

WOMEN AND FOOD SECURITY IN AFRICA: THE QUESTIONS THAT NEED ANSWERS FROM AFRICANS

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Abstract

African women play distinct roles in maintaining the crucial pillars of food security: as food producers, household gatekeepers, and managers of food stability during economic hardship. Women are pivotal in ensuring the nutritional security of their households, though their contributions are often overlooked in policy and legal frameworks, limiting their potentials in enhancing food security. This paper titled, “Women and Food Security in Africa: Key Questions that Need Answers from Africans” therefore seeks, through analytical research method to x-ray some pertinent questions on the challenges women face with regards to ensuring food security in Africa. This is in a bid to proffering solutions on how these challenges could be eliminated. It is therefore a prescriptive approach that provided solutions that could enable African women overcome challenges and contribute to food security.

Keywords: Food Security, African Women, Agriculture, SDGs, Development.

Introduction

Agriculture, no doubt, has been fundamental to human civilization, providing the essential sustenance needed for communities to thrive. Al-Zabir (2024) posits that agriculture is also crucial to economic growth, adding that it accounts for 4% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and in some developing countries, it can account for more than 25% of GDP. Thus, in many developing nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America, agriculture remains a major economic pillar. In addition to its contribution to GDP, agriculture generates employment opportunities across the value chain, from farming and processing to marketing and distribution (Food and Agricultural Organization, FAO, 2024). The job creation role of agriculture alludes to agriculture the role of poverty reduction and promotion of inclusive growth. As rural areas develop economically, they provide a more balanced regional development, reducing the urban-rural divide and mitigating the pressures of urbanization. Agriculture is therefore a key indicator to stability and development of every nation.

Another key indicator to national stability and development arising from Agriculture is food security. Food security, otherwise known as food availability depends primarily on the performance of the agricultural sector, as well as a country’s capabilities and competencies in processing, importing, storing, and distributing food. Unarguably, countries that invest in sustainable agricultural practices are better equipped to meet their population’s dietary needs. Morgan, Arrowood, Farris and Graffin (2021) explain that ensuring a reliable supply of nutritious food prevents hunger, malnutrition, and associated health problems, pointing out that improved nutrition has far-reaching implications for national development. According to Morgan, et al (2021), a well-nourished population is healthier, more productive, and better able to contribute to the economy. Children with adequate nutrition perform better in school, laying the foundation for a more educated and capable workforce in the future (Morgan, et al (2021). Consequently, diversifying crops and improving agricultural resilience against climate change are vital strategies for maintaining food security. This, therefore, makes it imperative to integrate advanced agricultural practices in any genuine efforts to achieve comprehensive development in African countries.

In realization of the relevance of effective agricultural policies and substantial investment to harnessing agriculture's potential for national development and food security, governments and international donor agencies try to create an enabling environment through supportive policies, subsidies, and incentives.

Globally, the overriding policy on agriculture and food security is captured by the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. According to the International Funds for Agricultural Development, IFAD (2023), the goal two of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture by the year 2030. A critical look at the specific objectives of the goal two of the SDG shows that women, who seem to account for over 70% of food production in Africa, are at the center of them all. These goals cannot be met in Africa without asking questions about challenges African women face while contributing their quota towards food security in Africa through Agriculture. Below are some of the goals of SDG two according to United Nations Organization, UNO (2023):

- 2.1. By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round
- 2.2. By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons.
- 2.3. By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.
- 2.4. By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality.
- 2.5. By 2030, maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at the national, regional and international levels, and promote access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, as internationally agreed
- 2.a. Increase investment, including through enhanced international cooperation, in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development and plant and livestock gene banks in order to enhance agricultural productive capacity in developing countries, in particular least developed countries.
- 2.b. Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets, including through the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round.
- 2.c. Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets and their derivatives and facilitate timely access to market information, including on food reserves, in order to help limit extreme food price volatility

Nevertheless, barely six (6) years to the expiration of the time-frame for the achievement of the global food security, there are indications that food security is at risk. This paper therefore seeks, through analytical method to x-ray some pertinent questions on the challenges women face with regards to ensuring food security in Africa. This is in a bid to proffering solutions on how these challenges could be eliminated. Before delving into this, understanding food security as a concept is necessary.

Understanding Food Security

The FOA (2023) defines food security as:

- The ability of all people to have physical and economic access to basic food needs at all times. Furthermore, a national food security strategy cannot be envisaged without ensuring food security at the household level.

- The capacity to ensure that the food system provides the entire population with a nutritionally adequate food supply over the long term.
- Food security is ensured when the viability of the household defined as a unit of production and reproduction is not threatened by a food deficit.

The World Food Summit (1996), cited in Giller (2021) defines the concept as 'a situation when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life', the need for sufficient availability of nutrient-rich foods seems to define food security. According to the World Food Summit (1996), cited in World Bank (2024), there are four main dimensions of food security, as shown below:

- Physical availability of food: This addresses the "supply side" of food security and it is determined by the level of food production, stock levels and net trade.
- Economic and physical access to food: This addresses an adequate supply of food at the national or international levels. Concerns about insufficient food access have resulted in a greater policy focus on incomes, expenditure, markets and prices in achieving food security objectives.
- Food utilization: Utilization is commonly referred to as the way the body makes the most of various nutrients in the food. Sufficient energy and nutrient intake by individuals are the result of good care and feeding practices, food preparation, diversity of the diet and intra-household distribution of food. Combined with good biological utilization of food consumed, this determines the nutritional status of individuals.
- Stability of the other three dimensions over time: Notwithstanding the adequacy of food intake today, you are still considered to be food insecure if you have inadequate access to food on a periodic basis, risking a deterioration of your nutritional status. Adverse weather conditions, political instability, or economic factors (unemployment, rising food prices) may have an impact on your food security status.

The foregoing aligns with FAO (2021), in their elaboration of the conditions that must exist to define food security. These are

- food availability: sufficient quantities of food available consistently;
- food access: sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet; and
- food use: appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, as well as adequate water and sanitation.

Food security is the determinant of an individual's ability to access nutritious and sufficient quantity of food. Some definitions of food security specify that food must also meet an individual's food preferences and dietary needs for active and healthy lifestyles. For food security objectives to be realized, all four dimensions must be fulfilled simultaneously. Food security, as already discussed, is a multi-faceted concept which begs the question - how is food security assessed? The World Food Programmes, WFP (2023) reveals that there are several facets and methods used to assess food security, as itemized below:

1. Estimating calories per capita
2. Household income and expenditure surveys
3. Measuring individual's dietary intake
4. Measuring individual's height, weight and body composition
5. Reports of individual's experience of food security

Understanding Food Security and Nutrition Situation in African

Available report reveals that about 78 percent, or more than one billion people in Africa, remains unable to afford a healthy diet, relative to 42 percent at the global level, and the number is rising (FAO, 2024; IMF, 2022; ECA, 2022; IFAD, 2024). Reports, also, reveal that the average cost of a healthy diet has risen over time, and was at 3.57 purchasing power parity (PPP) dollars per person per day in 2021 in Africa, which is much higher than the extreme poverty threshold of USD 2.15 per person per day. This implies that not only the poor but also a significant proportion of people defined as non-poor cannot afford a healthy diet in Africa. Between 2019 and 2021 Western Africa and Eastern Africa had the largest cumulative increases in the cost of a healthy diet.

The report found that the prevalence of stunting among the under five years children was 30 percent in 2022, which remains high despite a substantial improvement during the past two decades. The prevalence of wasting in children in the region remained just below the global estimate of 6.8 percent in 2022 and was relatively high in all sub-regions except Southern Africa. The prevalence of anaemia among adult women remains high in Africa, above the global estimate, and especially so in Western Africa and Central Africa. Despite modest progress in Africa in the reduction of the prevalence of low birth weight during the last two decades, the prevalence was still high on the compared to the global estimate. The prevalence of adult obesity in Northern and Southern Africa is about twice the global estimate.

FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WHO, ECA (2024), in their report of the global food insecurity index reveal that global hunger (measured by the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU), after rising sharply from 2019 to 2021, has persisted at nearly the same level for three consecutive years, still affecting 9.1 percent of the population in 2023 compared with 7.5 percent in 2019. The report also reveal that estimated 713 and 757 million people, corresponding to 8.9 and 9.4 percent of the global population, respectively, may have faced hunger in 2023(World Bank, 2022). This represents about 152 million more people than in 2019.

Analysis of trends at the regional level reveals that while hunger is still on the rise in Africa, it has remained relatively unchanged in Asia, and there is notable progress in Latin America (WFP, 2023). FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WHO, ECA (2024) informs that hunger increased in Western Asia, the Caribbean and in most sub-regions of Africa from 2022 to 2023, pointing out that Africa remains the region with the largest estimated proportion of the population facing hunger– 20.4 percent, compared with 8.1 percent in Asia, 6.2 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 7.3 percent in Oceania. According IMF (2024), Asia is still home to more than half of all those facing hunger in the world, with about 385 million people. Hunger also affected almost 300 million people in Africa, over 40 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, and more than 3 million in Oceania in 2023. It is projected that 582 million people will be chronically undernourished at the end of the decade and that more than half of them will be in Africa. This is about 130 million more undernourished people than in a scenario reflecting the world economy before the COVID-19 pandemic.

With regard to moderately or severely food insecure (meaning they did not have regular access to adequate food), an estimated 28.9 percent of the global population –2.33 billion people were reported in 2023 (FAO, 2024). These estimates include 10.7 percent of the population – 864 million people – who were food insecure at severe levels, posing grave risks to their health and well-being. In 2023, the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Africa (58.0 percent) was nearly double the global average, whereas in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania, the prevalence is closer to the global estimate –24.8, 28.2 and 26.8 percent, respectively. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity remained virtually unchanged in Africa,

Asia, and Northern America and Europe from 2022 to 2023, and it worsened in Oceania. In contrast, notable progress occurred in Latin America. Food insecurity affects women more than men, although the gender gap, which widened sharply from 2019 to 2021, began to narrow in and continued to grow smaller in 2023.

Globally, the percentage-point difference in the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity between men and women fell from 3.6 in 2021 to 2.3 in 2022 and narrowed further to 1.3 in 2023. Globally and in all regions except Northern America and Europe, the prevalence of food insecurity is consistently higher in rural areas than in urban areas, while the prevalence in peri-urban areas compared to rural areas differs among regions.

Women as Key Players in Food Security in Africa

African women play distinct roles in maintaining the crucial pillars of food security: as food producers, household gatekeepers, and managers of food stability during economic hardship. Women are pivotal in ensuring the nutritional security of their households, though their contributions are often overlooked in policy and legal frameworks, limiting their potentials in enhancing food security. Some of these policies and programmes that neglected African women are presented below:

African Leaders assembled together in Johannesburg in December 7, 2023 and deliberated on how to meet the food security and nutrition targets of the SDGs by 2030 and failed to critically assess the contributions of African women to food security and the challenges they face. Pursuant to this, the African countries came up with Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), as one of the continental frameworks under Agenda 2063 which aims to help African countries eliminate hunger and reduce poverty by raising economic growth through agriculture-led development as well as promoting increased national budget provision to the agriculture sector (World Bank Group, WBG 2024). Again, the factors that affect African women's contribution to food security were not captured. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, ECA (2024) informs that through CAADP, African governments are expected to increase investment level in agriculture by allocating at least 10% of national budgets to agriculture and rural development, and to achieve agricultural growth rates of at least 6% per annum. ECA (2024) adds that CAADP also sets targets for reducing poverty and malnutrition, for increasing productivity and farm incomes, and for improvements in the sustainability of agricultural production and use of natural resources. Through other initiatives such as the Green Great Wall (GGW), the Africa Agricultural Policy Leadership Dialogue (AALPD), the AU is also leading the implementation of initiatives and actions to end or reverse land degradation, loss of biodiversity in African dry lands and to ensure that ecosystems are resilient to climate change, continue to provide essential services and contribute to human well-being and the elimination of poverty and hunger WBG, 2024). In all these well-thought out plans and initiatives, inherent challenges African women face while engaging in Agriculture were not addressed. Is this an oversight? This paper therefore seeks to look at these factors that affect African women's contribution and efforts towards ensuring food security. It, therefore, becomes germane to x-ray the questions that need urgent answers if African women would continue to contribute to achieving food security in Africa.

Questions that Need Urgent Answers on African Women's Contribution to Food Security in Africa

The plausible attempts to mitigate food insecurity and its effects on people and their families require an understanding of why some people face food insecurity. Laborde and Torero (2023) identify the under-listed as some of the major factors that cause food insecurity and questions will be posed based on these factors:

Question One on Conflicts: How ready are African Leaders towards Conflict Resolutions in Africa?:

Laborde and Torero (2023) explain that conflict stands out as the single biggest factor driving global hunger today, pointing out that over 60% of those who are food insecure are living in conflict zones. Conflict forces people to flee from their homes, often leaving behind their only means to a livelihood. Conflict also divides communities and can cause farmers to abandon any long-term agricultural strategies for fear that they will never reap the benefits if they are forced to flee. Typical example of such conflict is the continual clashes between farmers and herdsmen in most African nations. Women, children and other vulnerable groups in Africa are the worst hit in conflict situations. If women account for 70% of staple food production in Africa, how would they produce food in the face of conflicts? Until Africans answer this question and address it critically, food insecurity in Africa will continue to soar.

Question two on Climate Change: Are African Leaders addressing issues of Climate change?

Laborde and Torero (2023) state that years of stagnation are usually accompanied by unprecedented rise in the number of hungry people in the world, with the greatest rise coming in drought-affected countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. An increase in the frequency and severity of natural disasters has devastated some regions, destroying crop yields and limiting the quantity and quality of food available to communities. The flood disasters in Nigeria in 2012, 2018, 2020, and 2022 are few examples. Small-scale farmers, often, are most prone to the risk effect that climate change can have on food security. These farmers are reliant on predictable climate patterns to provide them the yields they need to eat and support themselves financially. Fluctuations in these patterns and increasingly frequent climate disasters can leave farmers, who often lack significant capital or an alternative means to a livelihood, facing acute food insecurity. Staple food production, which is the core area of African women in Agriculture will continue to be adversely affected. How long will African leaders watch women weep over loss of farm lands to flood before they will intervene?

Question three on Patriarchy: Are Africans ready to be Gender-sensitive and Quit Patriarchy attached to Land Ownership? At this point it has to be added that the patriarchal nature of the society, which allows men to own lands and control most natural resources is responsible for women's subjugation in Africa. Empirically, gender encompasses both males and females. The patriarchal nature of African countries has given rise to what is referred to as gender ideology. According to Robertson (2024), gender ideology refers to the held beliefs and values about what is right for men and women and determines the patterns by which a particular society judges or evaluates the appropriate conduct of a man or woman. This is an emerging threat to food security. If not addressed, women will continue to face difficulties getting agricultural lands and resources.

Question Four on Gender-Based Violence: How are African Leaders Implementing Policies on Gender-Based Violence?: As far as discrimination and domestic violence are concerned, the female gender is the most vulnerable. Women in agriculture are often at risk of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation. Addressing gender-based violence in agricultural settings is essential for protecting women's human rights, promoting their safety and well-being, and enabling them to participate fully in agricultural development. The patriarchal nature of African Societies account for the lackadaisical manner in which issues of gender-based violence, especially rape, is treated. Until this is treated with the seriousness it deserves, most women will be afraid of engaging in agricultural practices to avoid being sexually harassed.

Question five on Availability of Markets: Are African Leaders Providing Women Access to Markets? Women in agriculture often face barriers to accessing markets due to limited mobility, lack of information, and gender-based discrimination. Providing access to markets and market information can help women increase their income, reduce their dependence on subsistence farming, and contribute to economic growth. If African Leaders fail to do this, food security via agriculture will be hard to achieve.

CONCLUSION

Women's contribution to agriculture is critical for sustaining life on the planet. Empowering women in agriculture, promoting gender equity, and increasing women's leadership and innovation in the sector are crucial for achieving sustainable development and food security. Addressing gender inequality in agriculture requires a global and local approach, involving policymakers, private sector, civil society, and women themselves.

Gender inequalities and gender norms restrict women's access to resources and services, such as land, knowledge, and food, leading to poverty and food insecurity. Vulnerable women, particularly in female-headed households, face limited access to nutrition information and resources, making them more susceptible to food shortages, food insecurity, and malnutrition.

The study titled "Gender inequality, reproductive rights and food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa – a panel data study," by Deeksha (2019) supports this assertion that gender inequality plays a significant role in explaining the prevailing magnitudes of food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa, and provides empirical evidence for the underlying hypothesis that removing discrimination against women, is an important precondition for addressing the hunger and undernourishment challenge Africa. The findings from panel data analysis provide empirical support that gender disparities prevailing in Sub-Saharan Africa have an adverse impact on the level of food security in the region. Government policies and programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa must focus on successful implementation of sexual and reproductive health and rights of women, as underlined in Goal 3 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Furthermore, this paper aligns with Agholor, A. I. (2019), in offering strategies for gender mainstreaming for rural agricultural advisory services. The study revealed that improving gender equity through agricultural production may translate into a contribution towards poverty reduction and improving food security in sub-Saharan African economies.

This paper has therefore succeeded in x-raying pertinent questions on issues affecting African women's contribution to food security via agriculture. The questions if addressed, no doubt, will help in fighting food insecurity in Africa.

Recommendations

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2024) has a mandate to eliminate hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition, and supports countries in translating their political commitment to the 2030 Agenda through concrete actions. FAO's interventions address food security and nutrition, focusing on gender equality and equal access to resources, employment, advisory and other services, and markets. The organization promotes gender equality in policies, programmes, and legal frameworks, strengthening national and governmental institutions' capacities for gender equality and empowerment. Community-level efforts involve gender-responsive projects and programmes. This paper therefore recommends in line with FAO interventions that:

- Empowering African women and closing the gender gap in agriculture and food systems is crucial to eradicating hunger, malnutrition, and poverty, and achieving SDG 2: Zero Hunger by 2030.
- Improving African women's income, and employment opportunities is vital for increasing productivity, improving health, and enhancing the well-being of families and households.
- Since women's empowerment positively impacts child and maternal health, Advocacy is necessary for achieving gender equality Africa so that women and girls can be empowered and all forms of discrimination eradicated.
- Gender-responsive interventions aimed at providing women and men with the same access to food, productive resources, education, decision-making power and economic opportunities along food value chains should be designed.
- Capacities of national institutions be to generate strong evidence-based data that can guide the design of adequate gender-responsive policies, strategies, laws and programmes on food security in Africa.
- Existing gender stereotypes and discriminatory gender norms affecting food security, nutrition and agriculture be identified and eliminated.

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