

## Gender vulnerabilities, food price shocks and social protection responses

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**T**he first half of 2008 saw the peak of the international food price spike: food prices had risen dramatically, with effects on domestic and local food prices in many countries. Since then, the global economic crisis has further compounded the situation, with concerns that the contagion effects could reverse decades of progress in developing countries, with hundreds of millions of people experiencing worsening impoverishment and destitution (McCord, 2009). Although food prices have now fallen at the international level, they have not returned to pre-crisis levels, and prices remain high in many domestic markets.<sup>1</sup> In this Background Note, we argue that two important features of the food price crisis have received inadequate attention. First – as has been the case in previous crises – women are bearing a disproportionate share of the burden of the food price crisis, both as producers and consumers. Second, responses at the international and national levels have not taken sufficient consideration of gender dynamics into crisis responses. We argue that it

is not too late to put in place gender-sensitive policy measures that will improve the effectiveness of policy responses to the crisis as well as address ongoing food insecurity.

### Gendered impacts and opportunities of the food price crisis

The food price spike was caused by a combination of factors (see Wiggins, 2008), the effects of which are complex and vary between countries. At a national level, the impacts of the food crisis depend on a country's degree of integration with world prices and its national production patterns, i.e. whether it is a net importer or exporter of food. At the household level, the impact of the food price spike depends on a number of interrelated factors. These include, for example, the degree to which world prices are transmitted to local markets, household production and consumption patterns and share of household income dedicated to food (Quisumbing et al., 2008). A household's existing food

#### Box 1: Key messages

- In many respects, the impacts of the food price crisis have not generated new gender vulnerabilities, but rather have changed and/or magnified pre-existing vulnerabilities and/or shaped the range of possible coping strategy responses available to men, women and children.
- It is crucial that the gendered nature of poverty and vulnerability, and the gendered dimensions and impacts of the crisis, are recognised, so as to support effective policy responses to the food price crisis and the possible compounding effects of the global economic downturn.
- The 2008 Comprehensive Framework of Action,<sup>2</sup> agreed on by the High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, includes some important gender dimensions, but needs to be strengthened with greater attention to: intra-household gender dynamics, women's time poverty and the importance of strengthening opportunities for women's voice and agency in food security policy debates.

security status, such as existing access to water and sanitation, and intra-household dynamics, such as the level of mother's education and nutritional knowledge are also important factors (see Box 2 below).

### Identifying who is most affected

Households most affected by the increase in food prices have been net buyers. The transmission of international prices to urban areas tends to be quicker as these are better connected to ports and international trade (Holmes et al., 2008a). As food prices rise, households are likely to shift their consumption patterns, reducing either the quality and/or the quantity of food they consume. To some extent, households may be able to offset a strong rise in imported food prices by switching to less preferred domestic substitutes. In urban areas, female-headed households are reported to have suffered a larger proportional drop in welfare than male-headed households as a result of the food price crisis (FAO, 2008). Labour market discrimination means that women are disproportionately represented in informal, vulnerable and casual employment and, throughout most regions, women are paid less money than men for the same

jobs. The 'already poor' in urban areas are particularly vulnerable to increases in food prices as they have no reserves to fall back on (Baker, 2008).

Net food buyers are not just urban, however: surveys of households in rural areas routinely report that more than half of rural households buy in substantial amounts of staple foods, even if they farm (Holmes et al., 2008a). Recent studies have also shown that female-headed households are disproportionately among the poorest of the poor in rural areas (Coon, 2008) and that sudden increases in food prices have negative repercussions for female-headed households in particular, partly because they tend to spend proportionally more on food than male-headed households and therefore are harder hit by higher food prices (FAO, 2008).

The gendered effects of food price shocks on children and men appear to be less well understood. Reports on the food price crisis and children exemplify this lack of attention to gender (Swan et al., 2009). However, in South Asia, in line with broader practices of son preference, data from India suggest that girls are likely to suffer significantly higher malnutrition rates (see Box 3 on p.6).

### Box 2: Effects of the food price crisis in Kenya

The food price crisis in East Africa has had important effects on household and intra-household wellbeing, but these have been closely intertwined with ongoing crises – recurrent environmental shocks (droughts and floods) and, in the case of Kenya, the post-election violence of 2007/08. In order to understand the gendered dynamics of the crisis, it is therefore important to understand these interaction effects as well as pre-existing gender relations and social norms.

Kenya is currently facing a serious food security situation, with an estimated 10 million persons highly food insecure (FAO, 2009). This is because of a combination of factors, including displacement, poor rainfall, rising food and commodity prices, reduced cereal production and livestock diseases. Vulnerable populations include: i) some 3.2 million drought-affected marginal farmers, agro-pastoralists and pastoralists on arid and semi-arid land in northern Kenya; ii) about 150,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs); iii) 850,000 school children, who will be incorporated into an emergency school feeding programme; iv) 3.5 million urban slum dwellers; and v) about 2.2 million persons affected by HIV/AIDS, including HIV orphans. While much of this vulnerability is because of longer-term stresses and recurrent shocks, the residual effects of the post-election violence are a new phenomenon, with no obvious end in sight to lingering tensions at the community level. Many farmers have seen their access to land dramatically reduced. This has, for instance, meant that for some grandmothers caring for HIV/AIDS orphans involved in the orphans and vulnerable children cash transfer pilot programme supported by the government of Kenya and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), cash transfers are even more critical, as caregivers no longer have access to vegetable plots, which had been a key food source. For households living below the poverty line, providing even one meal a day for children is often a struggle, compounded by women's lack of access to productive assets and credit, as well as cultural norms that accord women the main responsibility for meeting household consumption needs.

To date, government responses have been somewhat limited because of concerns about contracting fiscal space in the wake of the global economic crisis, which is now beginning to make itself felt in Kenya. Core poverty programmes are being maintained, but there are currently no plans to scale up the country's cash transfer programme at an accelerated rate. A public works programme targeting youth has been in place for six months, but this is seen largely as a response to concerns about the potential for renewed violence if unemployment and underemployment are not tackled. Moreover, the target population is implicitly male youth, given the type of work on offer; despite the fact that female urban unemployment is almost triple that of male unemployment, there are no specific measures to counter this lack of equal opportunities. One potentially promising donor and non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiative, the Hunger Safety Net Programme in Northern Kenya, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), is piloting a range of social protection options (social pensions and cash transfers) to tackle chronic food insecurity, but attention to the specific dynamics of gender relations within pastoralist communities is likewise still relatively underdeveloped.

### Unpacking intra-household dynamics

The food price crisis also affects individuals within the household differently, as intra-household dynamics, roles and responsibilities affect the production and management of food as well as the decision making around household income and expenditure. Women are mainly responsible for managing, producing and processing food within the household, holding significant importance for intra-household food security. Women’s education and nutritional knowledge and status within the household contribute more than 50% to the reduction of child malnutrition (Quisumbing et al., 2000). Indeed, poorer households headed by women provide more nutritional food for their children than those headed by men, highlighting the importance of gender-based knowledge and roles with regard to food security. Men who lack knowledge about food preparation ‘may not be able to translate food availability into nutritional security for their households’ (World Bank, 2008a: 34). Therefore women’s capacity to make decisions within male-headed households is critical for household nutrition. However, in times of crisis, with the erosion of assets, productivity and income among poor households, men frequently have to use their incomes to pay off debts and secure loans in order to plant next season’s crops, leaving little for family food and consumption (Coon, 2008). Where women have limited decision-making and bargaining power within the household over income, this often results in less expenditure on health, nutrition and education, and poorer outcomes for family members, including children.

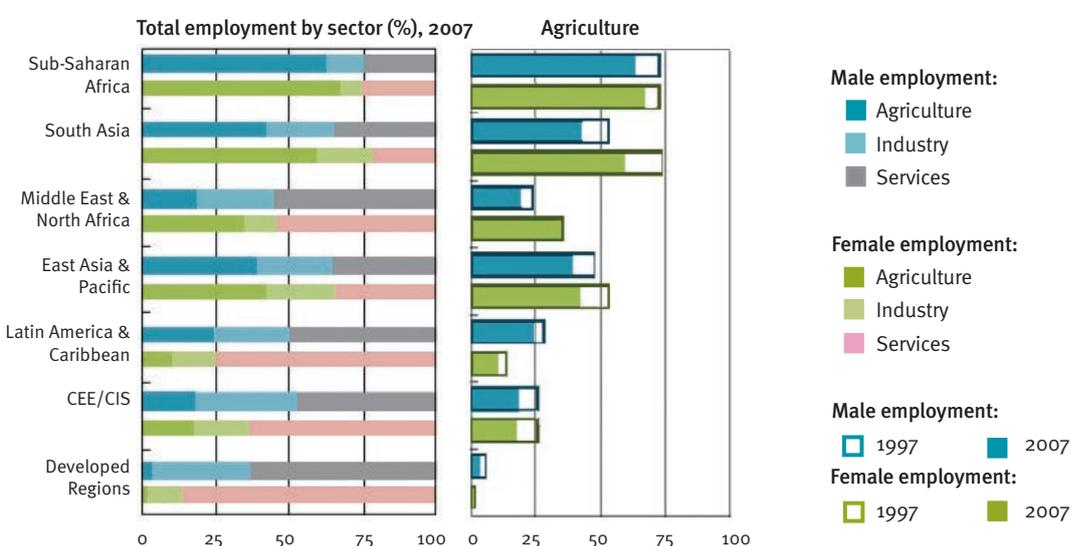
It is women who bear the brunt of the food price crisis, not only because they are primarily responsible for the management of food in the household but also

because they are often the ones who buffer the impact of the crisis at the household level through decreased consumption (see the next section, on coping strategies). The fact that women and children face particular lifecycle vulnerabilities, however, means that malnutrition can have particularly devastating health effects. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to the nutritional effects of high food prices, given that they are more likely to develop micronutrient deficiencies when driven to consume less diversified daily diets. Children, pregnant women and lactating mothers are most at risk of the effects of rising food prices (FAO, 2008; Oxfam and Save the Children, 2008; UNICEF, 2009). The crisis affects maternal health in particular, with malnutrition rendering pregnant women more susceptible to infection, miscarriage and premature labour. It also increases the likelihood that pregnant women who are HIV positive will transmit their virus to their children. Similarly, food shortages have been reported to lead to a decrease in the number of women seeking family planning services and antenatal care. The number of home deliveries also often rises, as women’s time is spent on searching for food for their families and neglecting their own health (Women Thrive Worldwide, 2008).

### Possible opportunities in times of crisis

The food price crisis has many negative impacts on consumers, but it also offers some opportunities for producers. Given that in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia the agricultural sector makes up more than 60% of all female employment (ILO, 2009), it is possible that rising food prices could create opportunities for female farmers in agriculture (see Figure 1). However, the majority of these farmers are smallholder subsist-

**Figure 1: Employment by sector (as share of total employment) by sex**



Source: Adapted from UNIFEM (2008).

ence farmers, or spouses of smallholder subsistence farmers, and they face a number of barriers to enhancing their productivity in agriculture, and indeed benefiting from rising food prices (which food producers should in theory be able to do). Female farmers in particular face systematic biases against ownership and control over productive resources, such as land and assets, because of customary laws and social discrimination. Women in Africa only own 1% of the land and also face biases against access to training, inputs, capital, credit and transportation. The most recent figures suggest that women receive 7% of agricultural extension services and less than 10% of the credit offered to small-scale farmers (Bafinga, 2008). Furthermore, time and labour constraints limit potential productivity on their own farms. Combinations of these constraints result in production inefficiencies (Mehra and Hill Rojas, 2008; Quisumbing et al., 2008): if women do not own land, they have less incentive to make long-term investments in their farms. This is especially the case for female-headed households if male partners have migrated: in many such cases, women are unable to make decisions related to agricultural production (Coon, 2008). Furthermore, limited access to transport, information, social networks, social capital and mobility make it more difficult for women to produce or market their produce as effectively as male farmers (Coon, 2008; FAO, 2008). Indeed, where women are unable to go to the market because of social norms, they are dependent on men to turn their labour into cash to purchase food (Swan, 2006).

### **Coping strategies in response to high food prices**

Given existing gender inequalities and vulnerability, the coping mechanisms available to women in either male or female-headed households in response to food price shocks may be more limited than those available to their male counterparts. Within the household, women are often the ones who buffer the impacts of crisis. Reports show that the coping strategies used by households vary from moderate (e.g. short-term reduction in quantity and quality of food) to extreme strategies (such as distress migration or distress sale of assets). Employing negative coping strategies has severe repercussions for short- and longer-term poverty reduction (see Figure 2). The global financial downturn may also negatively shape the range of available coping strategies used to manage food prices,<sup>3</sup> as well as other country-specific immediate or ongoing crises (e.g. environmental shocks such as drought, political instability or violence).

### **Reducing quality and quantity of food**

As the quantity and quality of food are reduced under economic stress, the intra-household distribution of food is often biased against women and girls owing to gendered social norms. These norms may in turn exacerbate gender-specific nutritional needs and lifecycle vulnerabilities. There is ample evidence of gender disparities in consumption cutbacks during times of food shortage, although this may depend to some extent on the mother's employment position, as presence in the home can often mean better access to food. In Bangladesh, for example, during the recent food price crisis the share of rice in total food expenditure increased, leaving a less diversified food basket (which has been greater in urban areas than rural areas [11% increase to 6%, respectively], owing partly to urban livelihoods being linked more directly to fixed salaries). Protein gained through fish and dal (lentils) has been replaced by cheaper vegetables, resulting in a higher prevalence of wasting among girls aged 0-59 months (a 8.6% increase compared with 7.1% among boys) and reduced weight among women in urban areas because of declining consumption of high quality foods (Sulaiman et al., 2009).

It is important to point out, however, that the food price shocks also resulted in a switch to less preferred foodstuffs, for instance from rice to maize, which is not necessarily of poorer quality nutritionally. In this case, there is evidence to suggest that men too were affected. In Indonesia, for example, men are cited to be buying rice less frequently in the day (IDS, 2009). In a rural Kenyan community, male farmers reported that, on occasion, their only meal for that day would consist of wild fruits or vegetables. Similarly, a study across five communities in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya and Zambia reported that, when choices have to be made, children come first in some communities; in others it is men. However, in none of the communities were women, including pregnant women, said to be offered the most nutritious foods (ibid).

In Indonesia, during the economic crisis of 1997/98, child weight-for-age measurements remained constant throughout the period, despite sharp rises in food prices, as mothers' buffered children's caloric intake, resulting in increased maternal wasting and anaemia (Block et al., 2004). In other words, women often become 'shock absorbers of household food security', reducing their own consumption to allow more food for other household members (Quisumbing et al., 2008). Moreover, domestic conflict and violence have been found to be more common in food crisis situations if one partner appears 'better off' (Swan, 2006) or if a husband believes his wife to be withholding money because she is returning with less after purchasing food (Quisumbing et al., 2008).

**Figure 2: Consequences of deteriorating household food security (in stages) with inter-related gender dimensions**

Consequences of Deteriorating Household Food Security (in stages) with Inter-related Gender Dimensions									
<b>Livelihoods</b>	Diversification / change in livelihood activities	Reduced expenditure on non-essential luxury items and sale of non-productive or disposable assets	Children drop-out of school and out-migration (rural to urban moves)	Increased use of child labour, borrowing and purchasing on credit, becoming indebted	Selling of productive assets	Selling of all assets	Reduced expenditure on essential items (food, water etc.)	Engaging in illegal or hazardous activities as last resort	
<b>Food related</b>	Change to cheaper, lower quality and less preferred foods	Reduced diversity of food, poor nutrient intake and favouring certain household members over others for consumption	Reduced size and number of meals	Consuming wild foods, immature crops and seed stocks, sending households to eat elsewhere e.g. neighbours	Begging for food	Skipping entire days of eating	Eating items not done so in the past or not part of normal diet (i.e. plants and insects)		
<b>Health outcomes</b>		Depletion of micronutrients and lowered immunity	Appearance of clinical symptoms of micronutrient deficiencies such as night blindness, anaemia and increased morbidity		Underweight	Wasting	Acute malnutrition	Early childhood mortality ↑	
<b>Gender dimensions</b>	Gender-specific roles and responsibilities for coping strategies	Intra-household dynamics may be biased towards men and sons in terms of food allocation, but in many contexts children are sheltered from the effects of shocks by parental sacrifice. In such contexts, FFHs tend to spend more on food. This is often at the expense of women's (and daughters') time poverty.	Men may have greater geographic independence and access to social networks, which may make it easier for MHH to cope cf. FHH. Men and women may both opt for migration, with implications for distribution of care responsibilities	Gender differences in access to credit and inputs. Increase in time poverty in household and community. Women may buffer family nutritionally. Borrowing from unfair money lenders	Work found in risky and low paid environments, and may be esp. case for women as they take on new income-generating activities. Women's and FHH's assets may be more vulnerable to stripping e.g. crops and poultry	Impacts on short and long term poverty reduction, including reduction of the likelihood of replacing assets 'Land grabbing' may worsen women's already restricted access to land and assets in many places	Declining maternal nutrition, and heightened incidence of low birth-weight infants	Increased risk of intra-household violence	

Source: Adapted from Maxwell and Caldwell (2008).

### Box 3: Gender and malnutrition in India

The impact of the global food price crisis has not been felt as strongly in India as in other parts of the world, including other South Asian countries. Food prices did rise but they have now declined again although, like in many other countries, they have not fallen to pre-crisis levels. A number of reasons reportedly explain why India managed to avert such a crisis, namely, its combination of policy changes and pre-existing safety nets. An immediate policy intervention that received considerable media attention was the Indian government's decision to ban food exports: this had immediate beneficial impacts in protecting rising food prices domestically, but negative knock-on effects for India's neighbouring importing countries, such as Nepal and Bangladesh. India's pre-existing social protection and food security programmes, which are reported (anecdotally) to have buffered the impact of rising prices on poor households, include: i) the Public Distribution System (PDS), where households below the poverty line are entitled to subsidised rice and wheat; ii) the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which provides up to 100 days of employment at minimum wage to poor households; and iii) the national midday meal scheme provision in primary schools.

While the worst impact of the food price crisis in India appears to have been mitigated through flexible policies and pre-existing programmes, India's malnutrition rates are shockingly high and have seen only limited improvement in recent years, despite significant economic growth. India has consistently ranked poorly on the Global Hunger Index – in 2008 it ranked 66 out of 88 countries, below all other South Asian nations except Bangladesh (Menon et al., 2009). Even in comparison with Bangladesh, India still has cause for concern: India actually ranks below Bangladesh, a much poorer country, on child underweight and child mortality indicators (ibid).

Even while aggregate levels of undernutrition are shockingly high in India, disaggregation across states and socioeconomic groups identifies an even worse picture: girls, rural areas, the poorest and scheduled tribes and castes are the worst affected. Underweight prevalence is higher in rural areas (50%) than in urban areas (38%); higher among girls (48.9%) than among boys (45.5%); higher among scheduled castes (53.2%) and scheduled tribes (56.2%) than among other castes (44.1%). Although the problem of underweight children is pervasive throughout the wealth distribution, prevalence rates are as high as 60% in the lowest wealth quintile (Gagnolati et al., 2005). Moreover, during the 1990s, urban-rural, inter-caste, male-female and inter-quintile inequalities in nutritional status widened (ibid). For example, between 1992 and 1998, the decline in male underweight prevalence fell by 14.3%, compared with a 6% decline in female prevalence. For severe underweight prevalence, the distinction is even more significant: for boys it fell by 23.7%, compared with just 10.8% for girls (ibid).

It is important also to consider changes in health-seeking behaviour in crisis contexts, which can reinforce the toll of inferior nutrition. Qualitative assessments carried out in the context of the current crisis have found evidence of changes in the health-seeking behaviour of men and women, including no longer going to private clinics but opting for self-diagnosis (IDS, 2009).

#### Increasing women's time burden

Rising food prices can hold important implications for the distribution of care responsibilities and time poverty. Women's time burdens are put under more pressure as the need for cheaper food may entail travelling further and more time-consuming preparation (Quisumbing et al., 2008), on top of other chores such as the collection of water and firewood. In response to the recent price shock, women have intensified the production of 'food security crops' such as cassava, and/or sought part-time trade or seasonal employment (Coon, 2008). Raised stress levels, anxiety and sleep problems are being cited more frequently (IDS, 2009). Increased demands on women's time and energy could hold negative impacts for children's health and schooling, as female employment, for instance, may interfere with breastfeeding practices and home-based food preparation (FAO, 2008). Men have also sought new sources of income and alternative means of finding food, such as gathering

wild foods (IDS, 2009). A reduction in childcare may translate into greater malnutrition and poor health, affecting children's lifelong capacity, ability to learn and chances of climbing out of poverty (Coon, 2008).

Girls are also frequently drawn into assisting with domestic chores and childcare in food-insecure contexts (Arends-Kuenning and Amin, 2004; Owotoki, 2005; Pitkin and Bedoyo, 1997). Moreover, as mothers work more outside the home, they are more likely to require their daughters at home rather than in school, whereas boys are more often needed to work in employment outside the household (Ersado, 2002). As education is correlated with almost all measures of children's welfare, this negatively impacts the inter-generational transmission of poverty (Coon, 2008), holding negative consequences for women's future wellbeing, reproductive health and earning power (Quisumbing et al., 2008). Initial evidence from 2008 suggests that these effects are already being felt. In Yemen, Burkina Faso and Tajikistan, for instance, children have been taken out of school to work in response to food price shocks (IFAD, 2008; Oxfam and Save the Children, 2008; Saporai, 2009). In Bangladesh, food expenditure increased between 2006 and 2008 from 50% of total expenditure to 60%, and that towards health/savings decreased from 10% to 5% and education 12% to 10% (cutting back food consumption was the primary coping strategy) (Sulaiman et al., 2009).

Also important with regard to the care economy is a rising trend of abandonment and abuse, associated with the food, fuel and financial crises. Reports from Kenya and Bangladesh cite elderly family members and children being more frequently neglected and abandoned (IDS, 2009).

### Accessing social capital

Over the past decade, there has been a growing realisation of the important role that social capital, especially belonging to social networks, plays in cushioning people from poverty and vulnerability to shocks. In the case of food security, differential access to social capital between men and women may mean that women are at a disadvantage in overcoming price shocks, rendering them more vulnerable to food shortages. Men frequently have relatively more social networks outside the household compared with female-headed households, for example, owing to greater economic and geographic independence (Swan, 2006). But this is not always the case. In the context of structural adjustment programmes in Latin America, which entailed rising food prices and reduced purchasing power, a common response was the development of communal soup kitchens run by women at the community level (Hays-Mitchell, 2002). Yet, even in this instance of women's community activism, a number of analysts argued that such activities constitute another instance of women having to absorb the costs of macro-level shocks through increased unpaid labour (Barrig, 1996; Lind, 1997). The impact of food price shocks on time poverty may therefore exacerbate the gendered division of labour, or women's 'triple-shift', or roles in reproductive, productive and community management (Moser, 1989).

### Resorting to distress migration

Food price shocks can be a driver of migration. The gender dimensions of this vary considerably with context, resulting in differing impacts for men and women. For example, migration abroad has been a common exit strategy from rising food prices and fewer employment opportunities for women in the Philippines (which has been hugely affected because of its high dependency on rice imports). Many of these women have found insecure and often risky employment as domestic workers, caregivers, entertainers, mail-order brides and sex workers, in order to return remittances for family needs (Philippine Women Centre, 2009). Similarly, adolescent girls from highly food-insecure areas in rural Ethiopia are considerably more likely to migrate from rural to urban locations than boys of the same age, because of weaker bargaining power and access to opportunities within the household. In doing so, many girls face heightened risks of coerced

and transactional sex and exploitative labour, as well as social isolation. Of young female migrants in a Population Council sample in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, who were employed as domestic workers, 77% reported employers to be abusive, sometimes physically and sexually (Erulkar et al., 2008). Men's distress migration also holds risks, as well as implications for the distribution of care and domestic responsibilities at home. This is further compounded by disintegrating coping strategies and/or contexts of violence and social displacement (Swan, 2006).

However, over time, migration may lead to increased intra-household bargaining strength. Macours and Vakis (2007) find a positive correlation, for example, between mothers' seasonal migration and early child development outcomes in Nicaragua, reporting a shift in intra-household bargaining power owing to women's higher share in income, which is used towards children's health and education.

### Resorting to distress sale of assets and increased indebtedness

Another coping strategy commonly adopted is the distress sale of assets. Underlying gender biases may mean that women's or female-headed households' assets are more vulnerable to stripping than those of men, the impact of which may be lengthy if what has been sold cannot be replaced. In sub-Saharan Africa, women are largely the providers of the sauces that go with staple carbohydrates with meals, and so are farmers (or gatherers) of legumes, groundnuts, vegetables and oil nuts. Often, when households are stressed, women sell such sauce crops to buy cheaper carbohydrates for family consumption, reducing family dietary diversity and possibly energy intake. The same dynamic applies to families who own poultry or livestock. 'Increases in prices of basic staples translates into less consumption of their own eggs, milk, or meat' (Coon, 2008).

Some households are also using loans to meet immediate consumption needs. For instance, there is evidence of increased loans to meet food needs in Bangladesh, especially during the seasonal monga period, when unemployment is high (Holmes et al., 2008b). Moreover, children in Bangladesh whose families had mortgaged their assets were found to have worsening nutrition, while a household's ability to borrow from an NGO is positively associated with better nutrition status among children (Sulaiman et al., 2009). Pastoralist households have too been found to incur debts in order to buy food in the Sahel region of Africa (Oxfam and Save the Children, 2008). An additional concern is 'land-grabbing' (Von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009) or the growing acquisition of land by overseas investors and commercial produc-

ers, as poor smallholders sell because of a lack of capital to produce themselves and/or countries which are dependent on food aid find it difficult to refuse such investments (e.g. in Ghana and Senegal) (IFAD, 2008; Speildoch, 2009). This holds detrimental impacts for food security and consequences for women's already restricted access to land and assets in many places.

### **Policy implications of the current crisis for gender equality and food security**

The food price crisis of 2008 is waning, at least in terms of international prices. However, prices in many countries have not returned to pre-crisis levels. Many families are already living in circumstances of heightened vulnerability because of the coping strategies they had to employ during the height of the crisis (such as distress sale of assets, reduced food consumption and greater time poverty because of additional work required to meet basic consumption needs). This has been exacerbated by interaction effects with pre-existing vulnerability to stresses and crises (such as HIV/AIDS, political conflict, spatial poverty). Moreover, given concerns that the current economic crisis could trigger a more severe food crisis (because of rising unemployment, restricted access to finance and credit, reduced expenditure on aid and agricultural investment (Sharma, 2008) and declining remittances (Baker, 2008)), it is critical to continue policy dialogues about the importance of ensuring more gender-sensitive immediate and longer-term protection from future food crises.

The 2008 Comprehensive Framework of Action (CFA), representing a consensus response to the global food security crisis among the UN system, Bretton Woods institutions and other relevant international organisations, already outlines a number of important gender dimensions of the crisis. These include: i) the development of gender-sensitive social protection programmes and safety nets; ii) investment in women in the agricultural sector and their access to productive resources; iii) targeting women (especially pregnant and lactating women) as a vulnerable group; and iv) strengthening global information and monitoring systems, which includes attention to gender and age variables. This concluding section summarises these four key policy recommendations, but also highlights important gaps in the CFA that need to be addressed if gender inequalities in food security systems and practices are to be effectively tackled.

First, the global food crisis has underscored the urgent need to put in place, and scale up, **social protection programmes and safety nets** (for example, public works programmes, safety nets, conditional cash transfers, pension systems, fee waivers and school feeding) (Baden, 2008; Baker, 2008; Islam

and Buckley, 2008; Von Braun, 2008; World Bank, 2008b). The types of social protection programmes that will be most appropriate in a given context depend on target group and need – for example, putting in place long-term safety nets including pensions or health fee waivers, and scaling up existing medium-term social protection programmes (such as the Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia, see Box 4) for shorter time-bound responses to reach the transient poor affected by the crisis. Preliminary evidence from Indonesia suggests that social protection programmes established in response to the economic crisis of the late 1990s have helped to cushion citizens from the worst effects of the current economic downturn (Mehrotra, 2009), and recent research from Lesotho suggests that cash transfers help to reduce gendered intra-household conflicts in times of crisis (Slater and Mphale, 2008). In order to ensure that social protection initiatives are gender sensitive and aim to minimise negative coping strategies, attention to a number of dimensions of programme design is urgently required (see, for example, Box 4 overleaf).

Second, it is critical to **invest in the agricultural sector, with particular attention to small producer female farmers**. Pro-poor and gender-sensitive agricultural development and policy lag behind the rhetoric, especially in terms of funding and the ability to mainstream gender in the development portfolios of large international financial institutions and multilaterals, such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Coon, 2008; Oxfam, 2008). Solutions that target the immediate (e.g. distribution of cash vouchers for food and grains, subsidised inputs such as seeds and fertilisers) and longer-term needs of women (access to markets, credit, productive assets, fairer trade policies) in male- and female-headed households, of women of different ages and of those located in peri-urban and rural areas are urgently needed (Quisumbing et al., 2008; Women Thrive Worldwide, 2008). This is especially important given the broader international context, in which powerful retailers and processors increasingly control global value chains, and small farmers face growing challenges in accessing agricultural markets and remaining competitive (Baden, 2008).

Given the unequal distribution of food within the household in many countries, **targeting women and girls as a vulnerable group** is a third critical policy area that requires investment in order to address nutritional deficits, especially for children and pregnant or lactating women (FAO, 2008; UNICEF, 2009; Von Braun, 2008; WHO, 2008), as well as broader health and educational deficits that girls in particular may face. Within this context, it is important to target women in male- as well as female-headed households. This is critical, as the concept of female-headed households

**Box 4: Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme in a crisis context**

In Ethiopia, the food price crisis saw food inflation rise to 80% in 2008, with relatively little change since the end of the international price spikes (arguably because of domestic market systems and some hoarding by 'middlemen'). For the poorest and most food-insecure populations, this is one of multiple and reoccurring food price shocks, which the country's much-discussed Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) has sought to address, although with diminishing efficacy as the value of cash earned declines in purchasing power. Initiated in 2005, the PSNP is a public works programme now reaching approximately 8 million households, with a relatively strong gender-sensitive design component. It was informed by a commitment in the country's first poverty reductions strategy paper (PRSP) to ensure that 'the inclusion of gender in any effort to alleviate poverty is non-negotiable', and this has been reflected in terms of targeting of female-headed households in particular, and women more generally; the provision of social transfers (rather than cash for work) for pregnant and lactating women; and regulations relating to the provision of childcare facilities at worksites of a certain size. Not surprisingly, however, in a country with strong gendered social norms regarding productive and reproductive work responsibilities, the implementation process has been less gender-sensitive. Key problems have included the following:

- Crèche facilities have not been routinely provided; the participation of women in some areas, especially women living in male-headed and polygamous households, has been constrained by cultural mobility restrictions; newly divorced women have faced difficulties in re-registering in their own right; and women account for just a small number of representatives in food security structures (Evers et al., 2008).
- In addition to these programme implementation bottlenecks, women face a range of other structural challenges in terms of food security. Women have only limited access to extension services because there are very few female extension agents (1:15 extension personnel and 1:50 development agents (AfDB, 2004)) and inadequate gender mainstreaming components in the agricultural extension service curriculum, and hence are often excluded from the diffusion of new ideas and technologies.
- Women also lack access to fertiliser and other agricultural inputs because of an inability to make the 25% down payment for purchase of inputs (46.7% female- compared with 93.3% male-headed households regularly use fertiliser (ibid)).
- Moreover, although in northern Ethiopia recent legislative reforms have ensured that women now have greater access to land titles, in regions such as the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNPR), despite women's official land rights, 'culturally' women are seen as ineligible to own or inherit land. 'Women's perception of themselves is so low that they accept they do not have the right to inherit, to own land' (WFSTF Official, Derashe, SNNPR, quoted in Evers et al., 2008). Indeed, politicians who championed women's land rights are highly unpopular and 'lost the last election' (ibid).

can limit coverage, as current gender analysis and agricultural development assistance that targets only women heads of households 'often overlooks the majority of women who reside in male-headed households' (Mehra and Hill Rojas, 2008).

Long-term strategies to increase agricultural productivity and sustainability must focus on **increasing women's access to and control over productive assets**, such as land tenure and water, which will also help reduce overall poverty for women and their families (ibid). In addition, access to credit and microfinance, extension services and markets need to be strengthened for female farmers in order to support them through the crisis in the longer term (Quisumbing et al., 2008). Micro-enterprise development programmes in particular are arguably rarely gender-informed, with lending criteria often corresponding to a 'male template' holding that members must have previous business experience and not employ family members, excluding many women in the informal sector (Hays-Mitchell, 2002).

Fifth, in order to break what has now become an

entrenched pattern whereby gender considerations are merely added onto broader agricultural policies, it is critical to ensure that **gender impacts are mainstreamed into agricultural and food security information and monitoring systems**, as well as **programme evaluations and research design** (Speildoch, 2008).

Crucially, constraining the full mainstreaming of gender concerns in agricultural development is a lack of political will and a disjuncture between policy and practice. Institutional changes have not always produced substantial changes in the actions and attitudes of executive and technical staff and awareness of gendered needs in planning processes, or generated greater and more equitable participation of women. Similarly, despite changes in the labour market, women's participation in economic, social and political life in many contexts remains limited, in turn hindering small producers' real access to training, research and technological services in the farming sector, where socioeconomic factors also play a part (FAO, 1997). Critical changes need to be made in terms of legal access to land ownership,

involving men and women actively in programmes and agricultural research, and reorienting agricultural extension services, which are often heavily male dominated, by building in safeguards to ensure their participation (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001).

Limited attention to the *gender* dimensions of agricultural production and food security also requires urgent attention. We need to widen the ‘lens’ through which we see agricultural development, including strengthening women’s entry points into agricultural markets, changing institutions and promoting women’s leadership in producer organisations. As such, it is important to question how far food security integrates gender analysis (Salkeld, 2008) and how far food security and social protection programmes address women’s practical and strategic needs (Slater and Mphale, 2008). By the same token, discussions of gender are too often equated with a focus on women only. Analysis of children and food security issues typically present findings in aggregate terms rather than discussing whether or not there are differences between girls and boys and the underlying causes. Similarly, we know very little about specific effects on particular groups of men, as gender analysis in this field has tended to focus predominantly on women or female-headed households. In order to better tailor nutrition policy and programming interventions, it is therefore critical that monitoring systems look at effects on both males and females, adults and children.

### **Strengthening the CFA’s focus on gender**

Undoubtedly, the focus on integrating gender into these four core CFA policy responses signals an important level of awareness of the particular gender vulnerabilities that women face in the context of food security crises. However, the efficacy of the CFA could be strengthened on a number of levels.

Overall, it pays scant attention to **intra-household gender dynamics** and the fact that women typically bear the brunt of the food price crisis. They are responsible for household food management, often induced by social norms to decrease their own consumption so as to cushion the impact of the crisis on other household members, and as a result of unequal decision-making power within the household, women-owned assets are frequently the first to be subject to distress sale. Social protection programmes and food secu-

rity safety nets therefore need to be informed by an awareness of these unequal intra-household dynamics and be designed so as to mitigate these gender power relations.

Women’s **time poverty** is another key issue that is all but overlooked in the CFA. Time use data show that, because of their dual responsibilities for productive and reproductive work, women suffer significantly higher levels of time poverty than men. This is often exacerbated in times of crisis as women take on additional work to compensate for diminishing household purchasing power. It is therefore critical that policy responses to food insecurity do not burden women in time-consuming processes but rather seek to alleviate the time burdens they face.

**Promoting women’s ‘voice’** is a third important area that would strengthen the overall efficacy of the CFA recommendations. Women are too often excluded from food security debates, despite the fact that they often hold primary responsibility for food provision and household consumption (Gawaya, 2008). Responses to increases in food prices should invest ‘in women’s ability to access productive resources, meaningfully consulting with women in food aid and agricultural planning’ as, ‘giving them voice in household decisions will be critical in stemming the current crisis and preventing another food emergency’ (Women Thrive Worldwide, 2008). Indeed, some analysts have suggested that the current food crisis may ‘provide ‘transformative’ opportunities to empower women in producer organisations, agricultural markets and wider institutions – and invest in the wider enabling environment for women (Baden, 2008) if timely and coordinated action is taken. In particular, a focus on promoting rural producer organisations is an increasingly recognised strategy for strengthening livelihoods and increasing human and social capital and incomes, including those of women (Penrose-Buckley, 2007).

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## Endnotes and references

### Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.fao.org/docrep/011/ai481e/ai481e05b.htm>.
- 2 <http://www.un.org/issues/food/taskforce/Documentation/CFA%20Web.pdf>.
- 3 See <http://www.ids.ac.uk/index.cfm?objectid=6323060D-5056-8171-7B3FD11536632EF8>.

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This Background Note is part of a larger body of work on 'Improving social protection effectiveness: Understanding social and economic risks and gender inequalities' funded by DFID and AusAid.

**DFID** Department for  
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Development



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