



GENDER ALERT: FOOD SECURITY RISKS OF THE MIDDLE EAST ESCALATION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

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I. OVERVIEW

The Middle East escalation is placing additional strain on global food security. Continued disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz are keeping energy, fertilizer and transport costs elevated and volatile, transmitting the shock into food prices, agricultural inputs, humanitarian operations, labour markets and remittance-dependent economies far beyond the region.¹ This is affecting countries already weakened by climate shocks² and successive global crises,³ which have disrupted energy markets, driven up fertilizer and food prices, reduced agricultural productivity, and eroded households' capacity to absorb further shocks. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has warned that, if current pressures persist, they could contribute to a severe global food-price crisis within the coming months.⁴

Women and girls are likely to bear the brunt of this shock. They already face higher levels of food insecurity, have less access to secure work, income, land, credit and financial services, and carry a greater share of unpaid care work. Evidence from previous crises shows that economic shocks widen these inequalities, both within households and across societies. When food becomes less affordable, women may eat less or eat last, shift to cheaper and less nutritious diets, or spend more time finding and preparing food.⁵

Women are central to the food systems that are now under pressure. They make up almost 40 per cent of the global agrifood workforce – growing, processing and selling food. In sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, agrifood systems account for 66 and 71 per cent of women's employment respectively.⁶ Higher fuel, fertilizer and transport costs can therefore affect women twice over: through higher food prices as consumers, and through lower agricultural earnings and reduced work as producers.

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This Gender Alert examines the potential near-term implications of this double exposure for women and girls in 28 countries,⁷ where food-price shocks intersect with existing food insecurity, import dependence, displacement, humanitarian funding pressures, climate vulnerability and gender inequality. The analysis shows that rising food prices could push millions more women and girls into food insecurity, with risks compounded where existing crises overlap with gender inequalities that limit women's ability to absorb the shock.

II. METHODOLOGY

This Gender Alert is based on an analysis of country-level secondary data using two complementary approaches.⁸ First, a scenario-based model estimates the potential number of additional food-insecure people approximately nine months after the onset of the crisis. It considers three scenarios – mild, moderate and severe – based on food-price assumptions, corresponding respectively to increases of 0.73, 2.75 and 5.00 percentage points in annual food inflation, compared with a no-crisis baseline in which food insecurity remains at its latest pre-crisis level.⁹

Higher fuel, fertilizer and transport costs can affect women twice over: through higher food prices as consumers, and through lower agricultural earnings and reduced work as producers.

Second, a country-level shock exposure analysis identifies where food-security conditions may be more susceptible to deterioration because of several factors¹⁰: domestic food-price pressures, existing levels of acute food insecurity, dependence on imported food and fuel,¹¹ the importance of agriculture and reliance on imported fertilizer and agricultural inputs,¹² internal displacement, humanitarian funding relative to the scale of food security needs,¹³ structural gender inequalities shaping women's economic position and their capacity to absorb food and income shocks.¹⁴

The estimated share of women and girls among the additional food insecure population is modelled using available country-level indicators, as comparable sex- and age-disaggregated food-security outcome data were not available across the 28 countries. The scenario results are estimates, not forecasts. While the exposure analysis supports prioritization and monitoring, it should not be interpreted as a causal assessment of impact.

III. KEY FINDINGS

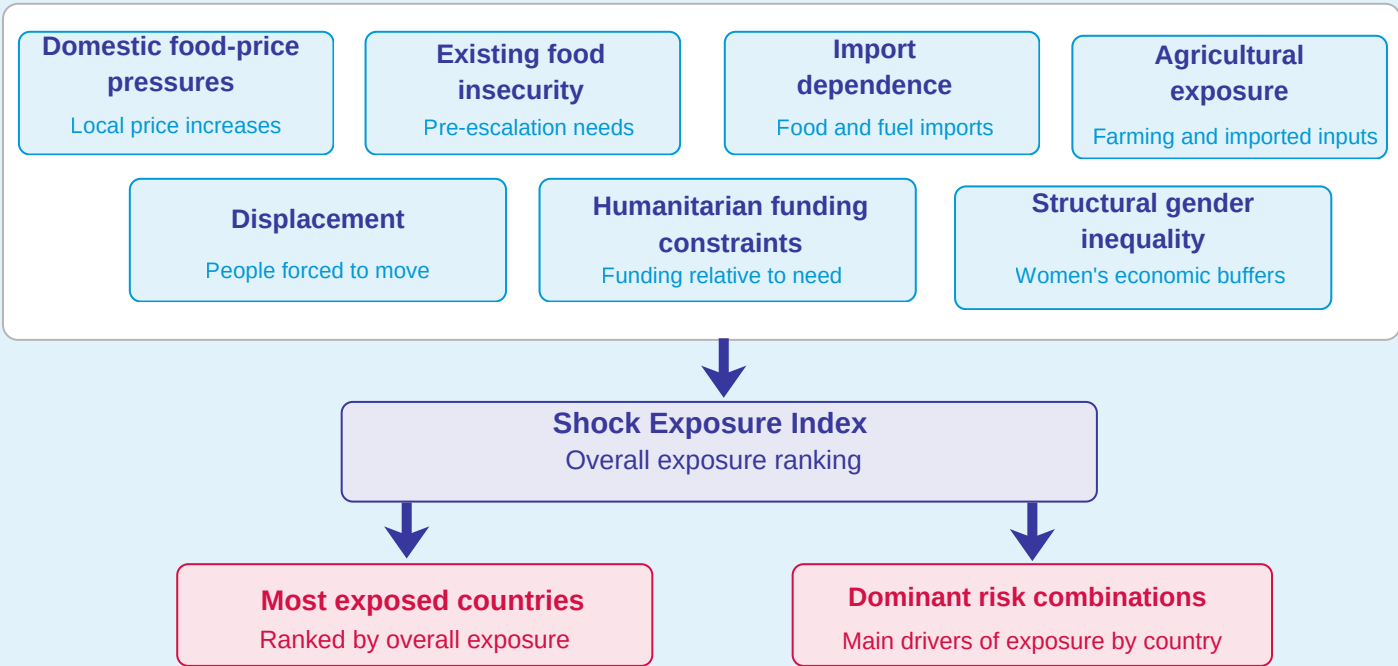
1. Millions more women and girls are at risk of food insecurity

The Middle East escalation is adding new price shocks to an already severe food security crisis. Higher energy, fertilizer and transport costs raise the cost of imported food, agricultural production and humanitarian delivery across many low- and middle-income countries, precisely when household coping capacity is already stretched.

Even before this escalation, an estimated 208 million women and girls across the 28 countries were food insecure or undernourished.¹⁵ The current shock therefore risks deepening an existing crisis rather than creating a new one.¹⁶ Under the moderate scenario, an estimated additional 11.7 million women and girls could become food insecure by the end of December 2026, accounting for 53 per cent of the projected 22 million additional people affected.^{17 18} In some countries, women and girls are estimated to make up an even larger share of those affected: 60 per cent in Afghanistan, 57 per cent in Yemen and Pakistan, and 56 per cent in Bangladesh and Sudan.

Figure 1: How the Shock Exposure Index is constructed.

Seven exposure pathways are combined into a single index that ranks countries by overall exposure and identifies the combination of risks driving it in each context. Source: UN Women.



Under the moderate scenario, an estimated additional 11.7 million women and girls could become food insecure by the end of December 2026.

The shock is most concentrated in South Sudan, where, based on observed IPC assessments, around 852,000 additional women and girls could face food insecurity by December 2026, roughly 14 per cent – or one in seven – of the country's female population. Lebanon follows, where the additional number is equivalent to nearly 4 per cent of the female population. These scenario-based estimates show how quickly outcomes worsen as the assumed food-price shock becomes larger.

2. Gender inequality can turn price and income shocks into a deeper crisis for women and girls

Prices are only part of the story. A woman's ability to keep food on the table depends on whether she has her own income, secure work, savings or credit, and a say over how household resources are used. The cross-country analysis measured three of these economic buffers: access to income, employment security, and financial inclusion. Each shows why many women have little room to absorb another shock.



Limited access to income

In Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Sudan and Syria, fewer than one in five women participates in the labour force. In Afghanistan and Yemen, participation falls to approximately one in twenty.¹⁹ Labour force participation does not fully capture economic resilience, but low participation is a strong signal that many women lack independent access to income, savings, credit and other resources that help protect food consumption when household budgets tighten.²⁰



Limited financial inclusion

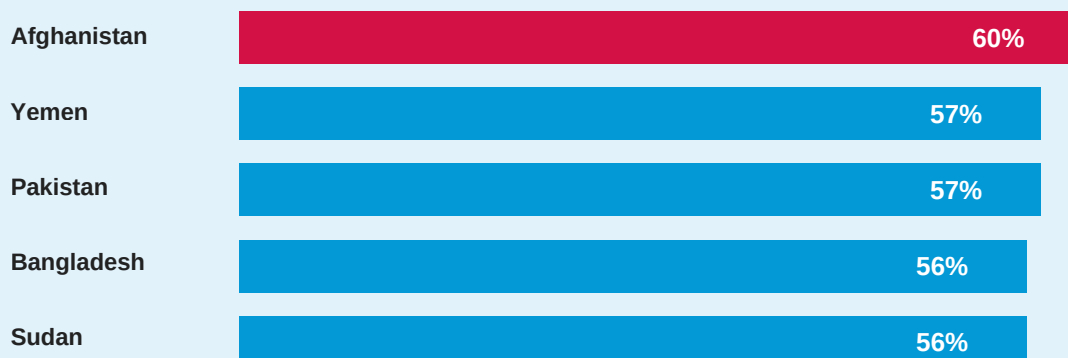
Access to financial services offers another potential buffer, but many women remain excluded. In Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan and Yemen, fewer than one in five women owns a bank or mobile money account.²¹ Without an account, women have fewer ways to save, receive remittances or cash assistance, or borrow safely. This may increase their reliance on informal lenders, relatives or male household members, and potentially heighten protection risks.



Insecure employment

In 17 of the 28 countries analysed, at least half of employed women are in vulnerable employment. In Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Haiti, Mali and South Sudan, this share exceeds 80 per cent. This indicator captures only part of women's employment insecurity, since temporary, informal, domestic and migrant work carry additional vulnerabilities not fully reflected in comparable cross-country data.

Projected share of women and girls among additional people facing food insecurity (%)
Scenario-based model estimates, not forecasts or observed outcomes.



3. Women and girls face the greatest food security risks where multiple pressures overlap

Rising food prices compound existing pressures on women and girls, especially where conflict, displacement, food insecurity, import dependence, agricultural exposure or humanitarian funding gaps are already present. This combination deepens the inequalities women already face in access to resources, livelihoods, services and decision-making, raising both their risk of food insecurity and the difficulty of coping with and recovering from it. Under a combined stress scenario of sustained food, fuel and fertilizer price pressures and reduced humanitarian assistance, 26 of the 28 countries would face high or very high exposure to multiple, compounding risks.²²

Sudan and South Sudan rank highest overall, with severe food insecurity, displacement, humanitarian funding pressures and structural gender inequalities converging. Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Haiti, Ethiopia and Palestine also face high exposure, but through different combinations of risks. For example, in Somalia and Yemen, exposure is driven mainly by severe existing food insecurity combined with low humanitarian funding for food security relative to the number of people in need. Because the drivers differ, no single, uniform response will fit every context.

Two different lenses are important here: how many women and girls are affected, and how concentrated the shock is within a country. Populous countries may drive the largest absolute numbers of women and girls facing food insecurity (India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Egypt), yet in each case the increase is below 1.5 per cent of the

population. In smaller or crisis-affected countries such as South Sudan, Sudan, Haiti, Yemen and Palestine, they face more concentrated risk because several sources of vulnerability coincide.²³ Both lenses are key for prioritization: absolute numbers for resource planning; and concentrated shocks for identifying where the shock is more acutely felt.

The dominant type of risk also varies by country. In countries where humanitarian food security funding is low relative to the scale of need, the main risk is that assistance cannot keep pace as prices rise. In countries where farming is central to the economy, the bigger risk is rising fuel and fertilizer costs, since so many women's livelihoods depend directly on agriculture.

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countries could face high or very high exposure to multiple, compounding risks under the combined stress scenario.

For women working in agriculture, the impact is direct as rising input costs cut into what they earn, not only what they pay at the market. In Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and South Sudan, around two-thirds or more of employed women work in agriculture.²⁴ Higher fuel, fertilizer and input costs can disrupt planting decisions, reduce production and labour demand, and squeeze earnings. Women in smallholder, informal and seasonal work may have especially few buffers where access to land, finance, inputs and extension services is limited.

In import-dependent economies, global food, fuel and logistics shocks pass more quickly into local prices. Women with limited independent income, secure employment, savings or financial accounts have less room to absorb the increase.

Policy and programme responses should be matched to the dominant risk in each context. Where humanitarian funding falls short of need, protect women's access to food, cash, nutrition and protection services. Where agriculture is the pressure point, protect women's production, inputs and livelihoods. Where import-driven inflation

Food price crises can deepen inequality as women enter the shock with fewer buffers and may absorb more of the adjustment inside households – a risk that grows if household income also falls.

Illustrative pathways shaping women's and girls' food security risks

Pathway	Why this matters for women and girls
Domestic food price pressure	Captures how quickly and how far food prices are rising in local markets. ²⁵ Rising prices can erode purchasing power fastest for households that spend a large share of their income on food. Women, who often manage household food budgets, may absorb the adjustment by reducing their own food intake, shifting to cheaper and less nutritious diets, or spending more time sourcing and preparing food.
Existing acute food insecurity	Captures how many people were already food insecure (IPC Phase 3+) before the escalation. Where food insecurity is already widespread, households have fewer coping options left, and further price increases are more likely to translate into reduced meals and poorer diets. Women and girls who already eat less or last have little margin to cut further, increasing nutrition risks, particularly for pregnant and breastfeeding women and adolescent girls.
Dependence on imported food and fuel	Captures how exposed countries are to international food, fuel and exchange-rate shocks. Higher import costs pass quickly into local prices for food and cooking and transport fuel. ²⁶ Where women have less independent income, control over household resources or access to financial services, they have fewer ways to absorb these increases, and higher cooking fuel costs can push households towards cheaper, more time-consuming or less safe alternatives, adding to women's unpaid work.
Importance of agriculture and reliance on imported inputs	Captures where food production and agricultural livelihoods depend on imported fertilizer and other agricultural inputs. Higher input costs threaten production, earnings and agricultural employment. Women farmers and agricultural workers may be particularly constrained where their access to land, credit and technical support is limited.
Internal Displacement	Captures where internal displacement disrupts livelihoods and access to services, while increasing unpaid care responsibilities, mobility constraints, and protection risks. These pressures can make it more difficult for displaced women and girls to access food, income and assistance.
Humanitarian funding relative to food security needs	Captures where funding for food, nutrition and related assistance is low relative to the number of people in need. Gaps reduce access to food and cash assistance, nutrition services and protection support while household purchasing power declines. Women and girls who depend on these services may face additional barriers to meeting food, nutrition and protection needs.
Structural gender inequality	Captures constraints on women's economic capacity to absorb shocks. Unequal access to income, assets and services, combined with unpaid care responsibilities and limited decision-making power, reduces women's options for responding to shocks and shapes how the costs of food insecurity are distributed within households.

dominates, protect household purchasing power and women's access to financial resources. However, responding to the price shock without addressing the gender inequalities that shape women's choices will leave the underlying vulnerability intact in every context.

4. What happens to women and girls inside households is still largely invisible

The estimates show where women and girls may face greatest risk, but not how that risk is experienced within households. Comparable sex- and age-disaggregated outcome data remain scarce, so this analysis relies on structural indicators, rather than direct measures of women's and girls' food consumption, nutrition and coping.²⁷

This distinction, between where risk is highest and how it plays out, is important. A household can be classified as food insecure without showing who eats less or last, whose diet loses diversity, who controls scarce food and cash, or who spends more time securing and preparing food. These blind spots are especially important for female-headed households, pregnant and breastfeeding women, displaced women and girls, and women with disabilities.²⁸

The same blind spots extend beyond food. Available data rarely show whether women and girls are taking on more unpaid care, leaving school or paid work, depleting assets, or resorting to harmful coping strategies. Yet these are precisely the pathways through which a short-term food shock can become a longer-term loss of income, health, education and autonomy.²⁹

For policy makers, this means household-level indicators are necessary but not sufficient. Assistance may reach a household while women and girls still eat less, lose assets, shoulder more unpaid work or face worsening nutrition and protection risks.

Food security monitoring should connect household-level data with sex- and age-disaggregated evidence on women's and girls' food consumption and nutritional outcomes. It should also examine their livelihoods, coping strategies, and unpaid care, drawing on nutrition, protection and qualitative sources alongside standard food security statistics. This would allow decision makers to see both where food insecurity is rising, as well as which women and girls are absorbing the cost.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Middle East escalation could amplify the inequalities that determine who can withstand economic shocks. How its costs are distributed between and within households will depend on choices made now. The significance is in how food insecurity is experienced and who ultimately bears its cost. Without early, integrated and gender-responsive action, the current escalation risks turning a temporary geopolitical shock into a long-term setback for food security and gender equality. Protecting food systems and household resilience requires protecting the women whose labour, livelihoods and unpaid care sustain them, and ensuring that their needs and experiences shape the response.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments, humanitarian and development actors, and donors should protect women and girls now while strengthening their ability to withstand the next shock.



1. Protect women's access to food and to the resources that make resilience possible

Food assistance is essential but not enough when rising prices collide with insecure livelihoods, displacement, limited financial access and humanitarian food security funding gaps. Support should protect both what women and girls can eat today and the resources women need to recover tomorrow.

Combine gender-responsive social protection and timely food and cash assistance with protection services, livelihood and agricultural support, and measures that safeguard women's productive assets and financial access. Design delivery around barriers that women actually face, including limited access to land, credit, services and assistance, as well as nutrition deficits, mobility constraints and unpaid care, so that coping does not require women to eat less, sell productive assets or abandon livelihoods.



2. Target resources where women and girls face multiple, overlapping risks

Prioritization should look beyond projected caseloads. It should combine the scale of food insecurity with the pressures that make women and girls less able to cope, including conflict, internal displacement, humanitarian funding gaps, climate vulnerability, agricultural exposure and structural gender inequalities.

Responses should target the dominant risk: sustain essential assistance where funding is low relative to need; protect women's access to fertilizer, other inputs and agricultural livelihoods where production is threatened; and maintain livelihoods and services in displacement settings. Time agricultural support to planting seasons so that higher input costs do not become lost production, lost income, and another round of food-price increases.



3. Make women's and girls' experiences visible in food security data

Food security monitoring should show not only whether a household is struggling, but how the shock is distributed among women, men, girls and boys. Assessments should use sex- and age-disaggregated analysis, and, where feasible, individual-level food consumption and intra-household food-allocation data. However, food security assessments alone cannot capture the full picture. Evidence on unpaid care, nutrition, harmful coping strategies, protection risks and women's access to and control over assistance also requires complementary sectoral and qualitative sources.

Data producers, including national statistical offices, ministries, and humanitarian and development actors should connect these sources across the humanitarian–development nexus, linking official statistics, humanitarian assessments and programme monitoring with evidence from women-led and women's rights organizations. A more connected evidence system would allow decision makers to see where food insecurity is worsening and who is paying the price – who is eating less, losing livelihoods, taking on more unpaid care, or facing heightened nutrition and protection risks, and adapt the response accordingly.

For a concise summary of the key findings and recommendations presented in this Gender Alert, please refer to the accompanying three-page Gender Alert Brief

Endnotes

[1] As of late September 2026, disruption through the Strait of Hormuz remains substantial, despite renewed U.S.–Iran negotiations over a phased reopening; earlier ceasefire arrangements proved short-lived and no durable agreement has yet been reached. Fertilizer flows from the Gulf remain severely constrained, while elevated energy, freight and agricultural-input costs continue to affect food prices and humanitarian operations globally. Glauber, Joseph, and Shawn Arita. ["How Are Fertilizer Markets Coping with the Continued Closure of the Strait of Hormuz?"](#) International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), September 18, 2026. Reuters. ["Iran Receives US Feedback on Seven-Day Trust-Building Plan."](#) September 30, 2026.

[2] Including drought, floods, desertification, water scarcity and land degradation.

[3] Including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine,

[4] UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), [Strait of Hormuz Disruptions: Beyond Reopening – Lasting Impacts on Vulnerable Economies](#), UNCTAD/OSG/INF/2026/4 (Geneva: UNCTAD, June 30, 2026), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *Global Agrifood Implications of the 2026 Conflict in the Middle East: Impacts on Energy and Fertilizer Trade*, and Food Security (Rome: FAO, March 2026, FAO publication.

[5] UN Women, *Global gendered impacts of the Ukraine crisis on energy access and food security and nutrition*, 2022; UN Women and UN DESA, [Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2025](#)

[6] FAO, *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (Rome, 2023). Regional groupings follow the United Nations M49 standard. Southern Asia comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; five of these are among the 28 countries analysed.

[7] The 28 countries were identified in consultation with UN Women regional offices based on their potential exposure to food-security impacts associated with the escalation, including through food-price pressures, import dependence, displacement, reliance on external assistance, and existing gender and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The countries included are Afghanistan, Armenia, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Moldova, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, the Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Ukraine, Viet Nam and Yemen. The selection is intended to support a focused risk analysis and is not globally representative. The estimates should therefore be interpreted as scenario-based projections for these country contexts rather than as a global food-security forecast

[8] Secondary data sources include publicly available country-level data on acute food insecurity, food prices, trade and import dependence, agricultural input exposure, displacement, humanitarian funding, population size and gender-related structural vulnerability. Key sources include IPC/CH acute food-insecurity data, WFP food-price data via HDX, FAOSTAT, World Bank WDI and Global Findex, IDMC displacement data (Global Internal Displacement Database: internally displaced people, conflict and disasters, latest year available), OCHA Financial Tracking Service, UNFPA population estimates and SOFI/FIES gender-disaggregated food-security indicators

[9] For the severe scenario, the model also presents a separate upper-band estimate that incorporates the potential effect of depressed household consumption or income growth. This is intended as a downside sensitivity test of combined price and income pressures.

[10] These dimensions were selected to capture both the main channels through which the escalation may affect food security, through domestic prices, import dependence and agricultural-input costs, and the conditions that may amplify these pressures or reduce households' capacity to absorb them, including displacement, humanitarian-funding constraints and structural gender inequalities. Selection also reflected the availability of broadly comparable public country-level data across the 28 countries.

[11] This dimension captures structural dependence on external markets, based on indicators including imports as a share of GDP and food and fuel imports as shares of merchandise imports. It indicates susceptibility to international price, exchange-rate and supply shocks; it does not measure an observed disruption or dependence specifically on trade through the Strait of Hormuz.

[12] This dimension combines the economic importance of agriculture with cereal and fertilizer import dependency. It indicates where food production, agricultural livelihoods and input costs may be particularly sensitive to external fertilizer or agricultural-input shocks; it does not measure an observed fertilizer shortage or price increase.

[13] This dimension uses OCHA Financial Tracking Service data on total humanitarian funding flows and food, nutrition and relevant multi-sector funding per person in IPC Phase 3 or above. It is a funding-based proxy and does not measure the number of people reached, the level or regularity of assistance received, transfer or ration size, or barriers to accessing assistance.

[14] This dimension assesses structural constraints affecting women's economic capacity to absorb shocks. It combines four equally weighted indicators: women's vulnerable employment, low female labour force participation, low women's account ownership and women's employment in agriculture. The last indicator reflects livelihood sensitivity to agricultural-input, fertilizer and food-production shocks. It is a proxy for economic and labour market inequalities and livelihood exposure, not an observed measure of women's and girls' food-security outcomes.

[15] UN Women calculations. For each country, the baseline is the latest pre-crisis count of people unable to adequately feed themselves: measured as the population in IPC or Cadre Harmonisé Phase 3 or above for the 13 countries where these assessments exist, and as the FAO prevalence of undernourishment applied to population for the remaining 15. The two indicators capture different conditions, acute food insecurity and chronic undernourishment; each country is estimated on a single consistent measure, and the figures are combined only as counts of people. The number of women and girls is obtained by applying each country's estimated female share.

[16] In two countries, Haiti and Somalia, comparable IPC assessments recorded fewer people in Phase 3 or above after the escalation than before (by about 77,000 and 460,000 respectively), likely reflecting harvests or assistance. Because improvements are not attributed to the crisis, the model records no additional increase for these countries rather than a negative figure. This is not evidence that the escalation had no impact: if the crisis slowed an improvement, that effect cannot be measured. Both countries remain covered by the exposure analysis.

[17] Across the modelled range, the increase is 3.8 million women and girls in the mild scenario, and 20.4 million in the severe scenario; if the effect of lower household incomes is added, the severe estimate rises to 24.2 million.

[18] The upper band adds an income channel, the estimated effect of household consumption growth falling one to three percentage points below its no-crisis path, to the severe price scenario (45.7 million people in total). It is not used for the headline because part of the income effect may already be captured by the price response. The income channel is not applied to seven countries: Haiti, Lebanon, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen, whose estimates come from IPC assessments rather than the price model, and Myanmar, where the consumption data are too unreliable. These shares are model estimates and do not vary by scenario.

[19] World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, female labour force participation rate, latest available year by country. The figures have been rounded to communicate the approximate scale of women's labour force participation in the countries identified.

[20] Female labour force participation is one component of the analysis's gender-vulnerability measures. It is used as a proxy for potential economic vulnerability alongside women's vulnerable employment, agricultural employment and financial inclusion. These indicators support prioritization and interpretation; they do not directly measure individual women's economic resources or food-security outcomes.

[21] World Bank, *Global Findex Database* (latest available wave by country. The values used are 2022–2024) — woman aged 15+ ownership of an account at a financial institution or through a mobile-money provider.

[22] UN Women stress-test analysis. Under the combined assumptions, the average exposure score rises by approximately 16.5 index points; reductions in humanitarian assistance produce the largest average increase, followed by oil and fertilizer pressures.

[23] Country caseload estimates are from the scale analysis (see the methodology footnote). The identification of concentrated and converging risks reflects the Shock Exposure Index, which combines, depending on data availability, indicators of women's labour force participation, vulnerable employment, agricultural employment and financial inclusion.

[24] World Bank, World Development Indicators — employment in agriculture, female, latest available year by country.

[25] Measured from WFP market price data combining recent price changes, deviation from pre-crisis levels and volatility.

[26] This captures structural dependence on external markets, based on indicators including imports as a share of GDP and food and fuel imports as shares of merchandise imports. It indicates susceptibility to international price, exchange-rate and supply shocks; it does not measure an observed disruption or dependence specifically on trade through the Strait of Hormuz.

[27] Data confidence also varies by country; these gaps should be read as a monitoring priority in their own right, not only as a limitation of this analysis.

[28] International Labour Organization (ILO), The Impact of Care Responsibilities on Women's Labour Force Participation (Geneva: ILO, 2024); Committee on World Food Security (CFS), Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the Context of Food Security and Nutrition (Rome: FAO, 2023); UNICEF, Undernourished and Overlooked: A Global Nutrition Crisis in Adolescent Girls and Women (New York: UNICEF, 2023).

[29] These dynamics are frequently documented in crises but were not measured in this analysis and should not be read as observed impacts of the current escalation. As highlighted in UN Women's Gender Alert "The immediate and long-term impact of the military escalation in the Middle East on women and girls" (April 2026), women and girls often absorb food shocks first and most deeply - reducing their own dietary intake, facing barriers to nutritious food, and taking on extra responsibilities to sustain household wellbeing - realities that rarely appear in conventional food-security statistics.

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