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Gender Alert in Brief: Food security risks of the Middle East escalation for women and girls

At a glance

- 11.7 million additional women and girls could become food insecure across 28 countries by December 2026 under a moderate scenario.
- The Middle East escalation is intensifying global food security pressures, and women and girls are likely to bear the brunt.
- Gender inequality, not prices alone, determines who can absorb the shock: women face it both as consumers and as food producers.
- Risks are most severe where price pressures meet conflict, displacement, humanitarian funding gaps and fragile livelihoods, so the response must match the dominant risk in each context.

Context

Disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz can affect food security through higher energy, fertilizer and transport costs, rising food prices, and straining humanitarian operations. This comes at a time when conflict, displacement, climate stress and strained humanitarian funding have already weakened livelihoods and left many households with limited resources to absorb further shocks. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned that, if these pressures persist, they could contribute to a severe global food-price crisis in the coming months.ⁱ

Structural gender inequalities can make these pressures harder for women and girls to withstand. Women often have less access to secure work, income, land, credit and financial services, and carry most unpaid care. As consumers, higher food prices squeeze household budgets. As producers, women's livelihoods are exposed to rising fuel, fertilizer and transport costs.

Women make up almost 40 per cent of the global agrifood workforce. In sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, agrifood systems account for two-thirds or more of women's employment. For women whose livelihoods depend on these systems, this creates a double exposure: higher costs for the food they buy, and greater pressure on the livelihoods from which they earn their income.

Methodology

This Gender Alert draws on UN Women analysis of publicly available data for 28 countries.ⁱⁱ It uses two approaches. The first estimates how many more people could become food insecure by December 2026 under three food price scenarios, compared with a situation in which the crisis had not occurred. The second identifies where overlapping pressures, such as displacement, funding gaps and gender inequality, make countries more exposed to the shock. The number of women and girls is estimated from country-level gender data, because direct measures are not available. The findings are estimates, not forecasts.

Findings

Finding 1. Millions more women and girls could become food insecure

An estimated 208 million women and girls across the 28 countries were already food insecure or undernourished before the escalation, so the shock risks deepening an existing crisis rather than creating a new one. Under a moderate scenario, an estimated 11.7 million additional women and girls could become food insecure by December 2026, 53 per cent of the projected 22 million additional people affected.ⁱⁱⁱ

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.

The shock is most concentrated in South Sudan, where, based on observed Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) assessments, around 852,000 additional women and girls could face food insecurity by December 2026. This is around 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 are scenario-based estimates, not forecasts, intended to support preparedness and prioritization; they show how quickly outcomes deteriorate as the price shock grows.

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

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 in how household resources are used. On each of these buffers, many women start with little margin. In Afghanistan and Yemen, only around one in twenty women participates in the labour force. In 17 of

the 28 countries, at least half of employed women are in vulnerable employment. In Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan and Yemen, fewer than one in five women owns a bank or mobile money account.

These gaps determine the options available when prices rise. Without independent income, secure employment or a financial account, women have fewer ways to draw on savings, receive remittances or cash assistance, or borrow safely, and may become more reliant on informal lenders or male relatives. Women therefore enter the shock with fewer buffers and may absorb more of the adjustment within households.

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

The analysis projects that under a combined stress scenario of sustained food, fuel and fertilizer price pressures and reduced humanitarian assistance, 26 of the 28 countries could face high or very high exposure to multiple, compounding risks. The risks are deepest where severe food insecurity, displacement, humanitarian funding pressures and gender inequality converge, as in Sudan and South Sudan. The dominant driver differs from one context to the next. In Somalia and Yemen, it is the combination of severe existing food insecurity and low humanitarian food security funding relative to the scale of need. In Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and South Sudan, where around two-thirds or more of employed women work in agriculture, it is rising fuel and fertilizer costs that cut directly into women's earnings. In import-dependent economies, it is the rapid pass-through of global prices into local markets. Because the drivers differ, no single, uniform response will fit every context.

Scale and concentration point to different priorities. Populous countries such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Egypt account for some of the largest absolute increases in women and girls facing food insecurity, 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 and Lebanon, the shock is far more concentrated. Both lenses matter: absolute numbers indicate the scale of resources required, while concentration shows where the shock is most acutely felt.

BOX 1

The data blind spot

A household can be counted as food insecure without showing who eats less or last, who sells assets, who leaves school or work, or who takes on more unpaid care. Comparable sex- and age-disaggregated data on these outcomes remain scarce, yet these are the pathways through which a short-term food shock becomes a lasting loss of income, health, education and autonomy. These blind spots are especially important for female-headed households, pregnant and breastfeeding women, displaced women and girls, and women with disabilities. Household-level indicators are therefore necessary but not sufficient. Monitoring also needs to show how food, income, care and coping are distributed within households, so decision makers can see not only where food insecurity is rising, but which women and girls are absorbing its costs.

Recommendations

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

Food assistance is essential, but it is not enough when rising prices collide with insecure livelihoods, displacement, limited financial access and humanitarian funding gaps. Gender-responsive social protection, food and cash assistance, and nutrition and protection services must be combined with support that safeguards women's livelihoods, productive assets and access to land, credit and services. Designing delivery around the barriers that women face, including mobility constraints and unpaid care, can help ensure that coping does not mean eating less, selling assets or abandoning livelihoods.

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

Prioritization should consider both the scale of food insecurity and the pressures that limit women's capacity to cope. Sustain essential assistance where funding falls short of need, protect women's access to agricultural inputs and livelihoods where production is threatened, and support livelihoods and access to services in displacement settings. Provide agricultural support in time for planting season so that higher input costs do not lead to smaller harvests and further price increases.

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

Use sex- and age-disaggregated and, where feasible, individual-level food consumption and intra-household allocation data. Link food security assessments with evidence on nutrition, unpaid care, coping and protection, and connect official statistics, humanitarian assessments and programme monitoring with evidence from women-led and women's rights organizations.

Without early, coordinated and gender-responsive action, this escalation could deepen food insecurity and gender inequality well beyond the region. Protecting women's and girls' access to food, while safeguarding women's livelihoods and resources, is essential to limit lasting harm and strengthen resilience to future shocks.

Read the full Gender Alert here: **Food security risks of the Middle East escalation for women and girls** (UN Women, October 2026). Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2026/10/gender-alert-food-security-risks-of-the-middle-east-escalation-for-women-and-girls>.

- i. FAO, Global Agrifood Implications of the 2026 Conflict in the Middle East: Impacts on Energy and Fertilizer Trade, and Food Security (Rome, March 2026); UNCTAD, Strait of Hormuz Disruptions: Beyond Reopening – Lasting Impacts on Vulnerable Economies, UNCTAD/OSG/INF/2026/4 (Geneva, June 2026).
- ii. 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. They 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 supports 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.
- iii. Across the modelled range, the increase is 3.8 million under the mild scenario and 20.4 million under the severe scenario, rising to 24.2 million if household incomes also fall.

UN Women exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.