

## Gender justice – a precondition for resilience

Women and girls in poorer countries are affected in particular ways by the multiple crises the world is currently facing. Uncovering the linkages between gender, resilience and food security, our authors look at ways to support women and girls' capacity to respond to crises and make them more resilient. They also explore what can be done to address underlying gender inequalities.

By Elizabeth Bryan, Ruth Meinzen-Dick and Claudia Ringler



The agri-food sector continues to bear gender inequalities. Significantly more women than men have lost their jobs as a result of the Covid pandemic.

Photo: Jörg Böthling

The world has witnessed a series of compounding, overlapping and, in some cases, reoccurring shocks and stressors in recent years, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the global food crisis triggered by Russia's war on Ukraine, several localised conflicts around the globe and the intensifying climate crisis. Thus, policies, investments and interventions focused on increasing resilience have become essential to help vulnerable populations rebound from these disturbances, while becoming better prepared to handle inevitable future shocks and stressors.

Whereas these multiple crises affect many vulnerable communities in low- and middle-income countries, there are particular gender-differentiated impacts which present unique challenges to the well-being of women and girls. Careful consideration of these gender-differentiated impacts is required for policy and programme responses to meet the needs of women and girls, tackle long-standing gen-

der inequalities and promote sustainable pathways to recovery. Without a gender lens, the proposed measures will fail to meet the specific needs of women and girls and may even exacerbate gender inequalities.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (2023) report *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* shows that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the related economic crisis, 22 per cent of women lost their jobs in off-farm agri-food systems work in the first year of the pandemic, compared to only 2 per cent of men. Furthermore, the gap in food insecurity between men and women widened from 1.7 percentage points in 2019 to 4.3 percentage points in 2021. These gender gaps are driven by underlying gender inequalities in agri-food systems, such as the fact that women's livelihoods and working conditions are marginalised, informal, irregular and low-skilled and thus more vulnerable to shocks than men's. Moreover, girls and young women face par-

ticular risks when confronted with shocks and stressors, such as a higher likelihood of being withdrawn from school, gender-based violence and economic or sexual exploitation.

Vulnerability and resilience also depend on other intersectional identities, such as age, marital status, class and ethnicity. For instance, women heads of household may face greater limitations in access to land, capital, social networks and labour, while married women may benefit from access to these resources through male household members but have less decision-making authority or autonomy. Similarly, women in different food environments (such as rural or urban contexts) may face different challenges. For example, while women in rural farming communities may experience adverse impacts of droughts on their water security and livelihoods, women in urban contexts may face greater challenges related to flooding and associated health risks, like cholera, given poor water infrastructure and crowded conditions.

So what can be done to support the capacity of women and girls to respond more effectively to disturbances and contribute to the resilience of their households and communities while addressing underlying gender inequalities that make women and girls more vulnerable in the first place? One useful framework for think-

ing about the approaches needed to achieve gender equality and resilience goals is the Reach-Benefit-Empower-Transform Framework. There is growing recognition among development practitioners, researchers and policy-makers that simply reaching women (e.g. including women in programme activi-

ties) is not enough to address gender inequalities. Policies, interventions and investments must ensure that women benefit from these interventions through measured improvements in their well-being (e.g. food security, income and health). This means ensuring that women have access to information and finance needed

**Conceptual linkages between gender, resilience and food security**

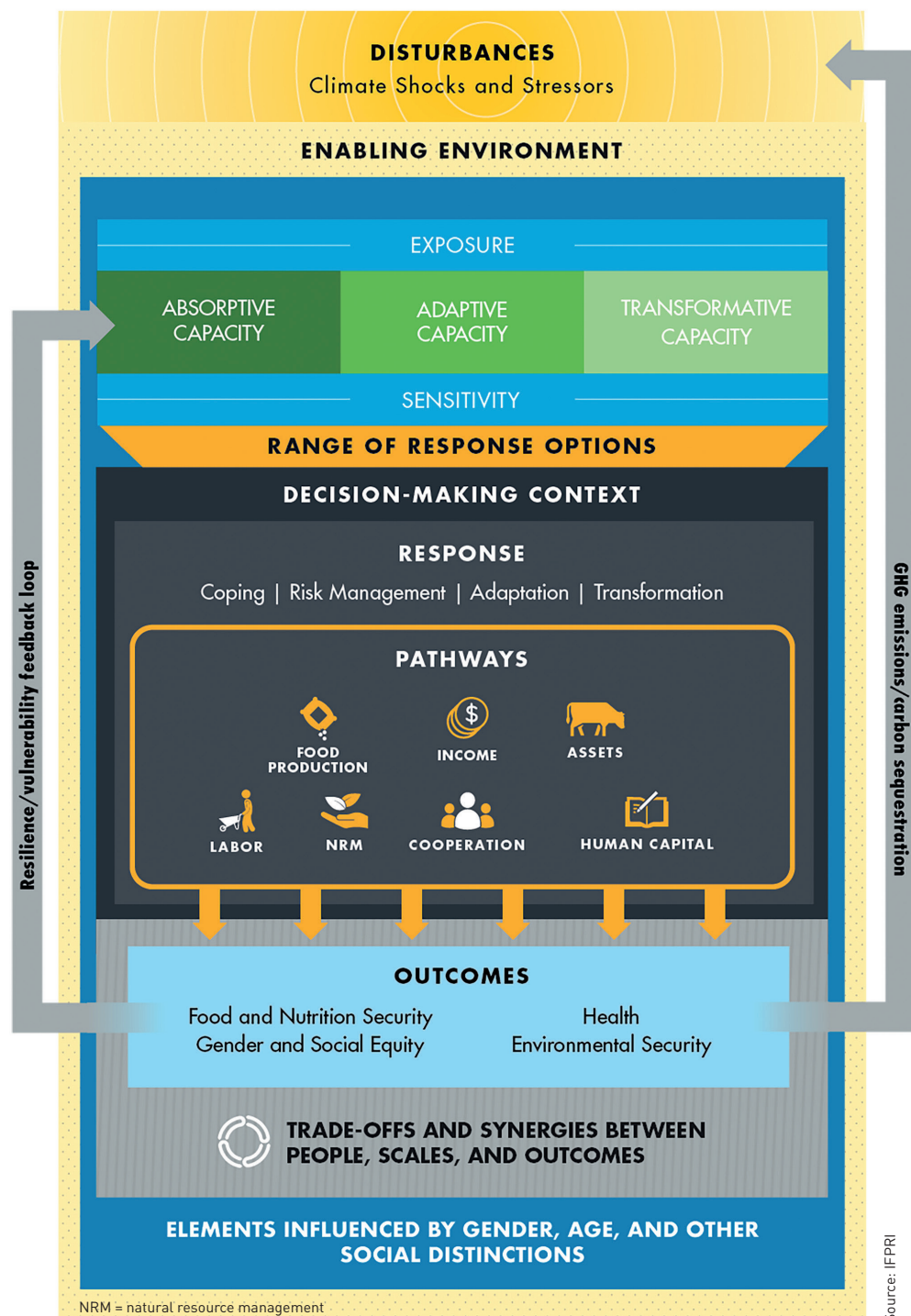
IFPRI’s Gender, Climate Change, and Nutrition Integration Initiative (GCAN) uses a conceptual framework to illustrate the gender dimensions of resilience (see Figure). Each of the components in this framework is shaped by gender differences. Men and women have different levels of exposure and sensitivity to various shocks and stressors, driven by gender differences in livelihood roles, health and nutrition status, and other contextual factors.

For example, men are more likely to migrate away from climate-stressed areas while women remain behind, leaving them more highly exposed to climate stress. Similarly, women tend to have lower resilience capacities to respond to disturbances given less access to information, finance and other services, more limited access to and control over assets, more restrictive social norms and a generally higher work burden compared to men, among other factors. Women’s generally lower resilience capacities limit their ability to respond to the shocks and stressors that they face, including the options available to them. For example, women’s poorer access to information and extension services limits their adoption of climate-smart practices that relate to their livelihood roles and their ability to maintain or increase agricultural productivity during times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or after a flood event.

When women are empowered to make decisions in agri-food systems, this can increase their contribution to resilience. In Bangladesh, women’s involvement in agricultural decisions increases the production diversification away from rice towards other crop types, with positive implications for climate resilience (by reducing risks associated with monocropping of rice) and nutrition (through diversified diets). Ultimately, the choices that are made in response to shocks and stresses have different implications for men’s and women’s well-being outcomes. For instance, the combination of climate stressors and the introduction of new climate-smart technologies or practices can influence the allocation

of household labour in ways that exacerbate women’s work burden in agriculture. Recent studies show that women’s labour in-

tensity in agriculture is increasing relative to men’s under heat stress, likely given men’s easier access to alternative livelihoods.



to increase productivity on the plots they manage, take advantage of economic opportunities and grow their enterprises. It means expanding social protection and violence prevention programmes to women in rural areas and providing other incentives to keep girls in school.

Increasingly, interventions aim to facilitate women's empowerment by providing them with more opportunities to make decisions and realise their own goals. Women's groups and networks often represent an important source of resilience as well as a platform for women's empowerment by offering opportunities to share labour, childcare responsibilities, access to savings, credit and government services, the ability to access and build assets, and increased political engagement. However, even efforts to increase women's agency may not be enough to reduce gender inequalities in agri-food systems and increase women's resilience. Gender-transformative approaches (GTAs) may be required for deeper and more lasting improvements in the status of women. Gender-transformative change goes beyond the individual and household levels to remove structural barriers in society. Thus, GTAs require multi-pronged, multi-scale approaches that involve challenging patriarchal norms which underpin harmful cultural beliefs and attitudes, gender inequalities in institutions, policy frameworks and governing structures at multiple scales, and gendered power dynamics and relations. They also depend on engaging men and boys as partners for gender equality.

### Group-based approaches are promising

One example of a project that incorporated gender-transformative approaches is the "Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards the Empowerment of Rural Women (JP RWEE)" led by numerous UN agencies and implemented across several countries including Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal and Niger. JP RWEE activities for transforming gender relations included dialogues at the household and community levels to promote more inclusive decision-making processes and engaging men and boys as champions for gender equality. Among these approaches are IFAD's Gender Action Learning System (GALS) intervention and FAO's Dimitra Clubs, which bring men and women together at the household and community levels to listen to each other and work together to solve local challenges. These dialogues also provide a platform for trained facilitators to raise awareness of harmful gender norms, attitudes and

### Resilience

Resilience is a complex concept that is understood and utilised in different ways by different disciplines. We adopt the definition by USAID which describes resilience as "the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth" (USAID, 2012, p. 5). Thus, building resilience requires investments and interventions that build adaptive capacities, such as expanding economic opportunities, education, and nutrition and health services, while also identifying and reducing context-specific risks.

beliefs, and to challenge unequal structures (such as local rules governing resource access). Importantly, JP RWEE relied on group-based platforms or approaches aiming to expand economic and livelihood opportunities for women and/or increase their access to resources like microcredit or savings. Research shows that the group-based approaches were core to the successes of the project, which included increasing women's involvement in livelihood decisions, asset ownership, credit decisions and, in some cases, income decisions. Having men take part in the interventions was also crucial to avoid potential backlash from the activities focused on women's groups and to promote changes in gender relations and norms.

While there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of applying gender-transformative approaches as part of resilience-building interventions, clearly, the status quo is not working. Intentional efforts and commitments from the development community to tackle persistent gender inequality is essential to ensure that women from all walks of life are actively engaged in efforts to restore their economies and

communities. Achieving this transformation will require interventions that prioritise gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, instead of pivoting from it. Women-led and women's rights organisations must take centre stage in designing and implementing interventions and have their voices heard in national and international platforms. A strong focus on justice, equality, inclusiveness and human rights must be at the heart of every effort to build resilient agri-food systems and rural livelihoods. Despite the many challenges that women and girls are facing, they remain essential to the success of any crisis response.

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In times of crisis, girls have a higher likelihood of being withdrawn from school than boys.

Photo: Jörg Böthling