



How to mitigate risks of Gender-based Violence for women and girls in the desert locust response

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Context

In the East and Southern Africa region, where more than 10 million people are facing severe food insecurity¹ - **a triple crisis is currently in the making: flooding, the desert locust invasion and COVID-19**. Humidity created by ongoing extensive rains² - which in some parts have reached a point of deadly flooding - is the perfect environment for crops and seedlings to grow but also for desert locust swarms to breed.³ In light of what has been declared an **L3 emergency**,⁴ FAO's response to the desert locust crisis is threefold: (i) curb the spread of desert locust (surveillance, detection, control), (ii) safeguard livelihoods and promote early recovery (cash intervention, crop and vegetable inputs), and (iii) ensure coordination and preparedness (surge support, regional partnership, strengthen national capacity).⁵ COVID-19, in addition to exacerbating socio-economic vulnerabilities, is also complicating the desert locust response in terms of surveillance, ground/air control and supply management.

While all segments of the population are potentially impacted by the desert locust crisis, it is key to keep in mind that **women and children (boys and girls) living in marginalized pastoral and agro-pastoral areas are the ones who usually work in the field and take care of livestock**. Although globally women provide 43% of the labour in agriculture, their contribution in this region is as high as 70%.⁶ Small-scale farmers produce most of the food. The majority are women subsisting on what they produce and sell on a daily basis. In addition, women are seen as responsible for family-level food consumption: they provide the food and given intra-household food allocation patterns, gender dynamics and social norms they usually eat last (and less).

This note is intended to cast light on the various potential impacts of the desert locust crisis on women and girls but also explain why and how it is paramount that all actors involved in the desert locust crisis response integrate gender and mitigate Gender-based Violence (GBV) risks at all stages.

Main impact of the desert locust crisis on women and girls

Food insecurity severely limits livelihood opportunities and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. **GBV is expected to increase in disaster contexts and changing climatic conditions**.⁷ Economic instability often creates additional stress at household level, which can lead to increased rates of domestic violence and intimate partner violence. Child marriage may be seen as a post-disaster survival strategy. Migration and

displacement can lead to increased exposure to GBV, including sexual exploitation and trafficking.⁸ The following lessons learned from the previous desert locust crisis in the Sahel⁹ highlight some of these major impacts:

- Women and girls are primarily responsible for procuring and cooking food for the family. Loss of crops or fields being unsafe for cultivation (due to pesticides) create additional burden for women and girls. If crops have to be replanted, this labour will fall on women and children, which added to unpaid care work, may have health implications. In addition, women may either **take risks to travel far to get food** (or assistance, commodity or cash), engage in unsafe survival coping strategies (which could include those related to forms of sexual exploitation, for example) or in the worst case be unable to feed their families.
- When commodity and cash-based interventions or agricultural livelihoods programming are insufficient to meet a family's food needs, or only target male heads of households, women and child heads of households may be **forced to find alternative means to feed their families**. In the previous desert locust crisis in the Sahel women "sold their own animals, in particular poultry and small ruminants, personal goods, such as jewellery to survive. Examples can be found such as involvement in extra-agricultural activities – gold panning in Burkina Faso and handicrafts in Mali – where women reverted to gathering wild food products for the provision of the family (Burkina Faso)". The same study highlights the exacerbated vulnerability of "women headed households who were finding themselves in a more critical situation than those headed by men".¹⁰
- Women and children eat last and less: learning from the previous desert locust crisis and other humanitarian analysis show that "the majority of the households were **forced to reduce their food consumption** (...) with important repercussions on (women's) health and that of their children; 80 percent of the women interviewed in Mauritania, 40 percent in Burkina Faso and in Mali complained about loss of weight, a state of weakness due to malnutrition, tiredness due to excess work, and problems of pregnancy and childbirth in 2004."¹¹
- Economic vulnerability, lack of food and livelihood can create household tensions and **increase risks of violence** such as intimate partner violence. Exacerbated vulnerability and reduced resilience capacity may also push women and girls to **adopt negative coping mechanisms** such as transactional sex and may also push some individuals into exploitive work environments, become dependent on and trapped in abusive relationships, or be forced or coerced into human trafficking. **Child marriage** and the dowry that may accompany it could also be seen as a solution for some vulnerable families: in addition to receiving a dowry, some parents may see it as a way to provide a "protective" environment for their girls.

1 Figure from May 2020 snapshot (OCHA): 8.5 million for Ethiopia, 6 million for South Sudan, 5.9 million for Sudan, 1.7 million for Burundi.

2 Scientists have linked the current locust outbreak to unusually favourable climate and resultant ecological conditions, primarily driven by climate change. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/locust-swarms-and-climate-change>

3 Many weather stations have recorded their highest amounts of rainfall in 40 years, according to IGAD. OCHA snapshot – May 2020

4 FAO - Desert locust upsurge – progress report May 2020 (please note that L3 emergency is FAO internal classification)

5 FAO briefing, 21 May 2020

6 FAO, 2011 State of Food and Agriculture: Women in agriculture, closing the gender gap for development.

7 Though Climate change is expected to make weather conditions in East Africa less predictable, wet conditions are likely to become more frequent. More cyclones could eventually lead to an increase of locust outbreaks, which underlines the necessity of preparedness and preventative systems. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/qa-are-the-2019-20-locust-swarms-linked-to-climate-change>

8 Resilient, Inclusive, & Sustainable Environments (RISE): A Challenge To Address Gender-based Violence In The Environment. <https://www.climatelinks.org/blog/resilient-inclusive-sustainable-environments-rise-challenge-address-gender-based-violence>

9 Multilateral Evaluation of 2003-05 Desert Locust Campaign: http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/common/ecg/929_en_DLCC06_03eEvaluationReport.pdf

10 This study mentions also "higher degree of poverty is a result of the lack of control over the productive resources and the resulting benefits". Multilateral Evaluation of 2003-05 Desert Locust Campaign

11 Multilateral Evaluation of 2003-05 Desert Locust Campaign

How to mitigate Gender-based Violence risks for women and girls during the desert locust response?

Key actions

The locust crisis is an emergency that necessitates immediate and wide-reaching action driven by national governments with support from relevant humanitarian actors especially in the agriculture and food security domains. **Regardless of the nature of the response, protection of women and girls should be prioritized, and respect for and the promotion of human rights should guide the response, with particular emphasis on the principle of Do No Harm.** Effective, safe and efficient strategies of the Food Security and Agriculture (FSA) and Livelihoods sectors can only be achieved if the risks of GBV are factored into programme design and delivery. Below some of the key actions to consider:

- **Engage women and girls at all stages in the response.** Concretely, this means:
 - Ask women and girls about the consequences and impact of planned activities and preferred modalities for distribution of assistance. In return, request frontline organisations to be flexible when it comes to delivery (times and places, etc.) to ensure safety of women and girls at all time.
 - Involve community-based organizations or groups before and during the operations and activities (i.e. groups for women, adolescent/youth or older persons), but also local governments and organisations, community leaders and civil society groups.
 - Ensure all communication material on the desert locust response (whether control operation through pesticides, or livelihood and resilience programming) is adapted to the needs of women and girls, who may be illiterate and/or not understand some technical concepts. The use of pesticides could create chronic human health issues if not handled properly – thus it is key that communication is also targeting women and children.
- **Control operations & pesticides: ensure risks for women and children are mitigated,** but also:
 - Include women and girls in trained teams to undertake control operations against desert locusts, this will create an additional livelihood opportunity.
 - Fields that have been sprayed by ground or air cannot be entered for a couple of days by humans or livestock until the active ingredient of the pesticides has degraded: ensure that women and children - who are usually the ones exposed as they work in the fields – are well aware of the effects of chemical insecticides and how to reduce their exposure, the potential health related issues that may arise and hygiene methods. These awareness campaigns should be done before, during and after spraying operations and should target specifically women and children.

- Ensure that control operations do not add to the labour burden of women and girls, or affect their ability to provide food for their families.
- **Address long-term solutions to food insecurity which will affect women and girls disproportionately.** Create food-for-work programmes targeting women, girls and at-risk groups. Empower and foster women and girls' economic independence, which will decrease their reliance on negative coping mechanisms (such as early marriage) and increase their ability to avoid and/or get away from violent, abusive and other exploitative situations. If cash and voucher assistance is envisaged, consult women groups to see whether they would benefit from being first recipients of this assistance.
- **Ensure your teams are gender balanced,** so that women and girls can feel comfortable to express their thoughts. In addition, build the capacity of your staff to design and implement effective gender sensitive programming.
- **Efforts must be put in place to prevent and respond to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA).** Make sure ALL your staff have completed a basic PSEA training,¹² have signed a Code of Conduct and are aware of the existing SEA complaint and feedback mechanisms, and their duty to report any suspicion of misconduct.
- **Coordinate with protection colleagues:** establish a link with Child Protection and GBV coordination groups, where present, or alternative groups such as women's groups, human rights actors or Red Cross societies. Request their collaboration on key interventions; make sure they have an opportunity to give inputs on key decisions and approaches. In addition, if there are any signs of GBV or harm to women and children, liaise immediately with GBV Specialists.
- **When gathering data, developing strategies, assessments, and policy papers** make sure to address gender concerns and take into consideration protection and GBV issues of women and girls and groups at risk. At a very minimum, ensure all data collected is Sex and Age Disaggregated.

For more information on GBV mainstreaming and PSEA please consult:

IASC GBV Guidelines: https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-IASC-Gender-based-Violence-Guidelines_lo-res.pdf

PSEA Material: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-learning-package-protection-sexual-misconduct-un-partner-organizations>

¹² PSEA online training: https://extranet.unfpa.org/Apps/PSEA2017/story_html5.html?lms=1