

# **AN OVERVIEW OF GENDER EQUALITY, SOCIAL INCLUSION AND FOOD SECURITY IN NIGERIA**

BENUE JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY Volume 11 Issue 1 ISSN: 0386 Department of Sociology Benue State University, Makurdi Pg: 1-28
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## **Abstract**

Fundamentally, food is the major survival need across the globe. Hence plethora of efforts are being geared towards improving quality, production, and supply of adequate and nutritional food. This is for the fact food security ensure stability to individuals, families, societies, nations, and world at large. The aim of this paper is to examine the nature, dynamics and dimensions of food security in relation to gender equality and social inclusion in Nigeria. Abraham Maslow human need theory was anchored in this paper to explain the phenomena under study. The paper employed secondary data analysis to gain more understanding of the essence and psychology of gender equality, social inclusion and food security in Nigeria. Hence, the paper used both published and unpublished documents including textbooks, journals, magazines, and other related articles. Findings of the study revealed among other things that much of the world's data on gender equality overlooks questions of women food security. This neglect has affected women negatively by making them more vulnerable, having less food than men in every region of the world. The paper concludes that in order to achieve significant gender equality, effective social inclusion and food security for all in Nigeria, strategic policies towards empowering older people, people without official identification, people with HIV, people with disabilities, people from ethnic & religious minorities, migrants, and internally displaced people should be guaranteed. Finally the paper recommends amongst other things that short-term and long-term policy

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responses should be in place, to ensure food security and nutrition for all, in terms of adequate supply, decent production, & stability, in the face of economic shocks that limit households' purchasing power.

**Key words:** Gender Equality, Food Insecurity, Food Security, Social Exclusion, Social Inclusion

### **Introduction**

Food is no doubt, the most basic of all human survival needs (Matemilola, & Elegbede, 2017). However, numerous efforts have been sunk in improving the quality as well as production of world food supplies, food insecurity remains prevalent, particularly in the global southern nations of Asia and Africa, and malnutrition in Nigeria, has resulted in death of many of its citizens (Matemilola, & Elegbede, 2017). Hence, steady food supply is relevant and fundamental to human existence, as it ensures stability to individuals, families, societies, nations and the world at large. In the light of above, Iweoha et al (2015) in Masara (2019) posited that food is the most basic need of man. Its adequacy, affordability and security have been the pursuit of every community. As a result, modern priorities regarding food security gave more emphasis on hygiene of water sources; promoting agriculture and rural development (especially in vulnerable areas); development of agricultural research; promoting new modern agricultural technologies; improving the management of natural resources; supporting international and national trade and macroeconomic policies and globalization in the support of the poor (Ene, 2020)

Written records by Ene (2020) postulated that at present, factors that serve as threat to food security, include: global warming and climate instability; desertification and land degradation; lack of use of agricultural potential to the detriment of excessive imports; lack of national strategy for food security; the global economic crisis; lack of independence of food security; development discrepancies between regions and countries; price volatility; lack of immediate action; lack of coherent policies; lack of control and traceability within the food supply chain; lack of global control and practical action to mention just a few. Equally related is the fact that vulnerabilities – identified as risks to food security – are very diverse, affecting the natural environment, infrastructure and technical resources, organization of farms, funds accession, investment and so on.

**Materials and Method**

This paper employed secondary data analysis; where relevant documents were reviewed to explore various positions of the scholars on variables under discussion. Hence, the secondary data examined include published and unpublished documents such as textbooks, journals, magazines, international organizations conference papers & reports and other related articles. This is with a view to gaining more insights with regards to the dynamics and dimensions of gender equality, social inclusion and food security in Nigeria.

**Gender Equality and Food Security: A Global Trend**

Understanding the links between gender equality and food security is a complicated effort, especially at a global level (Selva & Janoch, 2022). Food Agricultural Organization's (FAO) 2010-2011 report on the State of Food and Agriculture was one of the foundational global studies that presented new data and connections between gender equality, women, as well as food security on a truly global scale (Selva & Janoch, 2022). Thus, much of the world's data on gender equality overlooks questions of food security. For example, of the four (4) major global datasets on gender, including the World Bank's Gender Data Portal, the only sex disaggregated food indicators reinforce women's role solely for their importance in reproduction: measuring anemia in women of childbearing age, and counting stunting for children, but most food security data sets are strangely silent on gender (Selva, & Janoch, 2022). Consequently, and in the light of the above, in 2022, the State of Food Security and Nutrition data in the World, shows that women have less food than men in every region in the world (Selva, & Janoch, 2022).

**Gender Equality and Food Security in Nigeria**

The food security and nutritional requirements of women and those of their wards are neglected at the household level, where biased social and cultural values exist (Ashagidigbi, et al., 2022) In line with this, Ashagidigbi et al (2022) further posits that in Nigeria, women have suffered longterm discrimination in the allocation and control of productive resources, despite their essential roles in the maintenance of the family by guaranteeing food security at the household level and society in general, Studies have shown that when women have access to or own land, they allocate much of their household income to food and have better-nourished children (Ashagidigbi, et al., 2022). Thus, promoting gender equality is widely recognized globally in contributing to agricultural productivity and food security. Thereby, ensuring greater that gender equality makes households more food secure and, therefore, enlisted as a significant theme within the global rural development policy agenda aiming at

achieving the United Nation's first and second goals of no poverty and zero hunger (Ashagidigbi, et al., 2022)

In the light of the gender inequality is observed to be a cause and also a result of food insecurity; where sixty percent (60%) of global chronically hungry people are estimated to be women and girls, with ninety eight percent (98%) of them are from the global south countries (Otaha, 2013; in Matemilola, & Elegbede, 2017). Equally to the above, is the fact that women are observed to encounter series of discrimination in seeking education, job opportunities and even at home, yet women are mostly responsible for preparing meals and taking care of the children. Hence, they in fact, mostly spend all or a good fraction of their income on feeding and their children's needs (World Food Programme (2009) in Matemilola, & Elegbede (2017).

Written records by (Otaha) 2013 in Matemilola & Elegbede (2017) maintained that gender inequality is one of the primary impetus of food insecurity, as it is the most important concern of people who are denied access or unable to engage in labor. Since, the vulnerability of women is most noticeable when assessing the effect of food crisis; women constitute the larger ratio of the poverty ridden population especially in Africa (African Development Bank, 2013; in Matemilola, & Elegbede, 2017). This true owing to the fact that in many parts of the world, woman who serve as heads of a household, are often more vulnerable to poverty and hunger than a household headed by a man. In the same manner, families headed by widow, are particularly at disadvantaged position African (Development Bank, 2013; in Matemilola, & Elegbede, 2017). In the light of this, the role of women in ensuring adequate land use, as well as food production, processing, distribution and marketing cannot be over emphasized. However, unfortunately, in most of the cases women are often deprived of access to agricultural assets, inputs and services when compared to men. In the same vein, (Otaha (2013) in (Matemilola & Elegbede (2017) suggested that if women where to have the similar access as men to productive resources, yield would increase by 20% - 30%, boosting the total agricultural output by 2.5% to 4% in developing countries. This then, entails that if gender inequality is minimized and women are given better access to agricultural facilities, achieving food security will be much easier. Hence, this will go a long way in raising women's status, reducing their poverty level, and enhancing their nutrition (Otaha, 2013 in Matemilola, & Elegbede, 2017).

### **Social Inclusion and Food Security in Nigeria**

Onwujekwe et.al (2021), argued that as cities in Nigeria continue to grow, the

demand and pressure on social and public services are expected to rise, and ensuring equitable access to priority services such as healthcare, food and nutrition services pose challenges to social inclusion. Nigeria is not only Africa's most populous country, but also has more number of large cities and the highest urban population in sub-Saharan Africa (Onwujekwe, et.al., 2021). In the light of the above, a recent national survey revealed that socioeconomic inequalities are huge across urban settings of Nigeria, suggesting that many urban dwellers do not have access to key resources and services. Similarly, disparities exist in the nutritional status of the urban-poor, urban-middle, and urban-rich (Onwujekwe, et.al., 2021). Thus, more cases of malnutrition and thinness have been noted among the urban-poor than their counterparts, the urban-middle and urban-rich. Hence, vulnerable groups are oftentimes most affected by poverty, rising unemployment, poor living conditions, and low development indicators (Onwujekwe, et.al., 2021).

In a strict and narrow sense Onwujekwe, et al. (2021) postulated that the most vulnerable group that are prone to social exclusion in Nigeria include children, pregnant women, those with disabilities, elderly persons, displaced, unemployed, retirees, and the sick. Consequently, inequality reduces opportunities and contributes to high rate of maternal and child mortality especially among the urban poor, underserved, and vulnerable groups (Onwujekwe, et al., 2021). The levels of social inclusion do vary from region to region and state to state thus tackling its concerns should be context specific. Therefore, policies that consider these peculiarities and incorporate social inclusion are inevitable in the sustainable cities' agenda. Thus, social inclusion should be strengthened so that farmers are less vulnerable to socioeconomic shocks to feed Africa's growing population (Osabohien, et al, 2024).

### **The Concept of Social Exclusion**

The concept of social exclusion, is equally related to social inclusion. Thus, social exclusion is understood as a process where individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life (Birchall, 2019). In line with the above, it is belied that anyone is potentially at risk of social exclusion, certain characteristics or attributes increase the risks. In Nigeria, the literature suggests that groups particularly at risk of social exclusion include: women and girls; people with disabilities; ethnic and religious minorities; migrants and internally displaced people; children and younger people; older people; sexual minorities; people without official identification; and people living with HIV (Birchall, 2019). Hence, people can also experience social exclusion depending on their location. For each of these groups, social exclusion

is experienced as a result of complex and intersectional factors that combine to reduce their participation in society (Birchall, 2019).

#### Food Security and Nutrition across the World

Global report on Food Security Index (GRFSI) (2022) maintained that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development puts forward a transformational vision recognizing that our world is changing, bringing with it new challenges that must be overcome if we are to live in a world without hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in any of its forms. Conflict and instability have increased and become more intractable, spurring greater population displacement (GRFSI, 2022) Equally related is the fact that climate change and increasing climate variability and extremes are affecting agricultural productivity, food production and natural resources, with impacts on food systems and rural livelihoods, including a decline in the number of farmers (GRFSI, 2022). All of these has led to major shifts in the way in which food is produced, distributed and consumed worldwide – and to new food security, nutrition and health challenges (GRFSI, 2022)

Another disturbing fact is that about two billion people in the world experience moderate or severe food insecurity (Cochrane, et al., 2021). Thus, this connotes that lack of regular access to nutritious and sufficient food that these people experience puts them at greater risk of malnutrition and poor health (Cochrane, et al., 2021). Although primarily concentrated in low- and middle-income countries, moderate or severe food insecurity also affects 8 percent of the population in Northern America and Europe, where in every continent there are certain variation, the prevalence rate is slightly higher among women than men (Cochrane, et al., 2021).

**Table 1: Acute and Chronic Malnutrition (WFP Hunger Map)**

Country	Acute malnutrition of Children under 5 (%)	Chronic malnutrition of Children under 5 (%)
Kenya	4.2	26.2
Rwanda	2	36.9
South Sudan	22.7	31.3
Tanzania	3.5	31.8
Uganda	3.5	28.9

Source: (WFP Hunger Map, 2024)

Table 1 above depicted that South Sudan has the highest cases of children under the age of five (5) who are acutely malnourished, while 31.3 percent are cases of children with chronic malnutrition. This is in a sharp contrast with Rwanda



which has the lowest percentage of children who are acutely malnourished with only two (2) percent cases of acute malnourishment. Whereas Kenya has the least percentage of chronic malnutrition among the children under the age of five (5), with 26.2. This call for urgent policy action by the countries in Africa in order to address the problem of food security.

### **Food insecurity in Africa**

African Food Security Briefs (AFSB) estimated that approximately one out of every three persons in the sub-Saharan Africa is undernourished (Akerlele, 2013; Matemilola, & Elegbede, 2017). Thus, achieving a sustainable economic development in Nigeria and Africa at large, will continue to be a mirage without well-nourished and healthy people. In fact, failure to ensure food security has unavoidably resulted in many social problems including civil unrest and riots in many major cities of the world (Matemilola, & Elegbede, 2017). Africa has been known to experience series of problems among which are poverty, food insecurity, and lack of access to energy, lack of infrastructure among others (Osabohien, et al, 2024). Food insecurity boils down to inability of households to have reliable access to food in sufficient quantity and quality to enjoy active and healthy life (Osabohien, et al, 2024). Chronic food insecurity now affects some 28% of the population that is nearly 200 million people who are suffering from malnutrition (Osabohien, et al, 2024).

In the light of the above Cochrane et al (2021) posited that food security is defined and measured in many ways. Two macro-level data sets highlight the situation across the continent as follows: (1) prevalence of undernourishment, which shows the severity within a nation (2) the number of people who are undernourished, which is often linked to population size, but highlights the scale of the challenges faced in some countries. The prevalence of food insecurity is extremely high in nine countries, where more than 50 per cent of the population is undernourished (namely, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Somalia and South Sudan) as shown in Table 2 below:

**Table: 2 Prevalence and Number of People Who are undernourished by Country**

COUNTRY	POPULATION UNDERNOURISHED (BY PERCENTAGE)	COUNTRY	POPULATION UNDERNOURISHED (IN MILLION)
Somalia	67.5	Nigeria	53.9
Burkina Faso	58.6	Democratic Republic of Congo	30.5
Mali	58.1	Ethiopia	14.9
Ghana	56.5	Uganda	14.9
South Sudan	55.5	Egypt	12.2
Central Africa Republic	55.3	Burkina Faso	11.6
Niger	51.3	Niger	11.5
Sao Tome and Principe	50.0	Mali	11.1
Sierra Leone	50.0	Sudan	10.0
Lesotho	47.6	Mozambique	10.1

**Source:** (Cochrane, et al., 2021).

According to the Institute for Security Studies and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), many of these nations have experienced conflict during the last decade. The role of conflict as a key driver of food insecurity aligns with research by Alex de Waal, who finds that extreme food insecurity events are connected to atrocities (conflict as well as political/military decisions)(Cochrane, et al., 2021). Further to the above, many of the countries with a high prevalence of undernourishment are encountering multiple challenges, including weak governance systems. In addition to this, FAO also highlights climate extremes and economic factors as significant drivers of food insecurity (Cochrane, et al., 2021).

The second indicator – the number of people who are undernourished – highlights the scale of the challenge in some countries (e.g., Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo)(Cochrane, et al., 2021). Hence, even if these nations have a relatively lower prevalence of undernourishment, several of them experienced localized conflict situations(Cochrane, et al., 2021). Therefore the nexus of climate and economic stress requires innovative solutions that combine emergency response (e.g., safety nets) (as explored below) as well as structural transformation to economies, which is why Food Agricultural Organization, stresses the importance of multi- sectoral approaches that integrate economic growth, economic diversification and inclusive economies as key to strengthening food security in the long term (Cochrane, et al., 2021).



**Table: 3 Overall Food Security Environment the Top - and Bottom- Ranking Countries in 2022**

<b>BEST PERFORMERS</b>	<b>2022 SCORE</b>	<b>WEAKEST PERFORMERS</b>	<b>2022 SCORE</b>
Finland	83.7	Syria	36.3
Ireland	81.7	Haiti	38.5
Norway	80.5	Yemen	40.1
France	80.2	Sierra Leone	40.5
Netherlands	80.1	Madagascar	40.6
Japan	79.5	Burundi	40.6
Canada	79.1	Nigeria	42
United Kingdom	78.8	Venezuela	42.6
Portugal	78.7	Sudan	42.8
		Congo (Dem. Republic	43

Source: (Global Food Security Index, 2022)

### **Food Insecurity in Nigeria: A Statistical Analysis**

Understanding food security is key to exploring food insecurity (FAO, 1996; Braun, 2008; in Thomas, & Turk, 2023). In the light of this Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), further postulated that food security exists when 'all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life. (FAO, 1996; Braun, 2008; in Thomas, & Turk, 2023). Deducing from the above, food insecurity would imply the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life. Thus, food insecurity is a state in which people at all times do not have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (FAO, 1996; Braun, 2008; in Thomas, & Turk, 2023).

Put differently, Thomas & Turk (2023) conceptualize food security as having sufficient food to generate a calorie requirement of about 2200-2300 calories per day for adult females and 2900-3000 calories per day for adult males. However, children require a lower calorie level to maintain themselves in adequate health. In the light of the above, September 2018 to October 2019 household survey of expenditures revealed that the cost of achieving 2251 calories per day (age-weighted caloric need for food security), is about 82,000 naira per person per year. Based on this survey, about 40 percent of the Nigerian population is identified as food insecure (Thomas & Turk, 2023)

Thus, it has been observed that in 2024, Nigeria is expected to see about 26.5 million people grappling with high levels of food insecurity, as disclosed by the Government of Nigeria and its partners during the unveiling of the October 2023 Cadre Harmonize analysis on food insecurity. Further to the above,

approximately 9 million children are at risk of suffering from acute malnutrition or wasting. Of these, an alarming 2.6 million children could face Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and require critical nutrition treatment. Factors that contribute to this trend, includes ongoing conflicts, climate change impacts, escalating inflation, and rising costs of both food and essential non-food commodities (in part due to the devaluation of the naira and the discontinuation of the fuel subsidy) (Tsokar, et al, 2023). Equally related to the aforementioned factors, is the persistent violence in the north-eastern states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe hinders food availability and access (Tsokar, et al, 2023). Similarly, armed banditry and kidnappings in northwest and north-central states, including Katsina, Sokoto, Kaduna, Benue, and Niger, exacerbate the prevailing economic struggles (Tsokar, et al, 2023). Factors like socio-political instability which prevent the economic recession, communal conflicts, dwindling human resource base, gender inequality, education decadence, poor health facilities and host of other challenges have contributed to food insecurity in Nigeria (Matemilola & Elegbede, 2017 in Masara, 2019).

### **Two major Nigerian Regions with the highest prevalence of insufficient food Consumption**

Northwest and northeast are in recent time, the two major regions with the highest prevalence of insufficient food consumption. Thus, in order of severity, they include: Zamfara, Katsina , Bauchi , Borno , Jigawa , Kebbi , Gombe , Sokoto , Taraba , Kano , Kaduna and Yobe . These regions accounted for 55% of the total number of people with insufficient food consumption in Nigeria—amounting to approximately 55.3M people (World Food Organization, 2024), as shown in the table below:.

**Table 4: Prevalence of Insufficient Food Consumption (High Low)**

S/NO	State	Percentage	Total Population	No affected
1	Zamfara	78%	3.48M	2.71M
2	Katsina	78%	7.83M	6.10M
3	Bauchi	78%	7.22M	5.61M
4	Borno	76%	5.88M	4.47M
5	Jigawa	76%	6.37M	4.83M
6	Kebbi	74%	4.92M	3.63M
7	Gombe	74%	3.55M	2.61M
8	Sokoto	71%	5.42M	3.84M
9	Taraba	69%	3.40M	2.35M
10	Kano	68%	14.9M	10.1M
11	Kaduna	67%	9.39M	6.27M
12	Yobe	63%	4.34M	2.72M

**Source:** World Food Organization (2024)

### **Theoretical foundation**

This paper is anchored on Abraham Maslow needs theory. Abraham Maslow is often considered as the founder of the Human Needs *Theory*. He advocated a hierarchy of needs based on the assumption that everyone has the ability to make a contribution to society and be a sound and friendly individuals, if their needs are fulfilled. According to the theory, needs lower down in the hierarchy, must be satisfied before individuals can aspire for needs higher up. These needs when arranged from the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, include: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization (Thomas, & Turk, 2023). Thomas & Turk (2023) further argue that it is only after the basic physiological needs (the need for food, water and shelter) are fulfilled that individuals move on to the next stages; the need to feel secure, to be loved and accepted, etc. The human needs theory, can be divided into deficiency needs (D-needs), and growth needs (B-needs). Thus, Abraham posited that deficiency needs arise due to deprivation and are said to motivate people when they are unmet. He also submit that, the motivation to fulfil such needs would become stronger for as long as they are denied. This means that the longer a person is deprived, the more desperate they will likely become. According to Maslow (1943) in Thomas & Turk (2023) the physiological needs are the most important as all the other needs become secondary until these needs are met. This theory is relevant to this study as it implies that people become motivated to take action when their needs are unmet and could be a cause of feeling marginalized and excluded particularly, for individuals in Nigeria who are food insecure. Thus, contributions of need theorist provide an important conceptual foundation that advocate for addressing human needs at all levels. Therefore this theory can help those in position of authorities and policy makers in promoting and devising policy interventions targeted towards addressing food security issues in Nigeria, which are basically a physiological need. To provide policy direction in relation to food security, measures should be put in place to ensure availability, accessibility, affordability and stability of food for all in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

As women play a key role in producing food and in getting it on the table, their right and access to food are heavily intertwined. Hence, the urgent need for making strategic policies that ensure gender equality in food security. Social inclusion as a multifaceted process, that seek to ensure that all nations and people are liberated from poverty and hunger while improving their access to better conditions of life for all and sundry; consequently, to achieve social inclusion in Nigeria, women and girls; people with disability; ethnic and religious minorities; migrants and internally displaced people; old people; sexual minorities; people without official identification; and people living with HIV should be guaranteed food security for better quality of life.

**Recommendations**

The paper recommends that issue of gender equality should be given top priority, particularly in the area of food security and nutrition needs of women and their children.

The paper also recommends that owing to the overwhelming demands and pressures on social and public services, especially in food and nutrition services, special consideration should be given to vulnerable groups like children, pregnant women, people with disability, displaced individuals to mention but a few.

The paper further recommends that short-term and long-term policy responses should be in place, to ensure food security and nutrition for all, in terms of adequate supply, decent production, and stability, particularly in the face of economic shocks that limit households' purchasing power.

To ensure food security in an all-inclusive and gender-based manner, more priority should be accorded on promoting agriculture & rural development, agricultural research, use of modern agricultural technologies, effective management of natural resources, supporting national & international trade and macroeconomic policies among others.

Finally, the paper recommends taking decisive measures towards eradicating factors that are threats to food security. They include factors like global warming & climate instability, desertification & degradation, lack of general strategies for food insecurity, global economic crisis, and of lack of independence of food security to mention but a few.

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