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Women are the Early Warning: Gender & Food Insecurity in the Dry Corridor of Honduras

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SUMMARY

There is abundant evidence¹ indicating that, in general, women are more likely than men to experience hunger during crises, especially in contexts where gender inequality persists. However, due to persistent gaps in the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data, we rarely can specify how many women are affected or how much more severe their needs are compared to men.

In a new assessment, CARE Honduras used methods compatible with the global standards of the Integrated Food Security and Nutrition Phase Classification (IPC) and CARE's Rapid Gender Analysis methodology to highlight the gap between men and women affected by acute food insecurity in the departments of Choluteca, El Paraíso, and Francisco Morazán, Honduras. The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative information enhances typical IPC analyses by enabling a detailed understanding of the food security situation and gender gaps between men and women. This differentiation facilitates the development of gender-sensitive and, where possible, gender-transformative programs and projects, addressing the practical and strategic needs of the most vulnerable populations affected by crises and emergencies. The consulted municipalities were the following: in Choluteca: Pespire, San Antonio de Flores, San Isidro, and San José; El Paraíso: Liure, Soledad, Texiguat, and Vado Ancho; and in Francisco Morazán: Alubarén, La Libertad, Reitoca, and San Miguelito.



¹ <https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/women-in-crisis-top-ways-women-are-hungrier/>

Gender and Food Insecurity

Why is it important to study differentiated needs in Honduras?

In **Honduras**, acute events such as the “El Niño” phenomenon, recurrent droughts, hurricanes Eta/Iota, COVID-19, and economic shocks have combined with structural issues like poverty, gender inequality, environmental degradation, and climate change to increase the proportion of the population needing humanitarian assistance. The Humanitarian Network in Honduras estimates that approximately 2.8 million people will need humanitarian assistance in 2024 (63% women and 37% men).²

For communities in the Dry Corridor, 2023 was particularly marked by the occurrence the El Niño, which impacted the harvest of staple crops, putting communities at higher risk of food insecurity and endangering the livelihoods.

Amidst these tensions on the agricultural sector, rural Honduran women face particular challenges, such as barriers to accessing credit and controlling productive resources.² Additionally, femicide rates in Honduras are among the highest in Latin America, and harmful social norms perpetuating gender-based violence amplify the challenges women face in building resilience against ongoing economic and climatic shocks.³



Precisely understanding the different and disproportionate needs of women and men in Honduras during this critical time is key to delivering an appropriate, efficient, and effective humanitarian response.

However, key tools like the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) do not collect or analyze sex-disaggregated data, a fact that limits the power of IPC as an early warning system and the potential for gender-transformative intervention to address both the short-term effects of the hunger crisis and the long-term opportunity to build resilience and strengthen just food systems in Honduras.

Study Components:

The quantitative and qualitative data collection was led by CARE Honduras, facilitated by three local partner organizations in the region: ADEPES, Sur en Acción, and the Regional Network of Women of the South.

Quantitative data was collected using an integrated questionnaire that combined IPC-approved indicators as well as indicators specifically designed for gender analysis.

Quantitative data was collected from 1,126 households and individuals across three departments: Choluteca, Francisco Morazán, and El Paraíso (See Table 1). In each household, two members participated: one who answered the questionnaire to describe the household's experience (as would be done in a typical IPC assessment) and an additional respondent who described their experience as an individual. All respondent data was disaggregated by sex.

² <https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2024/04/22142854/Honduras-HCA-2024.pdf>

³ <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/violence-against-women-other-pandemic-impacting-honduras>

Table 1. Sample size of quantitative data

Department	Sample Size (individual level)			Sample Size (head of household)		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Choluteca	249	263	512	381	131	512
Francisco Morazán	154	162	316	244	72	316
El Paraíso	160	138	298	204	94	298
Total	563 (50%)	563 (50%)	1126	829 (73.6%)	297 (26.4%)	1126

Table 2. Number of participants per qualitative tool

Department	Focus group		Key informant		Individual story	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Choluteca	0	14	3	4	2	3
Francisco Morazán	13	9	3	3	1	4
El Paraíso	11	8	3	4	5	5
Total	24	31	9	11	8	12

The **qualitative data** collection tools were adapted from CARE's Rapid Gender Analysis (RGA) toolkit to include focus group discussions, key informant interviews (KIIs), and individual stories (IS). In total, 95 respondents participated in qualitative data collection sessions.



FINDINGS

Finding #1: In the studied areas, women experience levels of hunger that far exceed those of men.

Across the various tools used in this study, such as household and individual questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, respondents were clear: there is a growing food crisis in the Dry Corridor of Honduras.

Most men and women reported taking measures to cope with the crisis in the past 30 days, and almost all (96% of men and 91% of women) cited that the reason for employing a coping strategy was to access food. A male key informant in Choluteca commented:

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

However, it is equally clear from the study conducted by CARE and its partners is that the food crisis is not uniform. Rather, in the three departments, we found a marked difference in food security outcomes between men and women, as measured by IPC-approved indicator, Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES).⁴

Using FIES, the IPC has established thresholds to classify the severity of acute food insecurity that people experience into three categories: Phase 1 (Minimal), Phase 2 (Stressed), and Phase 3+ (Crisis or worse).

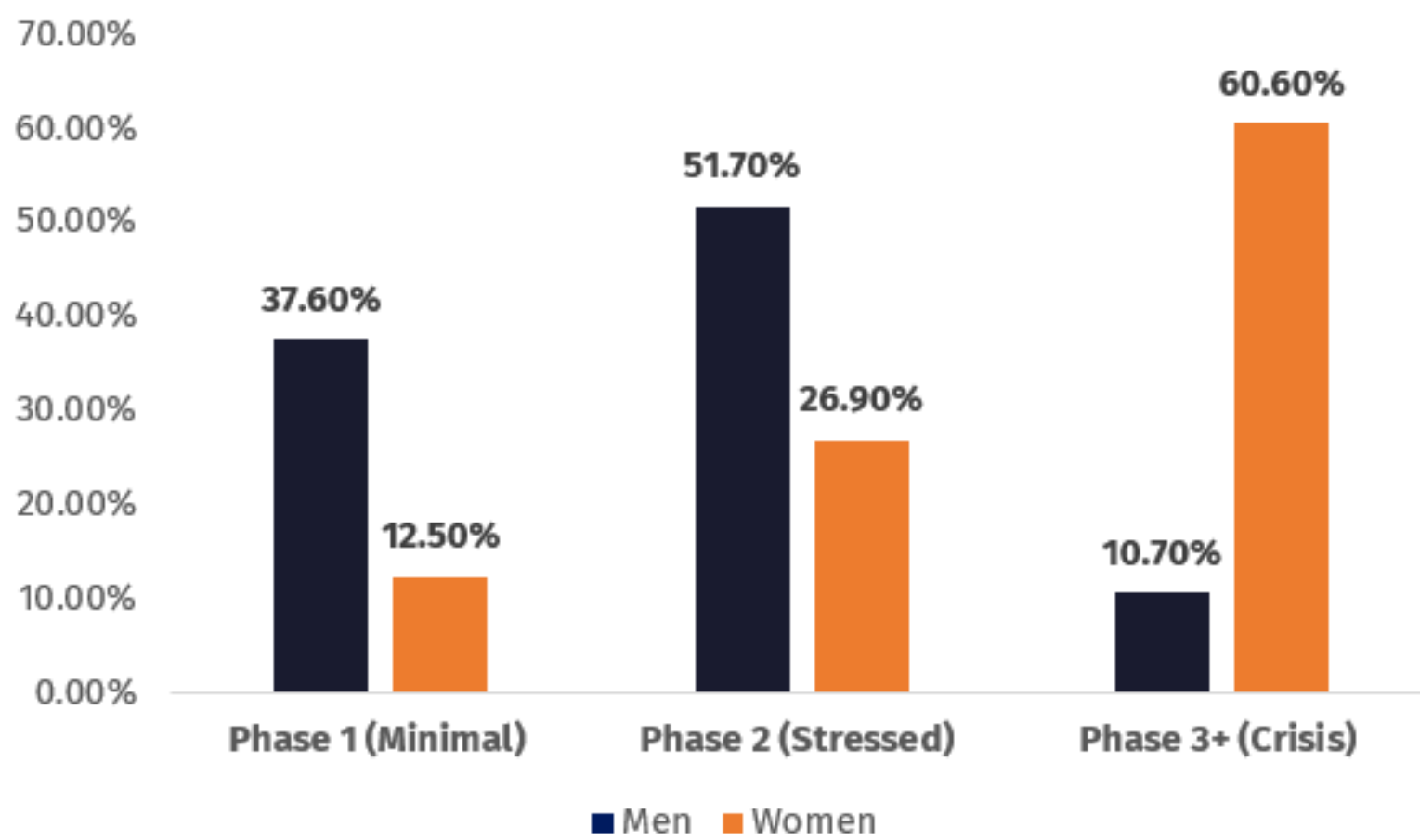
The results from Choluteca, Francisco Morazán, and El Paraíso show that women are experiencing crisis-levels of food insecurity at levels that far exceed men. **On average, 60.6% of women are classified in Phase 3+ (Crisis or worse), compared to only 10.7% of men.**

Qualitative interviews compliment these findings, as respondents often pointed out that the impact of the poor winter in 2023 had affected their community – from the increase in invasive pests to migration, security concerns (i.e., gang activity and gender-based violence), livelihood choices, and household commitments around meeting basic needs – and highlighted that the particular groups that were most affected by hunger were women, children, and the elderly.

Among the most affected groups, men and women shared that the difficulties faced by women were defined not only by their vulnerability to hunger but also by their responsibility to manage, prepare, and provide food for the entire family amid the crisis.

⁴ The FIES survey module consists of eight brief questions that refer to the experiences of the individual respondent or the respondent's household as a whole. Questions focus on food-related experiences and behaviors described by respondents, related to increasing difficulties in accessing food due to resource limitations (FAO).

Graph 1. Acute Food Insecurity in the Dry Corridor, disaggregated by gender (FIES)



As one respondent in a focus group in Choluteca described the experience of women facing the deep consequences of the hunger crisis:

We were anxious about not knowing how we would feed our children. Stress increased, headaches, back pain, foot pain; anxiety [about making] a sale, sometimes it doesn't sell.

The results of the Household Hunger Scale (HHS)⁵ indicator show that 54% of male-headed households are unable to meet their food needs, compared to 68% of female-headed households.

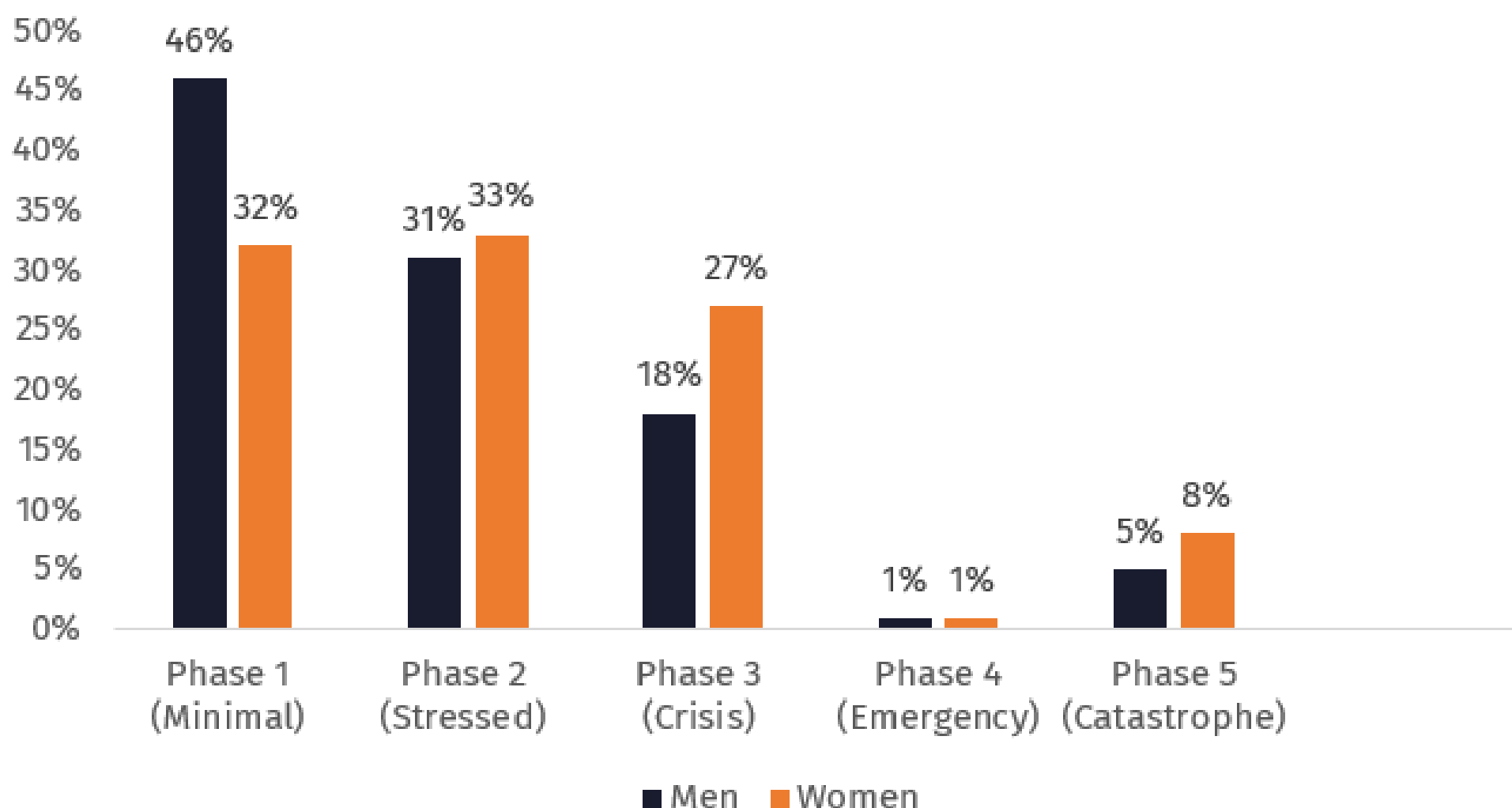
As with the individual-level data from FIES, while male-headed households on average, fall into the "minimal" acute food insecurity category, female-headed households are already in crisis.

Critically, data from the RGA study in Honduras confirms the correlation the gender hunger gap impacts more than just the food security of women. In the three departments, people of any gender living in female-headed households were more likely to experience food insecurity than those of any gender living in male-headed households.

In many focus groups, it was highlighted that single mothers face the greatest challenges providing for their families. A woman in El Paraíso succinctly highlights this phenomenon:

Everyone [is affected] because there hasn't been work, but especially single women are more affected, because they have to take on every role and figure out how to bring food home.

Graph 2: Household Hunger Scale (HHS) by Gender of Household Head



⁵ <https://www.fao.org/gender/learning-center/thematic-areas/gender-and-food-security-and-nutrition/4/>

Finding #2: Higher levels of hunger and barriers to rights and services mean that women are forced to resort to high-risk strategies for their and their families' survival.

Higher levels of food insecurity among women and female-headed households align with global trends and studies that have established associations between the unequal access of female-headed households to education, resources, services, and social capital. As a result, those living in female-headed households face greater risks of food insecurity.

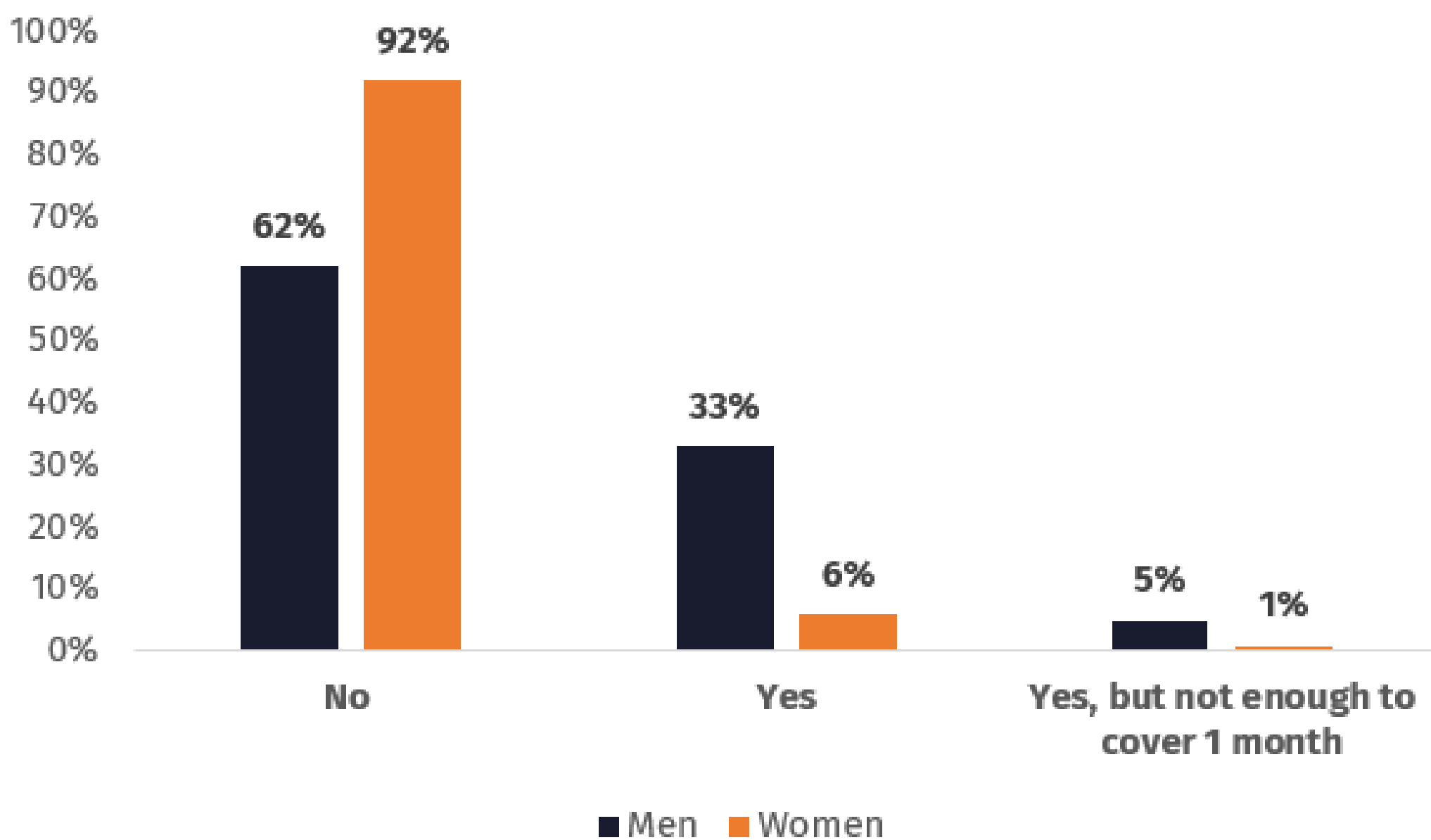
In fact, women and female-headed households reported very unequal access to opportunities and assets to cope with the food crisis. Both in the

quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, women highlighted the structural and systemic barriers that prevented them from accessing significant savings and assets to buffer crises.

Women described that because of longstanding inequalities that limit their ability to own property titles, they are likewise unable to access savings and credit cooperatives and other income-generating activities.

Results from the quantitative survey confirmed that women overwhelmingly reported (92%) that they do not have savings or assets they could sell if necessary, compared to 62% of men who said they have no savings.

Graph 3. Do you currently have savings or assets that you could sell if necessary?



Although several women indicated that there were some opportunities to earn income, they stressed that accessing these involved risks. In female-headed households, women expressed their interest or intention to seek income to support their families **but also voiced their fear that seeking employment and leaving their children (especially daughters) alone would put them at greater risk of gender-based violence (GBV), harassment, and sexual abuse.** In addition to GBV risks and coping strategies

faced by adolescent girls, testimonies identified indications of a relationship between the increase in teenage pregnancies and the food crisis:

In the community of El Hato - the largest in the municipality of Soledad - there is a lot of teenage pregnancy when parents leave for seasonal work during the coffee, melon, and watermelon harvests, leaving daughters alone, resulting in teenage pregnancies.



Findings from the studied areas further demonstrate a "negative cycle" effect, where food insecurity and protection risks reinforce one another. The more food insecurity people experience, the more exposed they become to protection risks. In turn, the impact of protection risks can undermine people's long-term ability to meet their needs or reduce their resilience to future shocks.

In the three departments, respondents often cited the difficulty of accessing assets or income opportunities to cope with the food crisis as a factor that led to increased use of high-risk coping strategies among women and girls, such as transactional sex.

During the interviews, multiple participants explained that some adolescent girls saw transactional sex as a way to finance their continued education, while single mothers used it as a form of economic support for their families. Women also expressed concern about new forms of sexual exploitation of adolescents, such as selling sexually explicit photos and/or videos to earn some income to support family expenses.

Finally, interviewees emphasized that the drought forced people to spend more time and travel greater distances to obtain food. This increased protection risks for women and children, as women had to journey farther from home, leaving children alone for extended periods.

At the same time, they mentioned that in such cases, they did not have access to protection services. Participants perceived an increase in household tensions, leading to more fights, alcohol use, domestic, and intrafamily violence. A GBV case worker stated during the interviews:

When there is no harvest, there is no food in the house, psychological problems and couple problems start. The man, seeing no harvest, gets frustrated, starts a discussion at home [...] in the last quarter of last year, almost every week there were cases of violence.

Finding #3: Despite the profound impacts, risks, and barriers that disproportionately affect women, response efforts largely continue to ignore a gender-focused approach.

In general, people of both sexes interviewed in the three departments expressed that the aid programs they were aware of were, at best, not very participatory and poorly directed and at worst not very transparent. Questions arose about whether the aid was directed to the most vulnerable and the level of support these programs actually offered. The responses indicate that, given the significant disparity in food security, coping strategies, and protection risks faced by women, there are alarming gender gaps in the response to community needs.

For example, although in the quantitative survey women reported participating in community decision-making processes at higher rates than men, many women felt that participation did not translate into influence or power, as social norms prevent women from exercising equal leadership in these forums or decision-making spaces. An interviewee from the community of Soledad explained:

In urban areas, as there is more education, women make more decisions. [...] 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.'

CARE identified an absence of programs in areas aimed at transforming power barriers and unequal access to resources. The study also identified a significant gap in access to services that mainly affects more remote communities, including psychosocial care services and support for survivors of gender-based violence.

Despite these barriers, the women interviewed in this study had many ideas on how to improve and support their communities. They suggested strategies with a long-term and transformative vision for their communities, focused on empowering local actors. We reproduce and develop these ideas in the recommendations section below.

Both the impacts of the crisis and the differential coping mechanisms imply that gender inequality is both a cause and a consequence of food insecurity for women and their families. However, participants in the focus groups emphasized that the responses to the crises have not considered the needs of women, much less do they have strategies to reduce root causes, such as gender inequality through the strengthening of local and municipal structures of civil society organizations (CODEL, CODEM, and Women's Organizations) in terms of preparedness and response to different risk scenarios, including early warning systems.

In partnership with:



RECOMMENDATIONS:

Humanitarian Response Teams:



Provide immediate food assistance tailored to the specific and individual needs of women, men, boys, and girls, with special attention to female-headed households and vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, nursing mothers, and young children.



Collect disaggregated data by sex, age, and disability to highlight the differentiated needs of women, men, boys, and girls in terms of food security, as well as access to resources and services.



Implement cash transfers to facilitate the acquisition of agricultural inputs or to strengthen enterprises, providing direct support to households to enhance their food production capacity, with priority given to female-headed households.



Strengthen gender-transformative community resilience and risk management through the use of climate information, training on adaptation and mitigation measures for extreme climate events, and technical assistance in regenerative agriculture.





Incorporate a protection approach against gender-based violence as an integral part of the crisis response, increasing support for women's organizations in the territories and ensuring their integral coordination role to bridge access gaps to services for women and girls, as well as to mitigate the risks highlighted in the study, such as teenage pregnancies and sexual exploitation.



Promote the analysis of capacities and vulnerabilities with a gender perspective that involves municipal and national authorities in different risk scenarios.



Strengthen local and municipal Civil Society Organizations structures (CODEL, CODEM, and Women's Organizations) in terms of their preparedness and response to different risk scenarios, including IPC acute food insecurity early warning systems alerts.



Ensure the participation and leadership of women in prominent roles in disaster risk management and resilience based on their practices, knowledge, and the strengthening of their local initiatives.



Promote and revitalize family farming through the adoption of innovative practices, the use of agroecology, and climate-smart techniques to increase the resilience of food production systems.



Promote the creation of community and school gardens to reactivate food production in rural areas, providing local employment opportunities and food security.



Provide technical assistance through participatory methodologies such as Farmer Field and Business Schools, where innovative agricultural production techniques are taught and the transformation of social norms related to nutrition, the market, finance, the environment, and gender is promoted to achieve sustainable change in affected communities.



Implement a community finance program (VSLA) linked to local enterprises and markets to strengthen the economic capacity of communities and their access to financial resources, with an emphasis on women and youth groups.

Program and Project Teams in the Food Security and Nutrition Sector:



Collaborate with the community and feminist organizations to incorporate women's leadership in decision-making in crisis response and Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) programs; ensuring equitable participation and empowering women at all levels of program planning and execution.



Establish and strengthen community grain banks led by women to ensure sustainable access to staple foods during times of crisis, fostering solidarity and collaboration among community members.

Decision-makers, including humanitarian donors:



Establish a system for monitoring and referring cases of acute malnutrition to the appropriate authorities, and provide training in food and nutrition education to improve the health and well-being of the population.



Increase investments in specific interventions for gender equality, and increase support for women-led organizations.



Ensure that all funded proposals are informed by a gender analysis, a protection and gender-based violence (GBV) risk assessment, the use of sex- and age-disaggregated data (SADD), and an evaluation according to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender and Age Marker.



Establish a system for monitoring and referring cases of acute malnutrition to the appropriate authorities, and provide training in food and nutrition education to improve the health and well-being of the population.



Address the intersectional impacts of the food crisis—such as increased protection risks and displacement—by adequately funding protection programs, gender-based violence (GBV), sexual and reproductive health, and psychosocial support, either as standalone programs or as part of multisectoral programming.



In Honduras, advance the regulation of the 'Law for the Protection of Women in Contexts of Humanitarian Crises, Natural Disasters, and Emergencies' and allocate public budget for its proper implementation.



Conduct a mapping of the actions being implemented in different territories in the field of Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) with a gender perspective; as well as manage funds to generate disaggregated data to close the information gap.







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