



VOICE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

FIGHTING HUNGER: A WOMEN-LED RESPONSE

MUNDO MADOU, BRUSSELS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of the main ideas discussed during the event and does not necessarily reflect the speakers' or the VOICE network's opinions.

Despite the fact that women produce more than half of the food worldwide, and have been leading the response to the global food crisis, they are more likely to eat last and the least. Unfortunately, food policies often fail to look at the issue from a gender perspective, which can prevent the elaboration of adequate responses and fail to support responses led by women's organisations that already exist in crisis settings around the world. The panel discussion explored how humanitarian practitioners and donors can design and support gender-sensitive responses, as well as contribute to creating an enabling environment for local women to play a leading role in the humanitarian response to the global hunger crisis.

In her opening remarks, Cristina Gutiérrez Hernández reiterated the humanitarian priorities of the Council's Spanish Presidency, running from July to December 2023. Among them is a strong focus on gender and the specific impacts of humanitarian crises on women and girls. Ms Gutiérrez Hernández emphasised the need to work on protecting against and eradicating gender-based violence (GBV), the importance of collaborating with women-led organisations, as well as the need to recognise women as agents of change rather than vulnerable people.



Keynote speaker:

- Cristina Gutiérrez Hernández, Spanish Humanitarian Director, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AECID), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, Spain

Panel speakers:

- Mimidoo Achakpa, National Coordinator, Women in Humanitarian Response in Nigeria Initiative (WiHRiNI) and Steering Committee member, Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN)
- Floriane Clement, Senior Researcher, French National Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment (INRAE)
- Megan Daigle, Senior Research Fellow, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI
- Cheryl Harrison, Deputy Director of the Cash-Based Transfers Division, World Food Programme (WFP)
- Kirsten Sutherland, Humanitarian Coordinator, Alianza por la Solidaridad (ActionAid Spain)

Moderator:

- Maria Groenewald, VOICE Director

Why is it important to include women in the humanitarian response to the hunger crisis?

Speakers broadly agreed that the disproportionate impact of hunger on women and girls combined with their key role in food systems called for their involvement in the humanitarian responses to hunger. Megan Daigle (ODI) reminded attendees that women are, and have always been, at the centre of the response to food insecurity, in a manner that is grounded in communities' priorities and ways of working, and as an extension of their socialised caring roles. Kirsten Sutherland, from VOICE member Alianza por la Solidaridad, highlighted that in the context of hunger, women's vulnerability is conditioned by patriarchal dynamics which intersect with race and colonisation. To provide adequate humanitarian responses, this context needs to be acknowledged and further illuminated through the collection of empirical data. It is essential for INGOs to collaborate with women-led organisations and networks, and to adopt approaches and methodologies that promote participation and leadership, putting more power in the hands of local women to address food insecurity. To ensure meaningful work, Megan Daigle indicated that international humanitarian practitioners need to engage in partnerships with humility, and undertake power analysis, to cultivate awareness of – and eventually redress – the inequalities between international and national/local actors.

Mimidoo Achakpa, from the Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN), mentioned that women, due to their various social roles, have unique insights into the gaps, dynamics, and power relations within their communities. Women enjoy the trust of their peers and are aware of the specific needs of the most marginalised. The FHN representative added that this allows women to take an intersectional approach, making sure that everyone is considered, regardless of their age, gender, or ability. Moreover, according to her, women propose approaches which enhance the impact of humanitarian responses and bring an understanding of resilience.

According to Megan Daigle, the international humanitarian community must recognise women's involvement in humanitarian work, resource it by including women-led organisations in decision-making processes, and give them access to direct, flexible, and long-term funding. Cheryl Harrison mentioned how WFP is increasingly giving cash directly to women because it increases their decision-making power and helps unleash their economic potential so they can become resilient beyond the immediate crisis. According to Cheryl Harrison, giving cash to women is our best bet to achieve gender equality and become agents of change, lifting themselves and their wider community out of poverty.



Beyond women's central role, how can gender sensitivity improve the response to the hunger crisis?

Floriane Clément (INRAE) explained that in development contexts, there is not such an unequivocal link between women's empowerment and increased food security. The response to food insecurity must be context-specific and consider the way in which gender affects the food system in a specific situation. To do so, it is helpful to look at food insecurity as a process, rather than a state. This enables us to understand the differentiated capabilities of men and women to access food, which might depend on one's ability to command different resources (labour, land, credit), to benefit from informal support (e.g., kinship networks), or to draw on one's agency (decision-making, mobility). Context analysis helps prevent projects from furthering the existing inequalities and power dynamics.

While gender shapes the impact of crises on people, Megan Daigle pointed out that crises too, change gender dynamics. This includes the actors involved in a humanitarian response, who have an impact on gender norms even when not gender focused. Humanitarian practitioners change dynamics through the work environments they create, which are based on their own values and norms, including gender norms. She highlighted the importance of remembering that not only women experience gender-related challenges. Despite the time pressure and resource constraints, it is key to remain aware of gender norms throughout a crisis, to make sure to adopt a gender-sensitive approach.



What are the obstacles in including women in the humanitarian responses to hunger, and how can we address them?

Throughout the conversation, the dominance of men and international actors in the humanitarian sector was mentioned as an overarching difficulty to overcome. When it comes to collaborating with women-led organisations, Kirsten Sutherland pointed out that it is important to remain flexible, to make sure women's participation is favoured. Unfortunately, the time constraints which come with emergency contexts can complicate this collaboration. Moreover, ensuring collaboration with partners of varying response capacities can be challenging, as women-led organisations are not always the biggest actors. Kirsten Sutherland stressed that humanitarian work often depends on the work carried out by actors working on longer-term approaches, for example on women's access to land rights. This highlights the importance of nexus approaches.

The undermining of women's leadership was mentioned by Mimidoo Achakpa as one of the main challenges to overcome. In addition, the high control from male relatives in some households increases the risk for women to lack experience, capacities, and skills to navigate the humanitarian aid systems. Mimidoo Achakpa mentioned the strong marginalisation of local and national women by donor agencies, which prevents them from participating in humanitarian responses. To overcome these challenges, the FHN recommends fostering dialogue around masculinities, exploring possibilities for women's involvement, and multiplying training opportunities in emergency preparedness. Additionally, the FHN urges donor agencies to ensure funding opportunities for women-led organisations.

According to Cheryl Harrison, a major challenge remains the lack of trust in affected people, especially women, coming from deeply set beliefs which need to be dismantled. Evidence shows that directing cash transfers to women is highly efficient and brings positive change. Yet, when women ask for this to happen, it often takes a long time to make the necessary changes. In her experience, there is a higher bar for evidence that show the positives of putting women in charge of household finances than is required for men. This is unfortunate because research shows that when women manage their families' finances, they make choices that benefit young girls as well as the whole family.

One must not underestimate the biases brought by the humanitarian community itself, and the subsequent risks of attempting to design responses that are gender-responsive or that follow feminist principles, but without consulting with or centring the priorities of crisis-affected women, according to Megan Daigle. Feminist movements exist everywhere, and their priorities do not all align. Intersectional approaches, including an analysis of the existing systems of power, are key to mediating the risk of exporting a vision of feminism and gender equality which might not be relevant to the context. This is why gender transformation must be locally led.



CONCLUSION

Speakers agreed that women's leadership in the humanitarian response to hunger does not only bring better outcomes but is the right thing to do. Because of their key role in food systems, and their close ties within their communities, women are very well placed to design and participate in the implementation of humanitarian programmes.

International practitioners must work on securing partnerships with women-led organisations of varying capacities, to make sure that they can be involved despite the fast pace of humanitarian contexts. They must always be aware of gender norms, through extensive dialogue with the communities they assist, considering the specific context. The broader context of operation, including any power dynamics in the humanitarian aid system, as well as the impact practitioners have on a situation, should be considered.

Beyond a gender approach, the panel discussion highlighted that a feminist approach is necessary to change the existing structures of humanitarian aid. While a gender approach focuses on meeting the needs of people of all genders, a feminist humanitarian approach aims to address the root causes of these differentiated needs and to overcome them through participatory processes. Given the heightened humanitarian needs of women and girls in hunger crises, as well as their key role in food systems, feminist approaches are particularly adapted to solving situations of food insecurity.

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