

Starving for Equality

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

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.

Gender inequality means men and boys also eat less. The [most recent research](#) shows that moving from perfect 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.

If a 40-year-old man with an average income in Honduras – which has high income inequality AND high gender inequality – he has an 87% chance of not knowing where his next meal is coming from. In the words of one man in Honduras,

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

“You no longer eat what you want, but what you can.”

Going to a place that has better gender equality and better income equality means he will be less hungry. If the same man lives in Albania – which has a relatively low income inequality and low gender inequality – he has a 55% chance of food insecurity. That's true even when everything else about his life—his income, his family, his climate worries—stays the same.

All of this is true even though the economies are growing in each of those countries. In economies where GDP is growing, but inequality is high, hunger goes up, not down. 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?

Social norms and expectations make it harder for women to eat. 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.’”

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 more people. Women having more equality in farming consistently translates into more food available, and people eating better, healthier diets—even in [crisis](#). **Climate change is hitting women harder.** 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.

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. 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](#).

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.** 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.** In [Burundi](#), working to build equality and farming skills showed a \$5 return for every \$1 invested, compared to a \$2 to \$1 return in agriculture program that ignored gender equality.
- **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.



“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. 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.
- **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](#).
- **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.