

# Gender-based violence in food systems

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Gender-based violence (GBV) is an important and pervasive global health and human rights issue whereby prevalence rates have remained unchanged for a decade. However, the relationship between GBV and food systems – the complex networks of people and activities involved in food, from production to consumption – lacks recognition in food systems research and policy. For both moral and practical reasons, GBV needs to be part of food system conversations, research and policy, so that the food sector can respond to global calls for action to address GBV.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an important global health and human rights issue. One in three women globally have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime, a number that has remained relatively unchanged for a decade<sup>1</sup>. This increases when taking race, age, disability, displacement and other intersectional factors into account. GBV has considerable health impacts, particularly for women and children, with substantial social and economic costs<sup>1–5</sup>. The sheer scale and endemic nature of GBV means that it touches virtually all aspects of life.

However, the relationship between GBV and food systems – the complex networks of people and activities involved in food, from production to consumption – shockingly lacks recognition in food systems research and policy. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' recent flagship report<sup>6</sup> goes some way to recognize the issue, but space given to the topic is limited. This is curious, given the importance of food systems in our daily lives, in addition to the increasing momentum towards addressing GBV in other sectors, such as #AidToo in the humanitarian sector.

For both moral and practical reasons, GBV needs to be part of food system conversations, research and policy. The food systems sector must respond to calls for action in a global, multi-sectoral response to GBV<sup>7,8</sup>.

## The concept of GBV

The term GBV as used by UN Women<sup>9</sup> refers to “harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender”. Rooted in systemic gender inequality and harmful social norms, GBV takes many forms – physical, sexual, mental and economic violence. It affects adults and children, and occurs at the household, community and national levels, and beyond<sup>10</sup>. The term is also increasingly used to refer to violence experienced by men and boys, particularly those who challenge established gender norms.

The use of the term ‘gender’ is important. While GBV is often used to describe violence against women and girls, gender is used to highlight that violence arises from social relations and the use of power within

these relationships. GBV risk is created as a result of being a woman, man or LGBTQI within these relations, and is further exacerbated by intersectional characteristics. Therefore, the term GBV encapsulates both the acts and causes of violence. Whereby individual acts of interpersonal violence are connected to broader systems of structural violence – violence that originates from the unequal distribution of power as a result of deeply entrenched and historic social, political, economic and institutional inequalities, fed by histories of colonialism and punitive social norms – that prevent people from meeting their basic needs<sup>11–13</sup>.

## Reasons why GBV exists in food systems

Food systems involve all aspects and relations around feeding and nourishing people (or lack thereof), including food production, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing and consumption. Food systems also involve many complex relationships between people, and other actors such as private sector companies, governments, technology and nature. Ontologies of power and critical feminist theory have a long history of ‘unpacking’ these relationships, but this has yet to reach more dominant food systems narratives.

However, the implications are clear. Expressions of power and control are part of how food is produced, processed, sold, distributed and consumed, from household to global levels. This is illustrated by the use of and dependency in food systems on precarious and exploitative labour practices, for example, which increase GBV risk. In the Global North, there is evidence of GBV prevalence among migrant farm workers, in some cases linked to large-scale supermarkets<sup>14,15</sup>. By contrast, there is a large body of applied gender research situated in contexts of the Global South that is relevant to food systems. This rich body of research has some, albeit limited, focus on GBV; however, it is often disconnected from broader forms of structural violence in food systems.

## Current knowledge on GBV in the food system

There is a notable gap in evidence on the prevalence and nature of GBV in food systems, despite it being a “systematic barrier for women’s



empowerment<sup>16</sup>. Primarily situated within the public health and humanitarian fields, with growing grey literature, GBV research often misses an important association to food systems and vice versa. However, the gendered nature of food systems is well established. Women are disproportionately represented in agri-food systems, particularly in informal and unpaid labour. Their labour is characterized by intense manual work, often combined with care and community work – including food provision – with low or no pay or protection, poor access to resources and limited decision-making authority, with clear links to punitive gender norms<sup>6,17–19</sup>. This context of structural violence then exacerbates violence at the community and household levels<sup>20–22</sup>.

As such, high GBV prevalence would be expected in areas of the food system where power and agency are low and under threat, and where power relations are exploitative and imbalanced. Illustrative evidence reflecting different areas of the food system are provided below.

A considerable body of research regarding GBV in food systems relates to food consumption and production, or more precisely, food security, largely focused on the Global South. This literature has focused primarily on the relationship between food insecurity and intimate partner violence, where violence – in multiple forms – occurs as a result of women’s limited agency in the household, and gender roles related to food provision and production (use of income, access to assets)<sup>22–24</sup>. A smaller, but important, area of literature, mainly from humanitarian research, examines issues of child marriage and ‘survival sex’, and risks of GBV and food security linked to conflict and climate change<sup>21,25–28</sup>. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change<sup>29</sup> cites evidence connecting rising temperatures and resource pressures with increased GBV in the Global North and South, related to risks experienced while travelling longer distances to collect food, water and firewood, in addition to risks experienced as a result of increasing household stress in the context of constrained resources. Many of these issues are of greater severity for female-headed households, minoritized women, women and girls with disabilities, and other marginalized women and girls. Attention to GBV and food insecurity among LGBTQI communities is limited but important, given the risk of food insecurity for this population<sup>30</sup>.

These issues are in the view of livelihood, resilience and social protection interventions in the humanitarian and development sectors, often under the umbrella of women’s empowerment programmes<sup>31–35</sup>. A systematic analysis of the impact pathways and programme effectiveness would be highly valuable, along with its connection to more macro-level dynamics. However, food security is only part of the picture.

Grey literature and limited empirical evidence indicate high GBV prevalence in some food production systems, largely in the Global South, such as the risks female farmers have experienced while farming<sup>36–38</sup>. The United States Agency for International Development’s Feed the Future initiative has also recently released a toolkit related to addressing GBV in this context<sup>20</sup>. Several studies report GBV risks

among workers in commercial agriculture and fishing<sup>39,40</sup>. Heteronormative pressures may also play a role in men’s labour in specific areas of the food system that are high risk for exploitation and abuse, including forced labour, trafficking, and physical and sexual abuse. A recent report by the International Organization for Migration<sup>41</sup> provides several examples, including from the fishing industry. However, how these issues relate to GBV and broader food systems requires more exploration.

There is a large gap in evidence of GBV risk in food processing, transportation, marketing and trade. However, existing research indicates GBV risk among food ‘hawkers’ and traders, including during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>42,43</sup>. There is also evidence from research on the fish trade in east and southern Africa of ‘sex for fish’ practices, whereby women exchange sex for a supply of fish that they can sell<sup>44,45</sup>.

## A collaborative agenda

A new collaborative agenda to address GBV in food systems, involving policymakers, researchers, civil society and activists, across the public health, food system, humanitarian and development sectors in the Global North and South, is urgently needed. This agenda should consider the following five points.

First, all progress on the agenda to urgently address GBV in food systems must be informed by practice. This means that actions will require collaboration and leadership of practice-based organizations and GBV survivors/victims where appropriate. This will ensure that research and policy are relevant to the interests and priorities of GBV survivors/victims and are trauma-informed – that activities are based on a complete understanding of how trauma affects individual and collective mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual wellbeing. Efforts in this area will subsequently require new forms of collaboration, communication and co-creation.

Second, research evidence on GBV in food systems is required. Interdisciplinary and collaborative research on GBV in food systems is long overdue, starting from research that establishes prevalence, forms and contexts of GBV along food supply chains in the Global North and South. Informed by civil society organizations and policymakers, research is also urgently needed on what works and what could work to address GBV risk in food system contexts. Importantly, a research agenda needs to examine how violence is part of the very structure of how food systems function. This can be explored through drawing on broader ontologies of power that emphasize connections between interpersonal and structural violence. There is a wealth of empirically based conceptual theory from philosophy, peace and conflict studies, in addition to practice-based and lived experience from civil society that can support a vibrant new research and policy agenda to address GBV in food systems.

Third, improved data collection on GBV in food systems is needed in the health, humanitarian and development sectors, based on best practice in collecting GBV-related data. While the Demographic and Health Surveys and the Violence against Children and Youth Surveys contain GBV modules, many large-scale surveys and impact evaluations do not collect such data, and agencies are not always committed or do not have the expertise to collect such data. There are important factors to consider in addressing these data gaps: (1) if the data provide information that is useful and a priority for civil society and front-line organizations; (2) if the data could be collected from perpetrators as opposed to victims/survivors, who are often the focus of such studies and whereby research may risk re-traumatizing victims/survivors<sup>46</sup>; and (3) if data can be collected in a way that reflects the diverse and dynamic roles that women, men, girls and boys play in food systems, which also give rise to the potential contexts where violence can occur. Women’s roles in food systems, for example, go far beyond providing a household with the means for food and nutrition. However, women’s roles outside household food provision are seldom captured in survey data<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, qualitative data are particularly important

to understanding intersectional aspects of GBV, and a focus on how gender interacts with “other inequalities/oppressions (sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, indigeneity, immigration status, disability) to produce unique experiences of violence” is essential<sup>47</sup>.

Fourth, meaningful reductions in GBV risk will require a fundamental change in the way food systems operate. Efforts can link with the current momentum around gender transformative change and broader transformative change towards the creation of more equitable, just and sustainable food systems. Both historic and contemporary examples from Indigenous, feminist and anti-colonial social movements relating to, but broader than, food systems offer insights into how change can occur<sup>48</sup>. However, while calls for food system transformation are increasing, the historic and contemporary use of power, violence and control within food systems need to be brought to the fore. This means research, policy and practice must include and extend beyond women’s empowerment and agency-focused approaches that in practice have the tendency to over-emphasize individual-level change, which may detract from broader societal norms and patterns of systemic abuse of power and lack of accountability within food systems.

Finally, change is required at the policy level within a global framework. The food systems sector must start by recognizing its role in addressing GBV. At present, the High-Level Panel of Experts on World Food Security, the current dominant paradigm that shapes policy on food and nutrition security, has not yet adequately addressed issues of GBV or broader violence in its flagship reports<sup>49</sup>. While the recent move to include agency in food security definition is a welcome change, more is needed to bring to light and address GBV in global food systems. While the next High-Level Panel of Experts on World Food Security report *Reducing Inequalities for Food Security and Nutrition*<sup>50</sup> is a very welcome step towards recognizing social context within food systems, it is hoped that it can spark future efforts that will extend a critical lens to GBV within food systems and deeper, historic power inequalities.

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## Competing interests

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## Additional information

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