

THE HUNGER CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON GIRLS: POLICY BRIEF, SEPTEMBER 2022

- An unprecedented global hunger crisis places the lives of 50 million people at immediate risk of starvation.
- The impact of hunger on girls is specific and differential yet often unaddressed.
- Governments, donors, humanitarian and development actors are called to i) provide urgent funding to halt this crisis, ii) ensure interventions are gender and age responsive and, iii) mobilise political will to address the drivers of hunger.

THE HUNGER CRISIS

This year, 50 million people across 45 countries are on the brink of famine - the deadliest form of hunger - within an unprecedented crisis.¹ Globally, **45 million children under the age of five are suffering from wasting.**² **One in five deaths among children 0-5 is due to severe wasting** (severe acute malnutrition), making it one of the main threats to child survival.³ The right to life, survival and development of millions are at immediate risk while hunger and poverty puts girls at risk of child, early and forced marriage, unwanted pregnancy, gender-based violence, school dropout, sexual exploitation and abuse.

In this context and with funding constraints, food aid is being reduced in hunger hotspots.⁴ Ethiopia, northern Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Haiti, Madagascar, Burkina Faso, Niger, Yemen, Kenya and Somalia are among the countries with the highest levels of food insecurity, from **crisis to catastrophic famine levels.**

Conflicts have caused 60 per cent of hunger worldwide.⁵ Moreover, the effects of climate crisis and COVID-19 are now being compounded by soaring inflation, rising food, energy and fertiliser prices, as well as food shortages due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Urgent action is required to halt this crisis and save millions of lives. Investment is needed in adaptation and anticipatory interventions, and prevention and response must be tackled from an age and gender perspective. Political will must address the drivers of hunger through the different decision-making spaces in the conflict, economic and climate agendas, and strengthen and

enforce accountability of existing mechanisms that ensure access to adequate food and nutrition.

Impact of hunger on the rights of girls

As the reality of this crisis unfolds, the specific and differential impact of hunger on girls often remains unacknowledged and unaddressed.

Women and girls account for 70% of the world's hungry.⁶ As a result of gender inequality, girls and women regularly eat less and last in countries facing conflict, famine and hunger.⁷

Yet food insecurity places girls at risk not only of hunger, but **gender-based discrimination and violence.** As poverty and a lack of access to livelihoods deepen, families increasingly resort to negative coping mechanisms, heightening girls' risk of child, early and forced marriage and unions, unintended pregnancy, child labour, sexual exploitation and abuse.

Hunger erodes the access of girls to basic rights. Girls are more likely than boys to be taken out of school when families come under strain, and for those who continue to attend school, hunger can severely impact their learning. Adolescent girls in particular face increased threats to their sexual and reproductive health and rights, including maternal health.

Despite the identified needs and risks faced by girls, their rights are deprioritised and neglected within standard responses to food insecurity - leading to devastating and lifelong impacts.

¹ WFP (2022). [2022: A Year of Unprecedented Hunger](#)

² FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO (2022). [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World](#)

³ UNICEF (2022). [Severe Wasting: An overlooked child survival emergency](#)

⁴ WFP (2022). [WFP at a glance: A regular lowdown on the facts, figures and frontline work of the World Food Programme](#)

⁵ WFP (2022). [Unprecedented needs threaten a hunger catastrophe](#)

⁶ UN HRC (2015). [Report on Integrating a Gender Perspective in the Right to Food A/HRC/31/51](#)

⁷ UN Women (2015). [Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace](#)

Impact of hunger on girls' exposure to violence and exploitation

- When food is scarce and the livelihoods that many families rely on are destroyed, this often leads to a rise in adolescent girls experiencing child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) and with it their risk of intimate partner violence and unintended pregnancy. **Adolescent girls overwhelmingly tell us that their vulnerability to CEFMU is closely linked to the economic situation of their families and findings from recent research show that food insecurity interacts with other risks and drivers to elevate girls' risks of CEFMU.**⁸ Other risks are increased susceptibility to female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in communities where this harmful practice is a norm.
- In response to growing food scarcity and loss of income, girls and young women may also be driven to work in harmful conditions, experience various forms of exploitation including working without pay and human trafficking, engage in transactional sex in exchange for food, money or goods, or be forced to live with relatives where they might experience violence and abuse.
- Stress and tensions in households are exacerbated by food insecurity, unmet basic needs, and an **increased burden of care**, particularly for girls and women, and this can cause increased risk of intimate partner violence, violence against children and neglect.

Impact of hunger on girls' education and school feeding programmes

- School closures due to COVID-19 dealt a devastating blow to gains that had been made in improving girls' access to quality education. As families now face mounting food insecurity pressure, girls are increasingly called upon to care for younger siblings so parents can work or seek food, forcing them to miss or drop out of school. As a result, **girls' education is likely to be further deprioritised, exacerbating the gender gap in education.** In the absence of free school meals, girls who go to school hungry are likely to perform poorly compared to girls from food secure households.
- Lack of access to education undermines girls' **long-term wellbeing and future prospects** with evidence showing losses in lifetime productivity and earnings of between USD 15-30 trillion for girls who do not complete 12 years of education.⁹ Loss of access to education jeopardises girls' immediate protection and increases their exposure to **gender-**

based violence (GBV) and other harmful practices.

- Closure of schools due to COVID-19, combined in some contexts with hundreds of schools rendered non-functional because of conflict and insecurity, is **interrupting school feeding programmes and general food and cash distributions to families in need.** School feeding initiatives not only improve children's nutritional status, and support household food security but also help increase enrolment, performance and attendance, particularly among adolescent girls.¹⁰

Impact of hunger on girls' sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR)

- Lack of resources and food exposes girls and young women to sexual exploitation, CEFMU and GBV. Consequences include **sexually transmitted infections** (including HIV), unintended or **unwanted pregnancies**, maternal morbidity and death.¹¹ Maternal under-nutrition is also a risk factor for low birth weight, premature birth and increased child mortality, contributing to an estimated 2.4 million neonatal deaths a year.¹²
- When food is scarce, households may be forced to deprioritise the purchase of SRH services and supplies, such as contraceptives or menstrual hygiene products. This leaves girls and women increasingly vulnerable to unintended or unwanted pregnancies and poor menstrual hygiene and health.
- During crises, including those of food security, the provision of SRHR education, services and information is often deprioritised. **Neglecting the SRHR needs of children, adolescents and young women has serious consequences** – including unintended early pregnancy and its associated risks, CEFMU, sexually transmitted diseases and psychological trauma.

Impact of hunger on Early Childhood Development (ECD)

- CEFMU, which is linked to early childbearing, can lead to increased maternal and infant mortality and malnutrition in both mother and child.
- **Pregnant and lactating women, adolescents and under-fives are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition** because of the increased rate at which they are growing and their bodies are changing. Lack of access to nutritious food can stunt growth and has significant impacts on brain development, which undermines school readiness, educational attainment, health, and economic

⁸ Plan International (2022). [Our Voices. Our Future](#)

⁹ World Bank (2018). [Why do girls drop out of school and what are the consequences of dropping out?](#)

¹⁰ WFP (2019). [The impact of school feeding programmes.](#)

¹¹ UNFPA (2015). [State of the world population 2015: Shelter from the Storm.](#)

¹² WHO (2020). [Newborns: improving survival and well-being](#)

outcomes. Malnutrition poses particular threats to adolescent girls and women who are pregnant, increasing their risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, newborn death and maternal mortality. Low birth weight and stunting for children can lead to an intergenerational cycle of malnutrition.

- The specific nutritional requirements of **children under 5 years and pregnant and lactating mothers**, including adolescent girls, mean that these groups are particularly vulnerable in the context of food insecurity, with long-term and inter-generational impacts on health, development and wellbeing.

Drivers of the hunger crisis

Conflict and insecurity are recognised as the primary drivers of acute food insecurity, including the current hunger crisis. Other drivers, often interconnected and reinforcing, **are economic shocks and climate change**. Within the context of women and girls, it's crucial to understand the intersecting drivers of **gender-based violence and gender discrimination**.

Conflict

Conflict has been the main driver in three of the four countries with populations suffering a catastrophic, faminelike situation: Ethiopia, South Sudan and Yemen. **Countries facing conflict and insecurity are the most complex and challenging contexts** for humanitarian actors to operate. Humanitarian access constraints in these contexts affect the ability of humanitarian actors to provide assistance to affected communities.

The starvation of civilians can be used as a method of warfare by parties to conflict, in violation of international humanitarian law. As civilians are displaced, agricultural land is left fallow and livelihood assets lost, while food systems and markets are disrupted.

Economic shocks

Economic shocks are the main factor currently contributing to acute food insecurity in 21 countries, affecting more than 30 million people. Still suffering the economic consequences of COVID-19, the conflict in Ukraine is exacerbating this situation, particularly through higher food, energy and fertiliser prices.

Domestic food price inflation in low-income countries with high dependence on food imports is increasing more than in the last decade.¹³ In addition, some of the

countries with Humanitarian Response Plans are also suffering a 30% increase in their food basket costs.¹⁴

Climate change

Climate variability and extreme weather events, land degradation and desertification are some of the key drivers of severe food crises, undermining all four dimensions of food security - food availability, access, utilisation, and stability.

This year, eight countries in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa and Eurasia faced high levels of food insecurity due to drought, floods and cyclones.¹⁵ In total, more than 14 million people are already experiencing extreme food insecurity as a result of drought across Somalia, northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia.

Gender-based violence and gender discrimination

Gender-based violence and gender discrimination intersect with food insecurity as cause and effect as the majority of women, particularly in developing countries, are denied access to finance, control over decisions, and resources such as land ownership, despite being key food producers in many countries. As a result their contribution is held back, exacerbating household food insecurity and the risk of intimate partner violence.¹⁶ Emergency settings, particularly affecting **displaced populations**, result in girls and women having less access to healthy diets, clean water and spaces to breastfeed privately and safely.¹⁷

Plan International's response

Plan International has declared a Red Alert to address the hunger crisis and is working in eight prioritised countries: **Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Haiti, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Somalia, South Sudan**. Interventions include scaling up response efforts such as food distribution, cash and voucher assistance, school meals, WASH services, malnutrition screening and nutrition supplementation.

In addition, Plan International is providing livelihood protection and support activities.

“The drought has restricted my rights. No food, no water, no way to keep my body healthy – it’s a really dark life.” Hawi, 13, Ethiopia, 2022¹⁸

¹³ Global Network Against Food Crisis/FSIN (2022). [Global Report on Food Crises 2022](#)

¹⁴ OCHA (2022). [Hunger is on the Rise. Unprecedented Levels of Food Insecurity Require Urgent Action to Prevent Famine](#)

¹⁵ See note 13.

¹⁶ FAO (2022). [UN Report: Global hunger numbers rose to as many as 828 million in 2021](#)

¹⁷ See note 13.

¹⁸ Pseudonym is used.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Plan International's recommendations for governments, donors and other humanitarian actors

- **Urgently provide USD\$ 21.5 billion** to avert **50 million people and 8 million children** from the brink of famine. Funds need to be readily available, immediately provided, flexible and unearmarked.
- Increase the prioritisation of funding for **age and gender responsive interventions** for child protection, GBV prevention, mental health and psychosocial support, maternal and child health, SRHR and education. These responses must be integrated into food and nutrition programmes, to ensure that the immediate protection, health and longer-term wellbeing of children, particularly girls, is not undermined in contexts of acute food insecurity.
- **Acting early saves lives.** Funds need to be readily available and immediately provided on a “no regrets” basis to prevent massive loss of life. Resilience building, anticipatory action and preparedness based on early warning indicators is critical, using forecast based financing where appropriate. Adequate, timely and flexible funding must be made available to support interventions, and all long-term development funding should incorporate rapid crisis modifiers.
- Increase funding for **critical school feeding programmes.** Where necessary, alternative food distribution measures should be identified in the event of school closures, such as school meal collection services, or cash transfers where appropriate, to replace school feedings. These should be adapted to ensure they reach the youngest children and adolescent girls.
- Ensure that life-saving assistance to address acute food insecurity is coordinated with complementary efforts to **address the drivers of food insecurity**, particularly those related to the conflict, economic and climate agendas. The intersectional impact of these drivers with gender-based violence and gender discrimination and the disproportionate impact on women and girls must be recognised and addressed.
- **Sex- and age-disaggregated data about food security needs**, including information about the needs of school-age children and adolescents, is essential to meeting their age- and gender-specific needs, particularly of adolescent girls. Children and adolescents should be consulted to understand their coping mechanisms and preferences and ensure the design of safe, inclusive programmes.
- Support should be provided to **locally-led responses** wherever possible. Local organisations, including youth-led organisations, need direct, flexible and increased funding and to have a central role in decision making about the response.

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