



# HELPING WOMEN RESPOND TO THE GLOBAL FOOD PRICE CRISIS

Agnes Quisumbing, Ruth Meinzen-Dick, and Lucy Bassett

with contributions by Michael Usnick, Lauren Pandolfelli, Cheryl Morden, and Harold Alderman

IFPRI Policy Brief 7 • October 2008

The current food price crisis has received widespread attention, but discussions to date have largely overlooked the gender dimensions of the crisis. More than 15 years of rigorous research on gender and intrahousehold resource allocation suggest not only that men and women will be affected differently by the global food crisis, but also that, as both consumers and producers, they will have different stocks of resources with which to respond to rising prices. Although the current situation calls for an urgent national and international response, urgency is not an excuse for misguided policies that fail to address the gender implications of the crisis. Instead, decisionmakers should take this opportunity to incorporate what is known about women's roles in agricultural production and household welfare, and the specific challenges they face, both to craft more effective policy responses and to enable women to respond better to the current challenges and opportunities.

## Gender Implications of the Food Price Crisis

Sharp increases in food and fuel prices over the past few years have eroded the purchasing power of poor households and raised serious concerns about food insecurity and malnutrition in many countries. Recent estimates find that the crisis may push 105 million people in low-income countries below the poverty line, representing a loss of seven years' worth of poverty reduction. This decline in turn represents a serious erosion of progress toward meeting many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including those aiming to reduce poverty, hunger, and maternal and child mortality. Analysis of rising food prices has so far, however, failed to consider the gender implications of the crisis.

High food prices affect households differently, depending on their production and consumption patterns and what commodities are produced and consumed, the share of household income dedicated to food, and the degree to which world prices are transmitted to local markets. High food prices can also affect different groups within households differently, but because the crisis is so recent, few data are available on these varying effects. Nonetheless, a large body of research on structural adjustment and on the Asian and Mexican economic crises shows that shocks have affected women disproportionately, suggesting that the current crisis may have analogous impacts on female consumers and producers.

In fact, crises of all kinds—economic shocks, natural disasters, political strife, or armed conflict—harm marginalized and vulnerable groups in particular. Women are less able to cope with and overcome crises than men are because they have less access to and control over resources than men and they experience gender-based vulnerabilities, including extensive time burdens; threats or acts of violence; and limited legal benefits and protections, decisionmaking authority, and control of financial resources. In the face of crisis, women are more likely than men to lose assets and formal sector jobs and their workloads, both at home and in the informal sector, increase more dramatically than men's. A recent empirical analysis of 141 countries from 1981 to 2002 found that natural disasters lower the life expectancy of women more than that of men. Under structural adjustment, reduced government expenditures on education and health shifted the burden of service provision to households and communities, adding to the already high demands on women's time. Rising prices can also tighten women's time constraints by forcing them to travel longer distances to obtain lower prices and to prepare cheaper, but more time-intensive foods.

The impact of food price crises on the food and nutrition security of vulnerable household members is also of real concern and may differ from the impact of other price shocks, such as high electricity or transport prices. The poorest people dedicate the largest share of their budget to food. Thus, when food prices rise they have the least ability to cut nonfood expenditures to compensate for the increased cost of food. Higher food prices increase the burden for women, who must stretch the limited food budget even further. Women often end up being the shock absorbers of household food security, reducing their own consumption to leave more food for other household members. In Bangladesh, even before the crisis, almost 60 percent of households reported that women skip meals more often than men. As food prices rise and staples consume more of the food expenditures, households frequently cut back on both food quantity (caloric intake) and quality (dietary diversity), which provides micronutrients that girls and women particularly need. Switching from rice and maize to cheaper starches like millet and cassava increases processing and cooking time, and this change in turn increases women's energy expenditures and time burdens, often at the expense of time for other productive activities, child care, and needed rest. Pregnant and lactating mothers are among the groups considered most at risk of food

insecurity and poor nutrition induced by crisis, with implications for their health and nutritional status and the future health and productivity of their children.

Crises often lead resource-constrained families to pull children out of school as the returns to education fall below the returns to child labor. In most countries, girls' attendance is more adversely affected. Setbacks to girls' education have lasting negative consequences for women's reproductive health and earning power and the well-being of future generations.

The impacts of the food price crisis will differ according to culture and livelihood strategy and depending on a household's production, consumption, and marketing patterns. In South Asia, where men and women jointly cultivate the family farm and where norms of female seclusion preclude women from going to the market to make decisions about food purchases, the major gender implications may concern changes in dietary quality, especially where men make food purchases and women have little input into decisions. But in Sub-Saharan Africa, women often have primary responsibility for cultivating food crops for household consumption. Most of these women are subsistence farmers, although some manage to produce a surplus for the market. Higher output prices could give these surplus producers opportunities to earn extra income, but only if they have the necessary inputs, which have also risen in cost.

Some observers have pointed out that higher food prices could increase incentives for producers, but past evidence suggests that higher prices may not necessarily stimulate production by female farmers. Where individual household members control resources, increases in cash crop prices can alter the opportunities faced by men and women in the household in different ways. Price changes bring with them conflict-laden negotiation over who gains the income benefits and who bears the labor costs of increased cash crop production. That conflict may play a role in stifling a household's supply response. Indeed, a study of joint-headed households in Burkina Faso found that the supply response to cotton prices was 25 percent lower in households where husbands and wives bargained over income transfers from husbands to wives and over wives' labor contributions to male-controlled agricultural production, compared with households where they were always in agreement. Evidence that the agricultural production and incomes of women farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa fell under structural adjustment could shed additional light on why increased food prices may not lead to higher production by female farmers. Because women had less access to cash and basic production inputs—such as land, seeds, fertilizer, credit, and technological training—and were more likely to grow food crops rather than export crops, they were less able to respond to incentives to expand the production of tradable commodities. Men, on the other hand, often embraced new production opportunities, appropriating basic agricultural

inputs including labor from women farmers and thereby cutting into women's ability to generate independent income.

In general, net purchasers of food are most vulnerable to food price increases. The urban poor are thus more vulnerable, in general, than rural people who can grow some of their food. This tendency, combined with higher population density in cities, may account for why urban women have been active in protests against rising food prices. But rural people are all not the same: rural people who are net buyers of food will suffer from input price increases, and net sellers of food may gain. To the extent that men are more involved in cash cropping than women or produce surpluses from food crops because of better access to resources, they are more able to benefit.

In the long term, the food price crisis will likely deplete the assets of the poor, which may also differ by gender. Women's assets such as jewelry or small livestock are often the first to be disposed of to maintain household consumption. Men's assets like land, cattle, or transport are retained as long as possible, in part because they are "lumpy" and more difficult to restore once sold. The issues of whether or not women's assets can be protected against disposal without their consent and whether they can be recovered or restored after a crisis merits greater attention.

## Gender-Appropriate Responses to the Crisis

Most projections indicate that high prices will continue, so solutions must address immediate and long-term needs. But interventions will not solve the problem of hunger unless they deal with gender differences in both food production and consumption. Measures designed to respond to rising food prices must take the unique dimensions of women's poverty into account and recognize that as producers, women are often constrained from responding to agricultural incentives, such as rising food prices. Interventions should thus be targeted to smallholders with explicit efforts to reach women farmers in poor female- and male-headed households. Policies to help women weather this crisis must be tailored to the specific sociocultural context in which gender relations unfold. Moreover, important differences among women, such as age or marital status, rural or urban residence, must also be recognized to ensure effective targeting.

Many promising interventions to address women's differential needs for increasing food production, stabilizing consumption, or maintaining nutritional security have been tried, but few have undergone rigorous evaluation. Where evaluations have been conducted, little attention has been paid to gender impacts. Such constraints make it difficult to recommend programs that should be scaled up, but these experiences can contribute to the range of responses to the food crisis.

### *Emergency Assistance and Social Protection*

In the short run, food aid distribution should expand and involve women as central actors in planning and distribution. To date, women have sometimes been uninformed about how to receive food aid and restricted from registering for it, especially in areas where male–female interaction is restricted or where women lack necessary identity papers. Better strategies would ensure that food aid is targeted to poor women—because women have been found to be more likely than men to distribute rations within the household—and that women are involved in decisionmaking on food aid programs at all levels.

Social protection interventions should be introduced or expanded. Such interventions include preventive health and nutrition programs like micronutrient and food supplements targeted to vulnerable groups (pregnant women, children, the disabled, and people living with HIV/AIDS), conditional cash transfers, food or cash for education or work, and microfinance programs. Many of these programs can target women as primary beneficiaries or tailor their services or requirements to suit women's and girls' needs. For example, food- or cash-for-education programs could provide higher benefits for girls, who are more likely to be kept out of school, and public works programs could provide on-site childcare and include lighter tasks suited to women's physical capacity. In emergency employment, food for work has an advantage over cash payments for several reasons. First, household can directly use food payments, which are not, from the household's point of view, affected by price inflation. Second, cash programs are more likely to attract men, who often spend less of the payment on food for the household. Participation in food-for-work programs, on the other hand, is often left for women, who then have greater control of the payment to feed their families.

### *Assistance to Female Farmers*

Recent initiatives targeted to small farmers, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa, to help them grow food for the World Food Programme could benefit women both as producers and as consumers of food aid if efforts are made to ensure that female farmers have access to such opportunities. Rather than simply buying the farmers' crops outright, these initiatives focus on teaching better farming methods and helping farmers store their crops in warehouses, plant higher-yield seeds, and transport their produce to customers. Local procurement also avoids the disincentive effect on domestic production that foreign-procured food supplies may create.

Many promising approaches to supporting female farmers through the crisis in the longer term also exist. These approaches include strengthening women's rights to land and natural resources; increasing women's access to and control of productive assets, extension services, credit, and markets; introducing irrigation or labor-saving technologies where

water or labor constraints prevent women from expanding production; and strengthening women's leadership and technical capacity. Given the rapidly rising cost of fertilizer, targeted fertilizer and seed vouchers may be an important short-term intervention. For the many women producers who are semi-subsistence-oriented and do not have enough cash to pay for fertilizer, fertilizer-for-work programs can be implemented or fertilizer can be sold to women in small bags at lower cost. Alternatively, interventions could focus on improving women's access to organic methods of replenishing soil fertility, combined with microdosing of fertilizers, which may be more cost-effective and environmentally sustainable than inorganic fertilizers alone.

New crop varieties and technologies also have the potential to benefit women farmers, especially if they do not require large initial investments or asset ownership or if they are accompanied by mechanisms for women to pool resources or obtain access to productive resources (such as land) by other means. Improved varieties relevant to the current crisis include biofortified crops with enhanced micronutrient content, such as orange-fleshed sweet potato with high vitamin A content, and high-iron rice that can help reduce iron-deficiency anemia, which affects millions of women and children worldwide. In developing new varieties and technologies, scientists must take into account both women's and men's preferences (regarding, for example, taste, color, and labor and other input requirements) and recognize that women of different ages and status may have different agricultural roles that influence the likelihood and processes of adoption. Introducing new technologies may shift the gender division of labor as well as men's and women's control of potential increases in output, causing both positive changes for women (such as increased control over outputs and other assets) and negative ones (such as an increased labor burden or increased control by men of commercially viable crops). In many cases, when a crop traditionally grown by women becomes more valuable, men take over its production and marketing. It is important to prevent this outcome in the case of basic food crops in the context of rising prices.

Agricultural extension systems too often fail to recognize the importance of women farmers and women's social networks in diffusing information. These systems could be improved by recruiting and training female extension workers, especially in areas where cultural norms restrict male–female interaction. Extension services can also be tailored to meet the needs of women by bringing services closer to women farmers at times when they can participate, using women's informal social networks to share information, focusing on crops controlled by women and activities performed by women, and using illustrations to reach women with low levels of schooling or literacy.

## *Credit and Market-Related Services*

Improved credit services could buffer consumption shocks, help women retain or reclaim their assets, increase farm productivity, boost women's empowerment, and reduce poverty. Credit packages designed to meet women's needs could feature group lending (as a substitute for other collateral) with graduation to individual liability, varying interest rates and loan maturity periods, and protected opportunities to save.

Women face many barriers to gaining access to markets. Modes of transportation may be culturally inappropriate for women. Market or health officials often harass women who market their wares just outside the market boundaries owing to the high cost of permits. Time burdens constrain women from seeking the best prices for their output. And marital conflict may be an issue if fluctuating prices lead a husband to believe that his wife is withholding money from him because she brought home more money on previous trips to the market. Overcoming such gender-related barriers to market access could facilitate women's ability to participate in market activities and generate income.

## **Implementing the Strategies**

The strategies outlined here are ambitious but necessary if recent progress in reducing poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals is not to be wiped out. They require concerted efforts to raise awareness about the gender implications of the food price crisis among policymakers, many of whom are new to the agricultural sector. Decisionmakers should ensure adequate treatment of gender in all policy responses from conceptualization to implementation at both the national and international level.

Developing appropriate policy responses to the food price crisis requires careful gender analysis to uncover differences between and among men and women that are important to address for policy success. Improved sex-disaggregated data collection is needed to support this analysis and develop gender-sensitive indicators for monitoring and evaluation of outcomes.

At the international level, agencies, donors, and government leaders involved with developing frameworks to respond to the crisis, including the United Nations Comprehensive Framework for Action, should ensure that their recommendations and commitments are not gender-blind, but instead address women's needs and provide opportunities for them to respond successfully to the crisis. Achieving gender-appropriate responses will also require dedicating resources to implement these responses on the ground.

Ultimately, governments and civil society groups must recognize women as both unique victims of the crisis and key contributors to overcoming the crisis. Many women's groups and movements, from the local to the national and international level, have drawn attention to the food crisis, and they can help mobilize action to overcome it. At the local level, women's self-help groups have distributed relief supplies to ensure effective targeting of benefits to poor women. Local women's groups can also help support women's access to financial capital, seeds, equipment, and markets and share knowledge about how to expand production. At higher levels, women's groups can play an important role in ensuring that the particular needs of women are included in the design of programs and policies. Expanding women's participation in and leadership of action to mitigate the impact of the food price crisis in the short run can also strengthen women's long-term ability to adapt to the crisis as both producers and consumers.

Finally, the promising approaches listed here must be continually evaluated, with particular attention to exploring alternative design mechanisms and differential impacts on men and women. Ongoing evaluation would help identify which design features can be modified for local conditions without adversely affecting the overall impact of the intervention and which programs could effectively be scaled up to ensure that gains in poverty reduction and women's empowerment are advanced and not set back by the food price crisis.

---

*Agnes Quisumbing and Ruth Meinzen-Dick are senior research fellows at IFPRI. Lucy Bassett is a senior research assistant at IFPRI. Michael Usnick is director of the U.S. Relations Office for the World Food Programme (WFP). Lauren Pandolfelli is a Ph.D. student at State University of New York Stony Brook. Cheryl Morden is director of the North American Liaison Office of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Harold Alderman is social protection adviser for the Africa region at the World Bank. Lynn Brown provided helpful comments and insights.*

## **INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

2033 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006-1002 USA • T. +1.202.862.5600 / Skype: IFPRIhomeoffice • F. +1.202.467.4439 • [ifpri@cgiar.org](mailto:ifpri@cgiar.org) • [www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org)