



# COVID19, Food & Nutrition Security, and Gender Equality

**How women, gender equality, and social norms are critical to recovering from the COVID19 crisis—and building back better.**

The Global Network Against Food Crisis says that [the number of people facing food crisis will likely double](#) as a result of COVID19. A combination of disrupted markets, lack of international trade, lower travel, and mobility restrictions are going to impact people’s ability to grow, buy, sell, or prepare the food they need to stay healthy. By the end of 2020, 265 million people are likely to face starvation.

These numbers are dire, and the picture for women is worse. Women already bear the brunt of hunger. [60% of the hungry people](#) and [76% of displaced people](#) in the world are women and girls. Women-headed households are the most likely to [suffer from food crisis](#). Add that to the incredible [burden COVID19 is putting on women, rising rates of GBV, and the other gender implications of COVID19](#), and the potential impacts are staggering.

Women are also a core part of the solution. They are leaders, innovators, farmers, caretakers, and saleswomen who can help solve this problem. Investing in women works. CARE’s research shows that every \$1 we invest in a woman farmer turns into [\\$31 of benefits](#) to herself, her family, and her community.

For women to further unleash their leadership, we need to transform the social norms and barriers that stand in their way as they respond to crises, feed their families, influence markets, and negotiate a better future. Laws, assumptions, data gaps, and traditional gender roles all put additional barriers on women’s ability to respond to crisis. If global responses to COVID19 perpetuate those inequalities—such as by releasing [gender blind data about food security and COVID19](#)—we will lose the chance to build back inclusively and equitably.

This review examines how COVID19 will especially challenge women and their food and nutrition security. It also shows women can be a part of the solution if they have a seat at the table and a greater voice in decisions.

## Women Grow Food

Women are a key—and yet often invisible—part of our food systems. Women are [43 % of the farming workforce](#) in developing countries. More than 60% of employed women in sub-Saharan Africa are working in agriculture—for [half the wages men make](#). How is COVID19 challenging women growing food?

- **Increasing the burden of care:** Even in a regular year, women are already [working 1.5 times more hours a day](#) than men are. Caring for children, collecting water, preparing food, cleaning house—[women do 76% of that unpaid care work](#). [COVID19 is increasing women's caregiving burdens](#) because children and the elderly are at home more and women are much more likely to be caring for the sick. That extra time makes it challenging to spend the time they need on farming, and productivity will suffer. All guidance must aim to reduce burdens on women's time and encourage men to share the caregiving burden.
- **Reducing access to information:** Many women rely on informal, [person-to-person networks](#) to get access to information. COVID19-related mobility restrictions and social distancing are compromising this kind of information sharing. As agriculture extension services move to digital platforms to accommodate social distancing, women will get left behind in the widening digital divide. Globally, [327 million fewer women](#) have access to smartphones than men. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only [58% of women own a mobile phone](#) compared to 71% of men. Men are more likely to control radios and other means of communication. Access to technology is not gender neutral, and we must not assume this in guidance, advisories, and response plans.
- **Closing access to markets:** Normally, women's lower access to resources means [they produce 20-30% less](#) than men do. COVID19 is likely to widen that gap. As markets close and cross border trade deteriorates with COVID19 quarantines, women struggle to access the seeds, tools, and fertilizer they need to plant crops this year. In addition to the challenges men face, mobility restrictions and caregiving burdens make it harder for women. When input prices rise, women—who already have lower incomes—will get priced out of the market for seeds, tools, and labor before men do. It is imperative that our guidance, investments, and technical support do not neglect this reality.

## Women Buy, Sell and Prepare Food

Globally women do [85 - 90% of the cooking](#). They also do [most of the grocery shopping](#). Women invest [more of their money in buying food](#) than men do. In most contexts, women are also almost [entirely responsible for child nutrition](#). Cooking and feeding the family are often considered to be a profound part of a woman's worth; that's why standard questionnaires about GBV ask if it is acceptable to hit a woman who has [burned the food](#). How is COVID19's impact on food systems likely to have a bigger impact on women?

- **Lowering mobility:** In many countries, women already have lower mobility than men, often requiring permission to leave the house. Some policy decisions in the COVID19 crisis restrict women more than men. Malaysia famously [only allowed heads of household to leave the home](#). Caregiving burdens also keep more women at home.
- **Decreasing immunity:** When a crisis hits, [women are usually the first to start eating less](#), or eating last, to make sure that the rest of their families can get enough to eat. They are also [3 times more likely to be anemic](#) than men. Not only does this mean more women than men are likely to go hungry when the COVID19-related “hunger pandemic” hits, it also means that women will have fewer of the nutrients so vital for boosting the immune system to fight disease. High rates of anemia for pregnant women and children increase these risks.
- **Raising risk:** Women are also [facing higher risk of Gender-Based Violence](#) and sexual exploitation as food quantity and quality decreases and stress goes up—especially when many men [consider inadequate food preparation](#) a justifiable reason to abuse their wives. Where women can be more mobile and continue their role of buying food for the household, that may put them at higher risk of exposure to COVID19. Women are spending more time collecting water to meet higher handwashing

needs, which increases women's and girls' risk of COVID19 exposure and GBV.

## Women Face Social Barriers and Harmful Norms

The COVID19 crisis risks rolling back women's rights and economic gains, as so many crises have before. CARE's research in [Ethiopia and Zimbabwe](#) nutrition programs showed that gains in women's decision-making power at home regressed when crisis hit. In [Mali](#) and [Niger](#), women are the first to lose access to land and income when crisis puts pressure on resources. The [Arab Spring was catastrophic for women's rights](#) in the Middle East, as people seized a moment of crisis to roll back social progress—a [pattern that is already repeating in COVID19](#).

The 2008 financial crisis rolled back [women's rights and employment](#). In the wake of COVID19, [millions of women are losing their jobs](#) in female-dominated industries like garment factories in Asia or domestic work in Latin America. Women who own small businesses in West Africa are now putting all of their capital into buying food for their families. For the poorest and most vulnerable women, losing these economic gains may also risk the empowerment and decision-making roles that women have been able to claim for themselves.

Women [are not at the table when key decisions are made](#) and are often [invisible in the datasets leaders use to guide decisions](#). The current data around COVID19 and food crisis is replicating this pattern, putting women at risk of losing the gains they had made around rights, agriculture, financial inclusion, and decision-making.

## Women Are an Essential Part of the Solution

COVID19 is putting unprecedented pressure on women, their rights, and their food security. But women can also be powerful actors to solve the problem. Their ingenuity, solidarity, [adaptive capacity](#), and key role in food systems means that if we keep women at the core of COVID19 response, we may see better results. How can we work with women to mitigate the coming food crisis?

- **Treat women and girls as leaders:** CARE [Zimbabwe's Masvingo El Nino Recovery Project](#), funded by USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, encouraged women to be in leadership roles during crises to ensure that women's needs are met, and that women have a voice in community decision-making on crisis response, to find long-term solutions to agro-input market disruptions. Women have different needs in a crisis and need to be a part of shaping the solutions.
- **Build all guidance, data, and policies with reference to women's rights and needs.** As development and humanitarian actors adjust plans and programs, it is imperative that all plans address different needs and vulnerabilities of women. Much current technical and policy guidance in the food and nutrition security arena is gender-blind. These omissions risk reinforcing existing biases in the way services, incentives, and information are delivered to women—further eroding women's rights.
- **Ask women and girls what they need:** All data collected in COVID19 should be sex-disaggregated, and include specific questions that ask women themselves what they need because [women, men, and youth](#) have specific needs. The current data on COVID19 and food crisis has a significant gap around the experiences and needs of women and girls—a gap we should urgently fill. Understanding how this shock is affecting women's food security is key to finding solutions to the looming food crisis.
- **Work with women's groups:** Women's groups—[savings groups](#), farmer groups, producer groups, and social groups—exist all over the world. With savings groups alone, CARE reaches 10.3 million women. These groups are already taking steps to react to COVID19. In [Niger, women savings groups](#) negotiated with a local energy company to get handwashing equipment they could install in their community. In the 2012 crisis in [Mali](#), savings groups took charge of helping refugee families get access to resources.
- **Get women cash and food now:** Because of quarantines during Ebola, [60% of people in Sierra Leone](#) ate their entire seed reserve and could not plant crops the following year. 26% of people sold off all their livestock, and 40% had used up all their savings. Depleting assets this way can depress agricultural production when farmers—especially women—can't afford to buy seeds, fertilizer, or other tools they need to grow food. The effects can last for years, with below average production as families struggle to

rebound. A combination of seed vouchers, [cash transfers](#), and support to savings groups helped keep Sierra Leone's crops growing, and 84% of people were eating more meals.

- **Recognize women as farmers and producers:** Any COVID19 agricultural support, programs, and subsidies should explicitly target women producers. That means not only setting specific targets for at least 50% of support to reach women farmers, but also designing interventions that meet women's needs. When we [aim to keep inputs flowing](#), we need to consider what women need. One example from Ethiopia includes packaging inputs in smaller bags so women can afford and carry them.
- **Think of women as market players:** Women are critical players in many markets and help keep economies flowing. In [Haiti](#), 43% of female vendors in the social safety net program hired additional labor to help with their businesses. Women entrepreneurs in [Rwanda](#) created nearly 100,000 jobs and increased business profitability by 75%. Every COVID19 food security response should explicitly consider how to support women in markets, [agricultural value chains](#), and business to support recovery.
- **Support women to build connections to markets:** In [Bangladesh](#) in 2014, political unrest shut down markets in some areas for several weeks at a time. Communities were not able to tap into normal market activities. Women who had built links with market buyers bounced back from crisis faster. They saw production drop by 3.8% and were able to return to pre-crisis levels in 2 weeks compared to 7 weeks and 7.1% drop for disconnected women. Connecting these women to markets was only possible by convincing private sector actors to change the way they thought about women as market players.
- **Enable women (and men) to access information:** In [Ghana](#), Talking Books and radio were used to convey seasonally appropriate key recorded messages. As one male Gender Champion put it, "The talking book was a very powerful gender tool. (...) Women would bring the talking book home and play it. The talking book had a significant impact on hard to reach men in the village." Radio programs and WhatsApp groups are also used to broadcast shows and information on nutrition, agriculture, and child health. When conflict and insecurity in [Mali](#) made it difficult to reach farmers, CARE worked with in partnership with [Farm Radio International](#) and **local radio stations** to host **shows on nutrition, agriculture, and child health**, and the intersections between them.
- **Allow as much mobility as possible:** Social distancing is a critical tool to contain the spread of COVID19, and quarantine measures are designed to support that. These measures should still allow as much mobility as possible, and particularly support women's mobility. Restricting travel between communities while ensuring that small-scale women farmers can get to their fields, encouraging men to take on child care responsibilities while women leave the house, keeping markets open with adequate social distancing measures, and investing heavily in public handwashing facilities can reduce the spread of COVID19 without crippling markets or making it impossible for women to access food.
- **Engage men to support women:** Working with male leaders who can advocate for women's rights and speak out against GBV is one key to success. Another is getting men to support women with caregiving work, household chores, fetching water, and other traditional roles for women. This gives women time to tend their crops and ensure food security in the long run. Men should also ensure women get equal access to food.

## Build back equal

We must consider women's rights and empowerment as an essential element of the COVID19 response and long-term resilience—not a trade-off between immediate crisis response and a longer-term goal of women's rights. Women and their rights are at risk in the COVID19 crisis. Gender-blind policies now will risk not only women's rights now, but also our global food and economic systems where women are critical actors. Women have the skills and abilities to lead in crisis, and our programs must empower them to do so. It is only by leveraging every resource available in the world—including the incredible, often ignored and oppressed—skills women bring that we can overcome the crisis we all face.