the most significant drivers of hunger, malnutrition and unhealthy diets, particularly for women and girls'<sup>1</sup>. Harmful social gendered norms at household level means that women often eat least, eat last and eat the least nutritious food<sup>2</sup>. Harmful gender norms about ownership of land, assets and resources mean that women are denied socio-economic, civil and political rights which is a form of structural violence.

According to Dr. Michael Fakhri, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, the definition includes, *"the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access – either directly or by means of financial purchases – to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear"*.

This means that the right to food is not limited to having a certain amount of calories and necessary nutrients in one's diet; it means that everyone should have physical and economic access to food or the means of producing it at all times.

According to the UN Report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the world, 60 million more people are

hungry today than there were five years ago. Three billion men, women and children cannot afford enough healthy food to eat. According to a World Food Programme report<sup>3</sup>, women are more likely than men to experience food insecurity in 10 of the 17 countries in which the measure was tested. UN Women have reported that globally, women have a 27 per cent higher risk than men of facing severe food insecurity<sup>4</sup>. This gender gap is expected to rise in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, lack of gender disaggregated data remains a significant challenge to understanding the full extent of women's experience of severe food insecurity.

### GENDER INEQUALITY, COVID-19 AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD

The global health pandemic has had a significant impact on many aspects of people's lives: as individuals, in our social and working relationships and in the social dynamics and ways in which our societies and cultures are formed and structured. Two critical issues are the extent to which this pandemic has impacted on women's rights and what this means for advocates and activists of women's rights and gender equality in the future.

According to a survey conducted with 24 We Effect partner organisations in 12 different countries and four different regions, 15 of 24 listed gender based violence, GBV as the most significant impact of the lockdowns or restrictions imposed during the pandemic. A further 8 of 24 identified loss of income or livelihoods as a major impact for women with a further 5 respondents highlighting food insecurity or food shortages.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.fao.org/3/ne982en/ne982en.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>CARE International (2020) Left Out and Left Behind: Ignoring Women Will Prevent Us From Solving the Hunger Crisis Policy Report: <https://www.care-international.org/files/files/LeftOutandLeftBehind.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>World Food Programme (2020) The power of gender equality for food security: Closing another gender data gap with a new quantitative

measure.

<sup>4</sup>UN Women (2020a) Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. The gender snapshot 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/progress-on-the-sustainable-developmentgoals-the-gender-snapshot-2020-en.pdf>



Photo: Jesper Klemmedsson

With support from We Effect a school for women was created. Participants represented a wide variety of civil society organisations, all part of the umbrella network Ut'z Che'.

Of these 24 partner organisations, 16 highlighted that food insecurity, livelihoods and lack of economic opportunities would be the main challenges facing women after this crisis. Finally, 18 organisations identified socio-economic rights for women and GBV need to be the focus of development work after the pandemic.

#### CLIMATE JUSTICE, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD

Women and girls, rural populations, marginalised and excluded communities in many of the countries in which We Effect work are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis. The impacts of climate change are undermining the right to food among vulnerable people and communities as they disrupt supply chains, impact soil and livestock health, and lead to crop failures. Women are also bearing the brunt of climate-related natural hazards, such as droughts, landslides, floods and hurricanes.

Evidence shows that during times of livelihood insecurity – especially under conditions of climate impacts and disasters – women's and girls' unpaid care burden increases.

This affects their ability to participate in activities that will support their rights, such as education and training. The care burden means that women cannot always participate in or benefit from our programmes. Their freedom of movement is limited or controlled by demands at household level. In times of crisis or disaster, they are unable to move or relocate as easily as men because they are often expected to be responsible for the care of the children or elderly.

**GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND THE RIGHT TO FOOD**  
Gender based violence remains a significant barrier to affirming the right to food for women and girls. If we do not address gender based violence then we cannot achieve the right to food.

**The denial of the right to food  
is in itself a form of GBV.**

GBV can also heighten food insecurity by undermining the physical and psychosocial well-being of survivors. Injuries

or illness can affect a survivor's capacity to work, limiting their ability to produce or secure food for themselves and their families. Stigma and exclusion may further reduce survivors' access to food distributions, food- and agriculture related technical trainings, and other forms of support.

Food insecurity can exacerbate the severity or impact of GBV. The politicisation of food often means the women and marginalised communities (based on multiple identities including political affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression etc.) are excluded from accessing food aid or humanitarian aid.

The way the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately affect low and middle income countries is a great source of injustice. In addition, the economic crisis that is a result of the pandemic is exacerbating the extent and impact of GBV against women and girls. According to the UN, globally, an estimated 243 million women and girls aged 15 to 49 were subjected to sexual and/or physical violence

by an intimate partner in the previous year<sup>4</sup>. Covid-19 and the resulting lockdown and confinement measures are widely presumed to have heightened women's exposure to violence<sup>5</sup>. Since GBV directly impacts resilience, their vulnerabilities to disaster risks are heightened, even more. Therefore, prevention and response to GBV must be a central part of responding to the Covid-19 and the climate crises.

#### WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

The CFS Voluntary Guidelines affirm, 'women are important agents for sustainable development as food system actors, but also as actors in their households, communities and countries. It is important to recognise women's organisations and cooperatives as agents of change rather than simply conduits for service provision<sup>6</sup>. We should acknowledge that women-led, women's rights organisations and cooperatives are the best equipped to lead the work on the right to food for women.

#### PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE – WOMEN LEADING THE CHANGE IN SRI LANKA

*For many communities in Sri Lanka, the legacy of the conflict has been disenfranchisement and economic hardship. This has particularly affected women in Anuradhapura, who were unable to work or generate an income and were confined to the household. A partner organisation of We Effect, RPK (Rajarata Praja Kendraya) was established in 1997. RPK is a women's rights organisation that works with women and children for socio-economic empowerment. RPK has supported women-led cooperatives and groups to establish savings and loans associations. RPK provided trainings in financial literacy, entrepreneurship, business management and budgeting.*

*Not only did this create critical socio-economic opportunities for women, it also challenged harmful gender norms that had prevented women from being able to set up and run businesses. For many women, particularly single or widowed women, this has provided an opportunity to save money and invest in a business, as well as support their families. However, the cooperative and the savings and loans associations have also become safe spaces for women to address issues such as gender based violence and sexual reproductive health. Women offer each other support and refer survivors of GBV to RPK for professional services. Women have also used the cooperative to mobilise other women and take action for change in their community.*

*In interviews with We Effect one woman commented, 'we offer each other counselling and support, we would not allow a member to suffer without supporting her'. The support system provided by the cooperative and the safety net provided by the savings and loans has transformed women's role in the community. Now the women are entrepreneurs and together in the cooperative they also ensure sustainable sources of income and livelihoods for their members.*

<sup>4</sup><https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>  
<sup>5</sup>ibid

<sup>6</sup><https://www.sida.se/contentassets/3a820dbd152f4fca98bacde8a8101e15/preventing-and-responding-to-gender-based-violence.pdf>

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

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We Effect call on policy makers to take the following measures to protect and affirm women's right to food:

- ▶ **All governments** have a responsibility to ensure that women can affirm their right to food. All nations are urged to follow and apply and implement the CFS Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition and to ensure a strong gender transformative perspective in the forthcoming VFS Guidelines on Gender Equality.
- ▶ **All governments** need to act on and invest in climate change mitigation, adaptation, disaster risk reduction and gender equality as key to ensuring sustainable food systems.
- ▶ **All governments** need to ensure that barriers to the participation and inclusion of small-scale farmers, particularly women, are removed. Governments should ensure that legislation does not disenfranchise smallholder farmers in favour of corporate or private companies.
- ▶ **All governments** should ensure mechanisms of consultation and participation with women smallholder farmers to affirm the importance of sustainable livelihoods and increased resilience. In addition, strengthening entrepreneurial systems, that can generate sufficient income and build resilience for smallholder farmers. Finally, ensuring functioning markets that make it possible for smallholder farmers to sell their products for a decent price without exploitation.
- ▶ **All governments** should ensure that women's economic empowerment is at the centre of food security strategies in order to guarantee women's right to food.
- ▶ **Sweden's government** is urged to continue supporting the World Food Programme. We Effect particularly urge the Swedish government to finance and support the development of quantitative and qualitative systems to collect gender disaggregated data.
- ▶ **Sweden's development** assistance to sustainable food production should amount to at least 5.0 per cent of the total aid budget in order to match up to the international average.
- ▶ **Sweden should** increase the support to small-scale producers related to sustainable food production and gender equality. Particular focus should be given to women, who are overrepresented among those living in poverty, and who simultaneously bear a crucial responsibility for food production.
- ▶ **Sweden's support** to agriculture should have a clear focus on the transition to sustainable agriculture, such as agroforestry and other sustainable methods contributing to biodiversity and to mitigating the effects of climate change assuring that the support reaches women small scale farmers.
- ▶ **All donor countries** should prioritise programmes that seek to tackle the root causes of food insecurity: gender inequality and climate change encompassing the social, environmental, economic, gendered and political impacts of climate change and strengthen resilience at all levels: individual, social, material and environmental.
- ▶ **All donor countries** should strengthen support to gender transformative work, to support the most excluded and vulnerable people to build resilience and sustainable livelihoods, and to be recognised as active agents and leaders of change.