



A woman in Yemen prepares food in April 2019.  
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## **“SOMETIMES WE DON’T EVEN EAT”**

**How Conflict and COVID-19 Are  
Pushing Millions of People to the Brink**







A woman in DRC sells condiments at a marketplace.  
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## Executive Summary

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic could nearly double the number of people experiencing serious food insecurity before the end of 2020. The situation is particularly dire for those living in conflict-affected settings. In these instances, violence has already impeded people's ability to produce, process, and access food or to obtain food to eat. In countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), northeast Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen, the combined effects of conflict, COVID-19, and other factors have gravely exacerbated food insecurity and put millions of people at risk of famine.

But not everyone experiences food insecurity in the same ways. Women and girls are disproportionately and uniquely affected by food insecurity. Pervasive cultural and social norms often dictate that women and girls are responsible for providing food for their families but also that women and girls should eat last and least. COVID-19 is making food insecurity worse for women and girls. Virus-control measures are preventing them from producing or processing food and they are more likely to lose their jobs due to the economic effects of the pandemic. With few coping mechanisms left, women and girls are facing an unprecedented crisis.

To prevent famine, support lives and livelihoods, and address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in areas experiencing conflict and extreme hunger, including DRC, northeast Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen, the U.S. Administration and Congress must:

- **Ensure adequate flexibility of food aid modalities**, with food assistance provided in whatever forms—such as cash, vouchers, or in-kind assistance—are most appropriate and effective in each context;
- **Provide at least \$20 billion in further supplemental funding** to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects around the world;

- **Ensure continued funding for programs that support the needs and rights of women and girls**, including those focused on gender-based violence prevention and response, women's economic empowerment and rights, and youth engagement;
- **Engage in robust diplomacy that includes women and girls to prevent and resolve the conflicts** that drive humanitarian need. This includes promoting accountability and compliance with the law of armed conflict and human rights law, particularly in support of principled humanitarian access;
- **Actively work to achieve political solutions to crises, promote durable solutions to displacement, and support communities to recover and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.** These processes must include women and girls to ensure gender-transformative recoveries and sustainable futures;
- **Collaborate with local organizations**, especially women-led organizations that are already responding to the crisis. These organizations are best positioned to assist communities in the midst of conflict and the pandemic, as well as to prepare for and lead future humanitarian responses.

*Conflict is one of the main drivers of food insecurity in DRC, northeast Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen, but additional factors compound the situation in each country. Some of these are highlighted in the country profiles below.*

## **DRC**

### **Long-term conflict leads to long-term challenges**

Conflict and insecurity have roiled DRC for more than 20 years. The insecurity has restricted humanitarian access, prevented the creation and maintenance of basic infrastructure—from roads to hospitals and schools—and made it difficult for the country to develop the systems and structures that it needs to move beyond responding to crises. Instead, the prolonged conflict has entrenched harmful gender norms and normalized violence against women and girls. At least 53% of women and girls in the country have experienced domestic violence and marital rape.

Humanitarian conditions have deteriorated in several parts of DRC in recent years, further threatening people's well-being and adding to already high food insecurity and acute malnutrition, especially for the country's 5.5 million internally displaced persons. In early 2020, 15.6 million people in DRC faced acute food insecurity—the second-highest number in the world, after Yemen. Now, continued conflict and the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to a 40% increase in the number of food-insecure people in DRC: 21.8 million people will urgently require food assistance before the end of the year. Established gender norms limit women's access to resources, including land ownership, money and savings, and decision-making power. These inequalities make it even more difficult for women and girls to cope with food insecurity and put them at greater risk of life-threatening hunger.

## Food Security Definitions

“**Famine**” is a technical term that is classified or declared when at least 20% of the population in an area or location have extreme food consumption gaps; at least 30% of children (ages 6-59 months) are acutely malnourished; AND the crude death rate exceeds 2 per 10,000 people per day.

“**Famine likely**” may be used when limited evidence prevents confirming famine. For example, if available information on food consumption and nutritional statuses exceeds famine thresholds but evidence on mortality is not available, a “famine likely” classification may be issued.

“**Risk of famine**” represents the worst-case scenario with a reasonable—greater than 20%—chance of an area or location going into famine in a projected period. Although “risk of famine” has no minimum evidence requirements, food security analysts must provide a justification that cites available evidence. The global [IPC community](#) is in the process of agreeing on the definition of risk of famine.

At least [2 billion people](#) live in fragile and conflict-affected settings around the world. The violence they are exposed to poses direct physical and mental health risks and also determines whether they go hungry. At the beginning of 2020, [most people](#) experiencing serious food insecurity lived in countries affected by conflict.

The connection between conflict and food security is well established and has been recognized by the international community. The UN Security Council unanimously adopted [Resolution 2417](#), which requests that the Secretary-General report to the Council when there is a risk of widespread food insecurity in countries experiencing armed conflict. In [September](#), the UN invoked this resolution, sounding the alarm on the **risk of famine and increasing food insecurity** in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), northeast Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen due to the cumulative effects of conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other factors.

However, the risk of famine is not limited to these four countries. The repercussions of COVID-19 are exacerbating global food insecurity to such an extent that the number of people experiencing serious food insecurity [may increase by 80%](#)—from 149 million people pre-COVID-19 to more than 270 million people—before the end of 2020.

Conflict, the pandemic, and food insecurity affect different people in different ways depending on intersecting cultural and social norms and forms of discrimination related to age, ability, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, and more. During times of conflict, men and boys are more likely to be conscripted or participate directly in hostilities, increasing their risk of injury or death. Women and girls may be more affected by [sexual violence as a weapon of war](#) or exposed to [sexual exploitation and abuse](#), and bear unique challenges due to their economic, political, and social positions in a particular society.

During the pandemic, [data indicates](#) that more men have been hospitalized and died from COVID-19 than women, which may be [linked to gender norms](#) that allow men better access to healthcare services than women. However, women and girls have been nearly [twice as likely](#) to lose their jobs during the pandemic than men and boys. The time that women and girls spend on care work in the home—already [3.2 times](#) more than men—has increased by [30-40%](#). Women’s roles as caretakers outside the home, where they make up [70%](#) of the global health and social care workforce, have exposed them to greater risk of COVID-19 infection while highlighting their leading roles in responding to the crisis.

In **Yemen**, the proportion of women and children [harmed by armed violence in their homes](#) rose from 53% in 2018 to 57% in the first half of 2020.



When crises arise, women and girls are often some of the [first to respond](#) to needs in their communities. They are crucially important in helping prevent and [resolve conflict](#), contributions recognized by the UN in landmark [Resolution 1325](#). Women and girls have also helped lead response efforts in their communities worldwide [during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Despite this, women's and girls' [voices and leadership](#) are often excluded from humanitarian responses and conflict prevention and resolution processes. The contributions that women and girls make, however, evidence their leadership and resiliency, as well as underscore the importance of supporting women and girls—with food or other humanitarian assistance, when needed—and reaffirm their position as agents necessary to creating a more [equitable world](#).

## Trying to Secure a Meal in Insecure Times

**Conflict impedes food production and processing.** When violence erupts, [it destroys crops, livestock, and the essential infrastructure](#), such as farmland and roads, that people need to produce and process food. [People may be forced to flee](#) their homes, losing access to their food production and processing assets. Others—particularly men and boys—may join or be conscripted into the fight, creating labor shortages that encumber those left behind. Too often, [women and girls](#) must continue producing and processing what food they can, constrained by fewer resources and increased care burdens. Even after a conflict has ended, [women and girls may lack the rights](#), or the means to enforce those rights, that they need to reclaim their property.

Most women in [South Sudan](#) cannot [inherit land or other assets](#) from their husbands unless they have a male child.

**Conflict decreases food accessibility and availability.** Violence prevents people and goods from getting to markets, so there [is less food available](#) for sale and fewer ways for people to get to that food to purchase it. In some cases, food may be used as a [weapon of war](#) by armed groups that limit humanitarian access and target food production, transport systems, and markets. Additionally, disruptions to production and transportation cause food prices to increase while high unemployment rates cause household incomes to shrink, significantly [decreasing food affordability](#).

Women and girls are among the first to be affected by these changes, as they are responsible for [85-90%](#) of household food preparation and [most food shopping](#) around the world. The pressure that women and girls face is unrelenting. Conflict notwithstanding, families must eat. Households may resort to [coping mechanisms](#), such as spending their savings or even eating seed stocks, that can affect future food production and availability. Again, this has particular effects on women and girls. As the stressors of violence and food insecurity raise household tensions, women and girls face higher risks of [intimate partner violence](#), may be forced to engage in [transactional sex](#) to secure sustenance for themselves and their families, and are more exposed to the risks of [sexual exploitation and abuse](#).

**Conflict reduces household food consumption.** When conflict makes food scarce, households may consume lower quantities of food and less diverse diets. Everyone in a household is affected, but social norms dictating that [men and boys eat first](#) mean that women's and girls' health is likely to be disproportionately affected. This can be especially dangerous for children and [pregnant and lactating women](#), who have unique nutritional needs.

Households facing severe food insecurity need immediate assistance and long-term solutions. The international community's failure to respond could have damaging consequences for women's and girls' lives and well-being for years to come. Humanitarian assistance can alleviate catastrophic levels of food insecurity—as it did in South Sudan in [2019](#) and Yemen in [2018](#), for example—but

In [northeast Nigeria](#), women have lost access to the cash-for-work programs that allowed them to buy seeds and grow crops.

[insecurity and bureaucratic constraints](#) can prevent relief agencies from identifying the most urgent needs and providing aid. Ultimately, however, the only way to address conflict-driven food insecurity is to address the conflict itself.

## **“Hunger is affecting people more than the virus.”**

COVID-19 and its repercussions are projected to nearly [double](#) the number of food-insecure people in the world before the end of 2020, with particularly severe effects for conflict-affected populations. **Food production and processing have become [even more difficult](#)** as movement restrictions have prevented people from accessing their fields. The pandemic-induced economic decline has led to sharp increases in the cost of inputs, such as seeds and tools. Moreover, labor availability has decreased as people fall ill and die and cannot continue food production, processing, or other income-generating activities. Even where women have not been affected by health concerns, their [care burdens have skyrocketed](#). Caring for sick family members, those returning from working elsewhere, and children at home due to school closures is depriving women of the time they need to produce and process food.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, food prices have increased 2.65% in [DRC](#), 26.82% in [Nigeria](#), 27.57% in [South Sudan](#), and 11.36% in [Yemen](#).

**The pandemic is further straining access to food** as trade is disrupted and economies suffer. Government-mandated border closures have [reduced food supplies](#), particularly for countries dependent on food imports. The trade routes that do remain open have been affected as transport workers face [delays](#) due to stringent virus-prevention measures. Market closures and movement restrictions are preventing people from buying or selling food, while the pandemic’s [economic effects](#)—including high

## **South Sudan**

### **Conflict-driven food insecurity compounded by climate shocks, COVID-19, and a collapsing economy**

Conflict is the genesis and the continued nemesis of the world’s newest country. Years of instability have damaged South Sudan’s economy, destroying people’s livelihoods and driving high levels of food insecurity. As a result, any new shocks have big consequences, and in South Sudan—one of the world’s [most climate-change affected countries](#)—new shocks come all too frequently. Climate events ranging from droughts to torrential rainfall and flooding frequently disrupt food production in many parts of the country.

Women and girls have borne the brunt of these events. Inequitable divisions of labor, lower access to productive resources, and fewer opportunities mean that women and girls feel the [effects](#) of climate change—such as food insecurity—more quickly and more severely than men and boys. Climate events, coupled with the collapsing economy, continued conflict, and widespread population displacement contributed to [5.3 million](#) South Sudanese experiencing acute food insecurity at the start of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has added new layers of complexity and may increase the number of people facing serious food insecurity. For a country born from and steeped in conflict, food assistance is needed but not alone sufficient—only a political solution will fix the problem.

unemployment, inflation, a decline in remittances, and increased food prices—have decreased households' purchasing power. Women, who are estimated to be [1.8 times more vulnerable](#) to job loss than men during the pandemic, have experienced higher income losses but are still responsible for the same amount of household food acquisition. In places where feeding one's family is considered a woman's duty and a profound part of her worth, being unable to provide food may further magnify women's and girls' risk of [intimate partner violence](#); force them to engage in transactional sex, or lead to increased incidences of [child, early and forced marriage](#).

Finally, **COVID-19 is continuing to decrease household food consumption**. Many households in conflict settings have already exhausted other coping mechanisms and are eating lower quantities of and less diverse foods, which negatively affects their health. This is especially true for children, who may [no longer receive food](#) through school feeding programs, and women, who are already more likely to eat [last and least](#). A recent CARE survey revealed that [41% of women](#) reported a lack of food as one of the COVID-19 pandemic's key effects on their lives. This is in comparison to only 30% of men who reported a lack of food, reflecting deeply entrenched gender inequalities in food systems.

**Congolese law** does not specifically prohibit domestic violence.

The pandemic has also [hampered humanitarian operations](#), further compounding consumption problems for the millions of people dependent on emergency food assistance. Movement restrictions and resource diversions—such as humanitarian organizations being compelled to reallocate funding to fight COVID-19 transmission or donors reserving funding for responses in their own countries—have kept aid agencies from providing critically necessary goods and services to those in need. In some contexts, [women and girls have faced additional constraints](#) to accessing humanitarian assistance. But populations facing severe food insecurity due to conflict and COVID-19 cannot wait for the crisis to end. They need assistance immediately.



**55% of the women CARE surveyed reported that income loss was one of the pandemic's biggest effects on them, compared with only 34% of men. Women are more likely to work in the informal sector that COVID-19 is hitting the hardest, and have less access to unemployment benefits.**

## Lack of Data and Funding Hinder Robust Responses

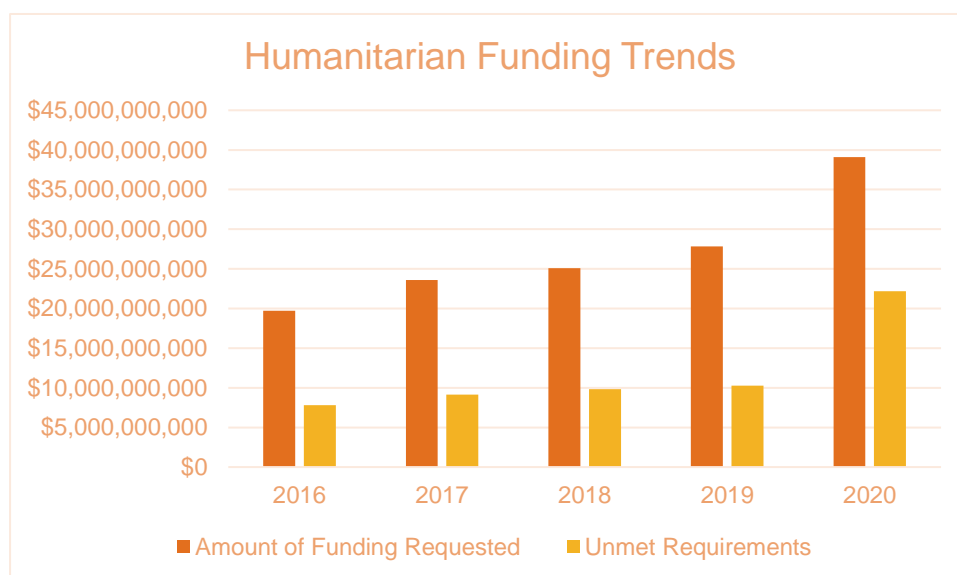
The pandemic and its repercussions have had disastrous implications for people around the world, but these effects are multiplied for people living in conflict settings. Even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people were already relying on coping mechanisms to respond to conflict-induced food insecurity. Consequently, these people now have even fewer resources to respond to, cope with, and recover from the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Just as some people have exhausted their reserves, some [governments](#) and INGOs are finding themselves pushed to the breaking point. Beleaguered by ongoing conflict and lacking resources to respond to the health crisis, governments may restrict, and aid agencies may reallocate, [funding](#) from the programs that are often most beneficial to women and girls. Driven by conflict and amplified by the pandemic's effects, food security actors forecast that [millions of people may be at risk of famine](#).

These forecasts are based on available food security data, but available data doesn't paint a complete picture of the challenges. Conflict, COVID-19, and other access constraints are inhibiting data collection

in countries around the world, sometimes making it difficult for humanitarians to gather information. Moreover, food security data frequently lacks a gender lens. For example, major food security analysis entities like the [IPC](#) and [FEWS NET](#) do not disaggregate findings by sex, age, ability, or other identity factors. This makes it impossible for aid agencies to fully understand how many people are food insecure and how hunger affects women and girls. It also prevents aid agencies from providing the best assistance possible and from doing so in a way that honors the humanitarian principle of [impartiality](#). However, given the established [negative correlation](#) between conflict and food security, and the known effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security, it is certain that conflict-affected people around the world, particularly women and girls, need immediate assistance.

Food security forecasts are based on the assumption that humanitarians will be able to maintain their food assistance programming, but this may not be the case going forward. Humanitarian funding has declined significantly: to date in 2020, donors have provided just [43%](#) of the funding required for humanitarian operations, compared with [63%](#) in all of 2019. Despite being the top global humanitarian donor, U.S. funding for humanitarian operations has decreased as well, from [\\$8.3 billion](#) in 2019 to [\\$8.1 billion](#) to date in 2020, despite greatly increased need. If donors do not quickly allocate additional funding, especially for women and girls, millions of lives will be gravely affected.<sup>1</sup>



Funding is important, but it cannot be spent in ways that disregard gender. Although peace processes that involve women and girls are [more durable and better implemented than those that do not](#), and although they have been instrumental in [responding to the COVID-19 pandemic](#), women and girls are systematically excluded from decision-making positions in every sector and at every level, from the local to the global. For example, a [recent CARE study](#) found that, of 30 countries surveyed, most national-level COVID-19 response committees were gender-unequal. Nearly one-quarter of countries surveyed had not taken any targeted action to help women and girls during the pandemic. This exclusion is untenable and unsustainable. Crises affect different groups of people in different ways; solutions that ignore that are bound to fail.

But failure is not inevitable. Donors and international organizations can account for the needs of different groups, particularly women and girls, and involve them in decision-making processes to avert the risk of famine and address underlying conflicts, paving the way to a more sustainable future.

<sup>1</sup> All funding figures are from [OCHA FTS](#) as of November 17, 2020.



No actor can unilaterally forestall this crisis. However, the U.S. Administration and Congress can act now to model a strong, gender-transformative response to the international community.

**To prevent famine and support lives and livelihoods in areas experiencing conflict and extreme hunger, including DRC, northeast Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen, the U.S. Administration and Congress must:**

- **Ensure adequate flexibility of food aid modalities**, with food assistance provided in whatever forms—such as cash, vouchers, or in-kind assistance—are most appropriate and effective in each context;
- **Guarantee sufficient resources** to support robust, sustained, and principled humanitarian responses that attend to the immediate food and livelihood needs of women, men, girls, and boys; that mitigate against the risk of gender-based violence; and that address the root causes of food insecurity. These funds must be obligated and dispersed promptly;
- **Engage in robust diplomacy that includes women and girls to prevent and resolve the conflicts** that drive humanitarian need. This includes promoting accountability and compliance with the law of armed conflict and human rights law, particularly in support of principled humanitarian access;
- **Actively work to achieve political solutions to crises, promote durable solutions to displacement, and support communities to recover and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.** These processes must include women and girls to ensure gender-transformative recoveries and sustainable futures.

## Yemen

### **Lack of funding puts millions more at risk of famine**

More than five years of conflict have brought Yemen to its knees, killing more than 12,600 civilians and leaving the economy in shambles. The country is widely considered the world's worst humanitarian crisis. An astounding 80% of Yemenis need humanitarian assistance, including at least 20.1 million people—more than 65% of the population—who required food aid before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these urgent needs, funding for the Yemen humanitarian response is at its lowest point in five years. As a result, aid agencies have already been forced to reduce food distributions for 9 million people and nutrition services for 334,000 pregnant and lactating women.

Recent food security analyses show that COVID-19 is causing precipitous rises in food insecurity in southern Yemen, and forthcoming analyses are expected to paint a similarly bleak picture in the north. Acute malnutrition rates for children under five are the highest ever recorded, and more than 250,000 pregnant and lactating women are acutely malnourished. Food security actors expect that the number of people facing acute food insecurity will increase and that millions of people may be at risk of famine. Pleas from relief organizations secured enough funding to scale-up humanitarian food assistance in 2019, temporarily averting the threat of famine in Yemen. But now, with the end of the conflict nowhere in sight and funding lagging, the risk looms again.

To adequately prevent and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and address second-order humanitarian effects, including food insecurity, the U.S. Administration and Congress must:

- **Provide at least \$20 billion in further supplemental funding** to respond to COVID-19 and its effects around the world;
- **Ensure continued funding for programs that support the needs and rights of women and girls**, including programs for gender-based violence prevention and response, women's economic empowerment and rights, and youth engagement.

To further address the gendered effects of hunger and the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Administration and Congress must work with implementing partners to:

- **Ensure that at least 50% of funding** for food and nutrition security programs supports women and girls directly and includes gender-based violence risk mitigation measures;
- **Collaborate with local organizations**, particularly women-led organizations that are already responding to the crisis. These organizations are best positioned to assist communities in the midst of conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to prepare for and lead future humanitarian responses;
- **Require that all partners collect sex, age, and ability disaggregated food security data and advocate for global food security entities, such as the [IPC](#) and [FEWS NET](#), to do the same now and in the future.**

## **Northeast Nigeria**

### **Inaccessibility amplifies humanitarian need**

Years of conflict have plunged northeast Nigeria into a humanitarian crisis. At least [7.9 million people](#) required some form of humanitarian assistance at the beginning of 2020, but increasing insecurity and COVID-19 prevention measures have significantly impeded aid efforts. Civilians are unable to flee the conflict while humanitarians struggle to reach the people most in need.

Many people were already going hungry because of conflict, and the pandemic is making a bad situation even worse. [3.8 million](#) people needed food assistance before COVID-19 struck; now, [5.7 million](#) people in northeast Nigeria are facing acute food insecurity—a 50% increase. Because humanitarian actors cannot easily reach the most conflict-affected areas to collect data or provide consistent assistance, the situation is likely even more dire than reported. The likelihood that more people are experiencing more serious food insecurity is high, particularly for women and girls. A recent CARE survey found that the pandemic's effects on food and nutrition were a major concern for more than [53%](#) of women surveyed in the country.

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