

# Barriers to resilience:

## The impact of gender inequality on food security



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Concern Worldwide is an international humanitarian organisation dedicated to tackling hunger and transforming lives in the world's poorest places. We are working for a world where no one dies for want of safe and nutritious food. Malnutrition is one of the gravest threats to child survival and development, with long-lasting consequences. We use our expertise and local knowledge to work with people and communities to develop lasting solutions to hunger so that they can lead happier, healthier lives and lift themselves sustainably out of poverty.

Concern's focus on tackling hunger and extreme poverty is underpinned by an understanding of a lack of assets, risk, vulnerability and power inequality in any given context. The need to protect development gains from being wiped out by disasters, whether natural or human-made, has been the driving force of Concern's interest in long-term programming, research and advocacy for strengthening community resilience to food and nutrition crises.

**On the front:** Women of the Kolkoli village's gardening interest group, supported by Concern in Niger's Tahoua region. The vegetables grown are eaten and sold locally to buy cereals.

Photo: Tagaza Djibo/Niger/2012

# Introduction

Gender plays a major part in influencing how a person experiences disaster and responds to risk. The different social roles and responsibilities of men and women, their access to and control over resources, their representation and their ability to make their voices heard, all combine to influence the level of risk they face.

Men and women make up the Tcharow Comite Communautaire d'Action (community action committee) in Tcharow, Goz Beida, Sila Region, Chad. Pictured analysing the impact and frequency of the hazards the village faces in order to identify the most important ones to be addressed.

Gender also has a significant bearing on the ability of a person to build resilience<sup>1</sup> against disaster. Men and women have distinct attributes or skills that allow them to achieve this, but the gender roles they inhabit can enhance or restrict the opportunities they have to contribute to resilience building.

It is therefore crucial that programme interventions and policy fully address the relationship between gender and vulnerability in order to support the building of resilient communities.

Both men and women are immersed in gender norms and social expectations, whether positive or negative. However, in patriarchal societies, gender norms associating masculinity with power over women mean that women are disproportionately affected by disasters. They are more likely to suffer damage to their livelihoods, at greater threat of gender-based violence and more likely to lose their lives during and in the aftermath of a disaster. It is important not to neglect vulnerabilities of men, their needs or, indeed, the role they can play in supporting

improvements in women's social and economic development. But when considering the relationship between gender, risk and resilience, particular attention needs to be paid to women.

In 2013 and 2014, Concern Worldwide explored how a range of factors enhance or diminish community resilience in West Darfur, Sudan, and Sila, Chad. This paper presents the findings on gender. It demonstrates the links between gender and risks to food security, and shows how gender-based vulnerability is manifested across four key areas of household and community life.

Drawing on Concern's wider programmatic experience, this paper also provides examples from Niger, Ethiopia and Tanzania of promising practice in addressing gender inequality and proposes a series of recommendations, addressed to players with direct influence on resilience programmes and policies. These include governments of food insecure countries, policy makers at country and international levels, and humanitarian, international development and donor communities.



Photo: Dom Hunt/Chad/2014

# Gender and food security in Chad and Sudan: context

Amme Hedjab receives treatment for her severely malnourished eight month old daughter Fatima Izza in Wandalou health out-post, Sila Region, Chad.

Chad and Sudan are countries chronically affected by food insecurity. In the Sila region of eastern Chad and West Darfur, Sudan, shocks, such as spikes in conflict or food prices, and stresses, such as climate change, which is thought to exacerbate the unpredictability of rain patterns, are contributing to a situation of entrenched food insecurity.

Gender inequality is also exhibited in key areas of life at community level in Chad and Sudan. In both countries, particularly in rural areas, traditional gender roles mean that women are less likely to be involved in household decision-making, have access to education or get returns from assets such as land or property. Practices such as early marriage, polygamy and female genital mutilation, which are practiced in some areas, also contribute to female vulnerability.

This situation persists despite policies at national level designed to safeguard women's equality. In Chad, the constitution guarantees gender equality<sup>ii</sup> and the country ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women in 1990. In Sudan, the interim constitution<sup>iii</sup> guarantees equality before the law and the civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights of women are also guaranteed by law.

Moreover, the importance of addressing gender when tackling vulnerability and building resilience is recognised in instruments at global level such as the Hyogo Framework for Action, the international framework for Disaster Risk Reduction<sup>iv</sup> and is expected to be well represented in its successor, the Post-2015 DRR Framework.

Yet the challenge remains to ensure that the principles of international, national and state level policies can be brought to life at community level, where cultural norms and family expectations can perpetuate inequality. Progress has been made, but without programming and policies which drive action at the local level, gender inequality will continue to exacerbate the effect of disasters and restrict the ability of communities to bounce back.

## Food insecurity in Chad and Sudan:

At the peak of the 2012 Sahel crisis, 28% of Chad's population was moderately food insecure and 14% severely food insecure, rising to 47% and 18% respectively in the Sila region<sup>v</sup>. Food security is also fragile in Sudan and is threatened by a combination of conflict, insecurity and high food prices. The 2010 Sudan Household Health Survey revealed levels of global acute malnutrition of 16.4% and severe acute malnutrition of 5.3%<sup>vi</sup> both well above international thresholds for an emergency situation. In both countries, the recurring nature of food crises reduces the ability of people, year on year, to withstand them. Since people are forced to sell basic livelihoods assets in bad years, some communities now face a food crisis even when rainfall is good.



Photo: Jennifer Nolan/Chad/2014

# Gender and food security in Chad and Sudan: research findings

Concern's findings in Chad and Sudan reveal how gender-based vulnerability is manifested across four key areas of household and community life: decision-making, livelihoods, responsibility for natural resources, education.

## 1) Decision-making

Women in Sila, Chad, and West Darfur, Sudan, are vulnerable to food insecurity in large part because their involvement in decision-making is limited. As in many disaster-prone parts of the world, women in these regions have restricted influence over key areas of household and community life, including areas that have a direct impact on their health and wellbeing.

In male-headed households in Sila, data collected by Concern revealed a consistent pattern of restricted decision-making in the areas that affect women most. Concern's research found that:

- **5.5%** of women had sole responsibility for decisions related to the number of children they had.
- **19.1%** of women were permitted to make decisions about their own healthcare and **13.1%** for that of their children.
- **26.4%** were able to take decisions related to their daily food needs<sup>vii</sup>.

The result is that women's needs and concerns are not sufficiently represented, which has clear implications for the risks they face from disasters.

Yet it is not just women's needs that go unrepresented, but also the contribution they can make to developing plans and mitigating the effects of disasters. By failing to capitalise on their potential to build resilience, their exclusion increases risk both for the women themselves and for the whole community. Concern's research in Chad identified key areas where involving the woman in decision-making led to better outcomes for the household and by extension, the community. It found, for example, that when men and women made decisions together about food, planting and

livestock, dietary diversity was higher and the household experienced fewer months of food insecurity<sup>viii</sup>.

The research also provided evidence supporting certain programmatic approaches to increasing female decision-making. It found, for example, that where a woman has her own source of cash, she has a greater say in household decision-making. Improving livelihood options for women can therefore have knock-on benefits for their position within the home. Participation in community groups – such as women's groups, youth groups, water well or latrine management groups – also increases the influence of women on decision-making at community level<sup>ix</sup>. In our research, 40% of women interviewed belonged to one or more of these groups, with 45% holding decision-making positions<sup>x</sup>.

If women's voices are to be strengthened sustainably, this will require an attitude shift on the part of men. A survey of men's attitudes in the project area in Chad reveals that a considerable majority do not support gender equity for women, with 76.2% of men showing low levels of support for women's rights<sup>xi</sup>. However, questions around attitudes towards girl children presented a different picture and suggested a way forward for gender programming. Men were asked whether money should be spent on sons first, if there was a limited amount of money available, and whether it is more important for a woman to give birth to a boy than a girl. Here, 40% of men showed high levels of support for gender equitable norms when it comes to girl children, with 28% showing medium levels of support and 31.8% the least equitable attitudes to girl children<sup>xii</sup>.

These results reinforce the importance of working with men as part of the solution to gender inequality. This is an area Concern already has experience of<sup>xiii</sup> (see Tanzania case study on page 9) and is delivering promising results. The results also highlight the strategic value of engaging with men as fathers on issues of gender equality, as an entry point to reflect on wider issues of gender equity.

## 2) Livelihoods

Challenges to livelihoods have played a key role in recent food crises in Chad and Sudan, particularly in rural areas. The major source of food and livelihoods for rural communities in both countries is crop and animal production. Climate change is thought to be exacerbating the unpredictability of rainfall, contributing to more frequent droughts and floods, reduced crop yields and degraded pastures. Conflict, particularly in Sudan, has prevented many farmers from travelling to their fields, depleted pastoralists' herds and caused widespread displacement.

In both Chad and Sudan, roles and duties relating to livelihoods are assigned on the basis of gender; so threats to livelihoods have different repercussions for men and women. In Sudan, an estimated 2.5 million people have been displaced to date in Darfur<sup>xiv</sup>, and in households of Internally Displaced People (IDP) living in camps, men's movement is restricted since there is a severe risk of fatal attack if they leave. As a result, women have to take responsibility for supporting the family financially in addition to their other duties. This increases their workload and, though less at risk of fatal attacks if leaving the IDP camps, they are still vulnerable to sexual violence. Meanwhile, the inability of men to make a significant contribution to household finances – the role traditionally assigned to them – can take a severe psychological toll, with implications for the whole family.

In Chad, where conflict has had a less dramatic effect on displacement, there has nevertheless been a significant trend of male migration for several decades. Almost a quarter of all households reported that someone in the household migrated for work in the past year<sup>xv</sup>. Research conducted on this aspect of life in Chad showed that migration appears to be undermining the long-term resilience of the community as a whole.

Households with a member who had migrated had a less diverse diet and were also more likely to have had a

child who was ill in the last two weeks<sup>xvi</sup>. This is, in part, because the expected remittances often fail to materialise. Only 18.2% of households who reported that one or more members migrated for work during the past year said that they had received remittances<sup>xvii</sup>. Reports from village leaders and focus groups suggest that many men have not yet earned enough abroad to send money home and many have been forced to give up opportunities for work due to interethnic conflict in the regions they've travelled to.<sup>xviii</sup>

## 3) Responsibility for natural resources

Access to natural resources is a significant and growing challenge for communities across Chad and Sudan. Rainfall variability, deforestation, depletion of soil quality and over-grazing of rangeland – often in response to the demands of growing populations – are causing damage to environmental assets and decreasing their availability. Inequitable land tenure systems also restrict access, particularly for women, to the environmental resources that families need to survive.

Women and girls bear chief responsibility for the management of environmental assets, such as firewood, water, fodder, wild foods and building materials. Travelling further afield to search for these resources puts them at greater risk of attack and sexual violence. The need to carry heavy loads long distances makes them more vulnerable to injury and long term health problems.<sup>xix</sup>

In Chad, our research recorded travel times of between 20 minutes and one hour, which may need to be repeated several times a day<sup>xx</sup>. A scarcity of water also presents other challenges. Restricted access to clean water increases the likelihood of illness in the household, which also increases the woman's caring duties. Difficulties accessing water for agriculture has an impact on agricultural production and the care of livestock.

These challenges can combine to make a woman's daily workload untenable. They can restrict girls' opportunities to attend school and prevent women from engaging

in other activities such as literacy training or income-generating activities such as market gardening. Women are therefore limited in their opportunities to adapt to their current situation, and to develop skills or take on work that will improve their standing, increase their cash income and strengthen their voice in both the household and the community.

Once again, these restrictions on women have wider implications for the household and community's resilience. Our research from Chad shows that a family gains considerably if a household has a source of cash income as this leads to better food security, a more diverse diet and a lower prevalence of wasting amongst children<sup>xxi</sup>. Meanwhile Concern's experience in emergencies shows that cash transfers, particularly when targeted at women, are an effective way of improving nutritional outcomes at household level because they lead to more frequent meals for children and a higher consumption<sup>xxii</sup> of legumes, which are dense in nutrients. These opportunities are restricted if women are unable to make money due to a heavily increased workload caused by a scarcity of natural assets.

#### 4) Education

Education is key to adapting to changing circumstances and confronting risk. It not only equips people with skills but also confidence, a critical element in fostering participation in decision-making. However, in the research areas in Chad, school attendance is low and girls are notably less likely to attend; only 30% of girls attend school, compared to 41% of boys<sup>xxiii</sup>. In Sudan, there are also significant gaps in formal education for girls; less than 13% of female adults have reached at least a secondary level of education, compared to 18% of men<sup>xxiv</sup>. Gender disparities in education are not just limited to attendance, but are also shown in the level of support pupils receive from their families and wider community to encourage them to remain in school.

The reasons for this are varied but are often tied to expectations of girls based on gender norms. When girls are expected to perform a wide range of household and childcare duties it results in a barrier to their education. In some cases, parents are reluctant to invest in their daughters' education since they expect them to marry into other families, and take the benefits of their education with them. Girls may be withdrawn from school early to marry as their families see them as an economic burden as they become older. Many girls are also reluctant to attend school because the long journey puts them at risk of attack and sexual violence, or because of an absence of proper water and sanitation facilities.

Inequalities in relation to education are demonstrated by the literacy rates for women in Chad, 25.4% compared with 45.6% for men<sup>xxv</sup>. In Sudan, literacy levels are 50% for women compared to 72% for men<sup>xxvi</sup>. This places women and girls in a situation of increased vulnerability as they have fewer skills and therefore fewer livelihood options that would enable them to adapt to difficult circumstances and still prosper.

# Addressing gender in resilience programming: Concern's experience

As our findings from Chad and Sudan demonstrate, gender inequality across the four areas detailed here is a key factor in exacerbating vulnerability and an obstacle to building community resilience. However, positive results from Concern's programme experience in Niger and Ethiopia shows that progress towards gender equality can be achieved, as part of broader efforts to build communities' resilience.

Both programmes are at an early stage, so their positive results should not be interpreted as evidence of permanent change. Nevertheless, they provide a positive indication that through sensitive programming, communities can take important steps in re-evaluating longstanding attitudes to gender.

Concern's three year Integrated Resilience Programme in the Tahoua region of southern Niger is addressing inequitable attitudes to gender as part of a programme which also includes health, education, livelihoods, disaster risk reduction and emergency activities.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The programme targets women as the primary beneficiaries of project activities, including livelihood diversification, to increase the number of women with their own source of cash. In addition, the programme includes gender-focused activities such as working with parents and schools to encourage girls to register for, and remain in, education, with discussions on child protection issues such as school codes of conduct and gender-segregated latrines. The programme also provides support for the poorest families to help them keep their girls in school.

A survey of participating households, conducted in November 2014, suggests a positive shift in the way women's roles are perceived. Among the most significant shifts were around attitudes to women's control of assets and inheritance; the survey reported a rise of 18% and 12% since 2013 in the number of respondents agreeing with the statements "Women should be able to own and

control assets" and "Women should inherit and keep property and assets" respectively. The survey also found that attitudes towards gender equality have improved in other key areas such as shared decision-making and women's access to education.

Concern's Building Resilience In Emergency-Prone Areas of Wolaita, south central Ethiopia, meanwhile, addresses gender as a cross-cutting issue, with gender and equality discussed in training sessions around livelihoods, health and disaster risk reduction<sup>xxviii</sup>. Examples are provided to show how gender equality contributes to the wellbeing of the whole community. In addition, the programme has been designed to complement and target the same beneficiaries as a pre-existing Concern programme, which organises training around saving and credit cooperatives for women.



Photo: Alexander Carnwath/Ethiopia/2014

Men and women join together for a cooking demonstration, part of Concern's Building Resilience In Emergency-Prone Areas of Wolaita, Ethiopia.



**“Our influence as women is changing. When I compare the respect that our male counterparts give [to how it was before], they listen to us, they give value to our opinions. All the things you have seen [supported by the resilience programme] have led to this change in influence. I have received seeds and goats. I have sweet potato and my own vegetable garden and seedlings. I am trading maize, other cereals. I am expanding business. For meetings at village levels, most of the women take part in every meeting. We revise points. We debate with our male brothers. Sometimes, we win the debate. Three months ago there was the election of a kebele (the smallest Ethiopian administrative unit) chairman. In that process there was debate about who should be supported. We argued with our brothers and supported him because he was free from corruption and he supports women in our activities. He was elected.”**

Shagite Gizaw, participant in Concern Ethiopia's Building Resilience In Emergency-Prone Areas of Wolaita programme.



Alexander Carnwath/Ethiopia/2014

The results are promising. At the start of the programme in November 2012, women in 50% of households reported having a say in how earnings are used. After the first year of the programme, this had risen to 62% and after two years, joint decision-making stands at 73.8%. These changes have been attributed to women's increased access to income and savings. Leadership positions in saving and credit coops in each community are mostly held by women, and there are reports that women are participating more in community meetings and that their voices now carry greater weight.

### Targeting men to change gender norms

Our findings from Chad and Sudan also highlight that women's exclusion from decision-making is a key underlying issue that entrenches inequality across all other areas of household and community life. Concern's experience provides evidence that progress on female decision-making can be made through sensitive programming that targets men as well as women.

The Women's Social and Economic Rights Programme, implemented by Concern and partners<sup>xxx</sup> in Tanzania's Mtwara and Kigoma regions, engages with men as a means of increasing women's influence over decision-making and the management of economic resources.<sup>xxx</sup>

The approach was selected after men were identified as a key group to influence in order to achieve changes in behaviours and attitudes. The programme established community dialogues to help both men and women reflect

on a range of gender-related issues, including gender relations, roles, decision-making, and to challenge rigid gender norms. Couples were encouraged to attend six sessions over three months, focusing on how masculine and feminine identities are socially constructed, and providing an opportunity and space for men to reflect on and understand the benefits of increased equality, not only for women, but for the economic wellbeing of the whole family.

During the project's mid-term review, substantial increases in women's contribution to decision-making were reported. For example, 90.6% of women reported having some control over use of land compared to 28% at the start of the project, and there were also significant increases in women's control over animals. The research also revealed significant changes in the percentage of household chores being shared between men and women. And respondents reported both an increase in the percentage of women in leadership positions across committees, and a decrease in the proportion of female respondents who say they never speak at meetings.

There are still important barriers to female influence in the targeted communities and while the proportion of women in leadership positions has increased, women in general report their level of influence over community level decisions is still low. Nevertheless, the significant changes already witnessed reinforce the importance of an approach that targets both genders to promote shared decision-making.

# Recommendations and best practice

Concern's findings from Chad and Sudan demonstrate that drought and food insecurity have a disproportionate impact on women and their potential to contribute to their communities' resilience. Addressing risk and strengthening the resilience of women, and their wider communities, will not succeed if they are excluded from decision-making, overburdened by a heavy workload, unable to access key environmental assets and restricted in their education, training and income-generation opportunities.

However, our experience in other contexts shows that sensitive programming can help change attitudes, both at household and community level, in favour of gender equality. This demonstrates the need for a broader and more thorough integration of gender across all areas of resilience programme and policy. The following recommendations are addressed to players with direct influence on resilience policies and programmes, including governments of food insecure countries, policy makers at country and international levels and humanitarian, international development and donor communities.

## Recommendations

- Gender is a key influence on how people experience disaster. Therefore, incorporate gender as a core theme within studies and assessments of disaster-prone areas, in order to understand gender roles, responsibilities and disparities fully.
- Use this understanding to develop, implement or support policies aimed at building resilience that address gender equality as a core issue. In addition, develop sector specific briefs, regarding the contribution of females and males to building resilience and strategies to support this.
- Women are more vulnerable to most risks than men<sup>xxxi</sup>. In developing and implementing community resilience policies, make sure that the voices of women are specifically included and that their views are heard and used to shape decisions.
- Support female engagement in decision-making and invest in a long term strategy to empower women. Engaging with men to shift attitudes in favour of gender equity is emerging as good practice and should be supported.
- Strengthen local institutions and engage with traditional and religious leaders to implement progressive laws and strategies driven through key ministries to support improvements to the lives of poor women.
- Education is the key to long-term development. Support education policies and environments that put children at the centre of learning, keep them safe, break down gender inequalities early and ensure that children learn effectively. In addition, given the divide between male and female literacy levels and the importance numeracy and literacy can play in increasing women's opportunities and status, support basic literacy and numeracy training for women.
- Integrate gender into all efforts to build resilience to food insecurity, through effective coordination between different ministries, including agriculture, nutrition, education and social welfare.

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- xxxi However, the nature of women and men's vulnerability will vary depending on the type of risk. For example, in conflict, men are more at risk of death and women of sexual violence.



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