

VOICE KEY HIGHLIGHTS: FIGHTING HUNGER: A WOMEN-LED RESPONSE

THE ISSUE

FROM CRISIS TO RECOVERY: WOMEN'S ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION



The panel of experts at the VOICE event "Fighting hunger: a women-led response"
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Even though 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. On 21 June 2023, the VOICE network organised a panel discussion on the topic "Fighting hunger: a women-led response". 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. After some opening remarks from Ms Cristina Gutiérrez Hernández, Spanish Humanitarian Director at the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AECID) of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, complementary views were shared by speakers from various backgrounds:

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

INCLUDING WOMEN IN THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO THE HUNGER CRISIS IS MORE THAN NECESSARY

Women are already doing the work

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. 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. 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 underlined that international humanitarian practitioners need to engage in partnerships with humility and undertake power analysis.

Women have an excellent grasp of communities' needs

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.

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.

IN SITUATIONS OF FOOD INSECURITY, CONTEXT-SPECIFICITY MUST RHYME WITH GENDER SENSITIVITY

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. Understanding the differentiated capabilities of men and women to access food helps prevent projects from furthering the existing inequalities and power dynamics.

While gender shapes the impact of crises on people, Megan Daigle (ODI) 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. 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.

MANY OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP REMAIN

Time pressure

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 the importance of nexus approaches, as humanitarian work often depends on the work carried out by actors working on longer-term approaches.

Marginalisation of women

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.



Kirsten Sutherland speaks about the importance of ensuring women's collaboration in humanitarian response. Photo: ©VOICE

Access to funding

According to Cheryl Harrison, a major challenge remains the lack of trust in affected people, especially women. 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. 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. Mimidoo Achakpa (FHN) also urged donor agencies to ensure funding opportunities for women-led organisations.

Bias within the humanitarian system

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. 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 not only brings 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.

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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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