
THE IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

Research from Pibor and Akobo counties, Jonglei State, South Sudan

This briefing presents research undertaken in the midst of a critical food insecurity crisis in Pibor and Akobo counties in order to understand its impact on the lives of women and girls. The research found that women and girls' household chores, their livelihood opportunities and their access to education have all been impacted. It also found serious risks to their safety and health, and that they have limited coping mechanisms to deal with the crisis. The report highlights what the humanitarian community should do to ensure a gender-sensitive response to these pressing needs.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	2
Acronyms and abbreviations	4
Executive summary	5
Summary of findings	5
Recommendations for NGOs, donors and government.....	6
1 Introduction	9
1.1 Background	9
1.2 Objectives of the research	9
1.3 Sampling and methodology.....	10
1.4 Challenges and limitations of the research.....	10
2 Findings	11
2.1 The food security crisis and its impact on women	11
2.2 Food insecurity and protection risks.....	13
2.3 Food insecurity and education	15
2.4 Food insecurity and health and nutrition.....	16
2.5 Food insecurity and gender roles	17
2.6 Food insecurity and coping strategies.....	19
2.7 Humanitarian assistance	21
2.8 Humanitarian needs.....	21
3 Recommendations for gender-sensitive programming by NGOs, donors and government	23
Food Security and livelihoods	23
Protection.....	24
Education	24
Health and nutrition.....	24
Gender justice	24
WASH.....	25
Notes.....	26

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

EFSVL	Emergency food security and vulnerable livelihoods
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FGD	Focus group discussion
FRC	Famine Review Committee
GAM	Global acute malnutrition
GBV	Gender-based violence
HMO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
IDP	Internally displaced person
IGA	Income-generating activities
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System
IPV	Intimate partner violence
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organization
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
UNOHCR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was undertaken in response to recent humanitarian reports that point to a critical food security crisis in eastern areas of South Sudan. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projections indicate an emergency (IPC Phase 4) in Pibor and Akobo Counties, with a likelihood of famine (IPC Phase 5) in the Pibor *payams* (administrative divisions) of Gumuruk, Pibor, Lekuangole and Verteth.¹ Recurring flooding and intercommunal violence, as well as the poor economic situation of the area, coupled with the impact of COVID-19, are the main reasons for this food security crisis.

Given the vulnerability of communities during crisis and the different vulnerabilities of women, men, boys and girls, this research seeks to highlight the specific needs of women and girls, so that appropriate policy interventions can be put in place to ensure gender equality throughout the humanitarian response. The research aims to understand the extent of the food security crisis and how women and girls are affected in terms of their livelihoods and also household chores and safety, as well as what coping mechanisms they employ. In addition, this report looks at key humanitarian sectors such as Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Health, Nutrition and Education and the kind of humanitarian assistance provided. Finally, it highlights both the most pressing needs and longer-term ones and puts forward thematic gendered recommendations for informed humanitarian programming by Oxfam, donors, UN agencies and NGOs, as well as national and local authorities.

The research was carried out in Pibor and Akobo Counties of Jonglei State and attempted to cover a broad range of issues related to food security. The methodology involved a review of secondary literature and an analysis of qualitative data collected from the field locations. The qualitative data included focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). Eight FGDs were conducted with women, five with girls, eight with men and five with boys across the two locations. A total of 28 KIIs were conducted, broken down into 10 with female interviewees and 18 with male interviewees, 16 with community leaders, and 12 with representatives of government, NGOs and UN agencies. The selection criteria aimed to reach vulnerable communities and to achieve a gender and age balance among respondents.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Jonglei State, a fragile state in the Republic of South Sudan, is experiencing its most severe food security crisis in decades, with Pibor and Akobo Counties being particularly hard hit and with women and girls bearing the brunt of the catastrophe.

More than 80% of the respondents in the study pointed to the intercommunal conflicts and the recurring floods that have hit the region over the past three years as being the major drivers of the food security crisis. These stressors have had a devastating impact on the lives and livelihoods of millions of households, including female-headed ones, displacing people from their homes, reducing food production and disrupting livelihoods and markets. COVID-19 lockdown measures have also interrupted market supply chains, leading to price rises. While there are humanitarian agencies delivering relief aid in the two counties, this assistance barely meets the growing needs of the communities there. Moreover, humanitarian delivery faces serious challenges of accessibility due to insecurity, poor road networks and flooding, and financial stress and logistics constraints.

Traditional sources of livelihoods for women, such as farming and animal husbandry, have been depleted as they have been forced to sell productive assets such as livestock, goats, sheep and farm tools, which has increased their vulnerability to recurrent shocks. Cultivation is now at very low levels as hunger makes people weak and sick, leading to increased vulnerability and reliance on relief aid. Negative coping mechanisms for women and girls include reducing their food intake and

selling productive household assets. The main positive mechanism is collecting firewood for sale. However, this has led to a double burden of work on women and girls, as they have become more engaged in tedious and time-consuming household work (collecting firewood, fetching water, taking care of siblings and elderly family members), as well as farming and grazing livestock in order to support their families. In terms of protection risks, women and girls have become more vulnerable to issues of gender-based violence (GBV) such as rape, physical assault and robbery as they forage for wild fruits, firewood and water for household use and to sell. The health and nutrition status of women and girls has deteriorated, with malnutrition reported.

Education has also been affected. Because of the exhausting nature of collecting firewood and fetching water, girls' attendance and performance at school are suffering. Forced and early marriage, in order to obtain financial and other in-kind resources (cattle, sheep and goats) for the family as the food crisis mounts, have also led to girls being denied their right to education, with UNICEF highlighting that 52% of girls in South Sudan are married before they are 18.²

Gender inequality has further increased as women and girls have significantly lost control of and access to vital productive resources (land, livestock, finances, farm inputs); they are not being consulted in household decision making; and they also have sole responsibility for the care economy (fetching water, collecting firewood for sale, taking care of children).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NGOS, DONORS AND GOVERNMENT

FOOD SECURITY AND LIVELIHOODS

- Ensure that at least 50% of food security and nutrition funding directly supports women, with a specific focus on the most vulnerable (e.g. female-headed households), with clear communication in the community as to why this target group has been chosen and with risk analysis being conducted to ensure that a 'do no harm' approach is followed.
- Deliver livelihoods support through improving market access and providing seeds and tools (farm inputs) and training on livelihood diversification and better farming methods to stimulate production levels. It should be supplemented with food and livelihoods support for returning populations to enhance their integration into communities.
- Support the creation of women's savings groups, to be rolled out with support for men and general sensitization on changing roles within the household in order to reduce the incidence of intimate partner violence.
- Provide opportunities for income-generating activities in a gender-sensitive way, targeting women while communicating with and sensitizing men on the reasons for this targeting and ensuring a safe programming approach.
- Scale up unconditional cash assistance to poor households generally, with a specific focus on female-headed households across the assessed locations, conducting thorough risk assessments on the safety of such distributions.
- Support the creation of women's organizations and agricultural cooperatives and roll out capacity-building and training programmes on empowerment and advocacy on economic inclusion, GBV and other women's rights themes. Ensure sensitization of men and boys at the same time.
- Provide or support local manufacturing of fuel-efficient as well as solar stoves by women to mitigate the risk of violence when collecting firewood. This could be an important alternative livelihood opportunity, alongside training and educating women on the development and management of wood lots.

- Scale up assistance to address deficits in food security, targeting women and girls, not just those assessed to be in IPC Phase 5 (Famine) but also those in IPC Phase 3 (Crisis) onwards. Food assistance should also support school feeding programmes for girls and boys to increase attendance.
- Pre-position commodities and stocks for humanitarian delivery in eastern parts of Pibor in order to rapidly respond to the needs of large numbers of displaced people.
- Scale up gender-sensitive livestock health intervention programmes by training new community animal health workers and expanding delivery of animal health services.

PROTECTION

- Establish or support the establishment of efficient referral systems in order to rapidly respond to food security-related protection risks or violations of the rights of women and girls.
- Continue to monitor the protection situation in areas where humanitarian WASH and EFSVL programmes are running and communicate to the community the local partners available to provide GBV services.
- Support the organization and implementation of awareness campaigns on incidents of GBV and robbery related to food security.
- Play an advocacy role to duty bearers and peace partners at different levels of government to prevent the resurgence of conflict, by providing support to conflict resolution and peace-building mechanisms that address the root causes of the current conflict. This should be conducted with reference to UNSCR 1325, which emphasizes the role of women in peace-building, and the national action plan for implementation of the Resolution.

EDUCATION

- Support girls' education, through cash-for-education projects or scholarship assistance, to enhance school enrolment rates. This should target female-headed households with girls in school. School feeding programmes should also be included.
- Provide tailored literacy courses for women to inspire them to acquire skills and professional qualifications, in order to achieve social and economic integration and avoid exclusion based on educational levels.
- Build educational and vocational skills for girls and boys. This will boost their incomes and increase skill sets for more work and livelihoods opportunities.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

- Prioritize the delivery of life-saving health and nutrition services, including commodities of higher nutritional value, as a famine prevention measure in the affected payams. This should target in particular vulnerable female-headed households.
- Enhance the knowledge, skills and capacity of women, girls, men and boys and of local community leaders around nutrition-sensitive livelihood support.

GENDER JUSTICE

- Tackle the care burden of women and girls and ensure that it is redistributed among family members by holding sensitization sessions on gender roles with men and boys, as well as with women and girls.
- Support transformations in food systems that recognize women and girls as leaders in such systems and pave the way to equal access and rights in the food production and consumption chains.

- Advocate to other humanitarian and development partners to ensure that development and humanitarian funding supports gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

WASH

- Restore access to clean water and to an acceptable standard of sanitation for both IDPs and host communities. This can be done through the installation of water supply hardware, with participatory mechanisms for women, girls, boys and men.
- Ensure that latrines have lockable doors and are segregated. Consider also local customs to avoid communal resistance.
- Regularly distribute dignity kits for women and girls. Girls and women could also be trained on how to make reusable menstrual pads in the long term.
- Support health promotion activities and training on disease prevention, with emphasis on handwashing and water treatment for women, men, boys and girls.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

This research was commissioned following the publication of a number of reports that pointed to a severe humanitarian situation in Jonglei State in South Sudan. The state has an estimated population of 2,031,800, of whom 1,711,400 are facing urgent humanitarian needs.³ The worst-affected locations include Pibor and Akobo counties, which are facing a very alarming food security situation. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) food security analysis for October 2020 to July 2021, released by the IPC Global Unit,⁴ the food security situation in four payams (administrative divisions) of Pibor (Gumuruk, Pibor, Lekuangole and Verteth) was classified as IPC Phase 5 (Famine Likely).⁵ Together, these four payams account for about 80% of the county's population. The situation in Akobo was classified as IPC Phase 4 (Emergency).⁶ OCHA's 2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) estimated that 57,000 people in Pibor and 22,700 in Akobo were at 'catastrophe' level.⁷ In addition, according to the IPC's Acute Malnutrition (AMN) analysis, Pibor and Akobo are thought to be facing a critical situation of global acute malnutrition (GAM).⁸ The HNO 2022 further lists Jonglei State as being host to some 1.3 million children under the age of five and to 676,000 pregnant and lactating women who are thought to be at risk of acute malnourishment.⁹ The analysis for February to March 2022 and the projection to July 2022 is equally dire.¹⁰

The unprecedented flooding seen in 2021 as well as flooding in 2020 in most parts of Jonglei further exacerbated the situation for already stretched populations, who had barely recovered from the floods in 2019. These recurring floods have damaged crops repeatedly over a number of years and have resulted in considerable population displacement and disruption to markets, while also increasing food prices. Furthermore, the purchasing power of households in these locations has been affected by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic,¹¹ which has led to the loss of income sources for employed populations, livestock traders and casual wage earners alike. This is in addition to an escalating cycle of intercommunal violence in both counties, with cattle raiding leading to safety concerns, unsafe access to humanitarian aid and destruction of public infrastructure.

It is against this backdrop that, as part of its humanitarian response, Oxfam is implementing various projects in Jonglei State. To ensure a gendered response, but also in order to contribute to policy discussions and lead to gender transformative changes in the wider humanitarian effort, Oxfam conducted this research on the impact of food insecurity on women and girls. They are the most affected by the crisis because of unequal social structures and unequal ownership of resources, which make them more vulnerable to the impacts of food insecurity in this fragile context.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

This research set out to gather evidence and recommendations to inform effective humanitarian programming that prioritizes and addresses the needs of women and girls. Its specific objectives were to:

- examine the extent of food insecurity for women and girls;
- establish the effects of food insecurity on their livelihoods, education, household chores, social status, health, security and other related issues;
- understand their coping mechanisms, both negative and positive;
- establish the kind of services they are currently receiving, from whom and what gaps there are, if any;

- make recommendations for Oxfam’s thematic programming areas: Food Security and Livelihoods, WASH, Gender Justice, Protection and Education, as well as for the wider humanitarian response.

1.3 SAMPLING AND METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by means of a review of secondary data as well as primary sources. Primary data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIs) in a number of payams of Pibor and Akobo counties. These payams were selected due to the badly deteriorating food security conditions they are facing, with some on the brink of famine. In Pibor County the areas assessed were Pibor payam, Gumuruk, Akilo, Bathikajach and Golgothin. In Akobo the payams covered were Barmach, Diror, Buong and Walgak. A total of 26 FGDs were conducted (14 in Akobo and 12 in Pibor) and 28 KIs (14 each in Akobo and Pibor). In total, eight FGDs were conducted with women, five with girls, eight with men and five with boys across the two locations. For the KIs, the sample consisted of 10 female and 18 male interviewees, while 16 of the KIs were with community leaders and 12 were with representatives of government, NGOs and UN agencies.

1.4 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The biggest challenge was access in and around Pibor and Akobo counties, which was limited due to poor road networks, flooding, insecurity and COVID-19 precautions. This substantially limited the field-based collection of data and meant that the quality of the data suffered, while the desired sampling strategy of ensuring greater representation of women and girls across FGDs and KIs was not achieved. To ensure a sound report, data were cross-referenced with other Oxfam reports from the area as well as with secondary sources from other organizations.

A second limitation was that respondents often referred to both Pibor town and Pibor County simply as ‘Pibor’. Often respondents made limited or no distinction between the two, especially those who had previously lived in Pibor town. For this reason, Pibor County and Pibor town/centre are each referred to with an appropriate administrative descriptor, i.e. ‘County’ or ‘payam’ respectively.

Another challenge pertains to the limited availability of gender-disaggregated statistical data and information on food security for the data collection areas. For this reason, the data gathered qualitatively are presented in a quantitative manner, to allow for visual representation of the gender gaps they reveal.

2 FINDINGS

2.1 THE FOOD SECURITY CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN

The food security crisis was confirmed as being dire, with all the KII respondents in both locations indicating that households did not have enough food to meet their basic food and nutrition needs. Similarly, more than 80% of the FGD participants in each of the research locations asserted that they had barely enough food in the house; they were eating on average two or fewer meals a day and were concerned about running out of food in the next three to four months.

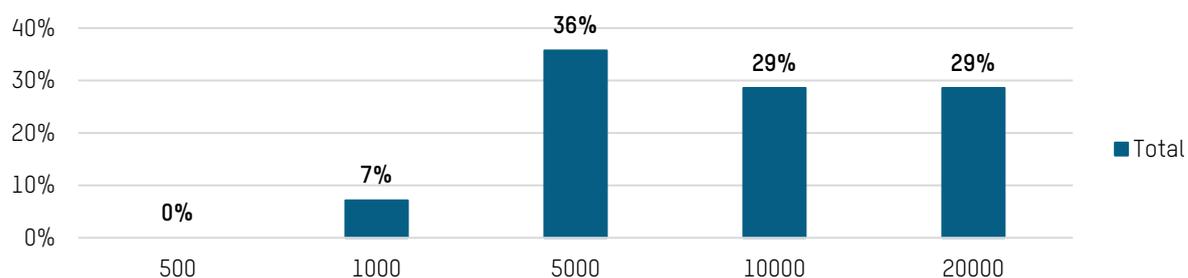
Participants in the FGDs and KIIs further confirmed that the main drivers of this food insecurity were the recurring floods (2019, 2020, 2021) and the intercommunal violence taking place in both Pibor and Akobo counties. They described how the flooding has destroyed large swathes of agricultural land and has contaminated water points. The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the crisis. Half of the KII respondents in Pibor and Akobo indicated that its impacts had been severe as the lockdown had interrupted supply chains, including those of vital food items not just from neighbouring counties in Jonglei but also from across the border with Ethiopia, leading to inflated market prices.

Hunger is also contributing to poor or inadequate care for livestock, and this is affecting a significant number of communities who rely on animal grazing for their livelihoods. Boys taking part in the FGDs said that there was no incentive to go to the bush to look after animals, because when they return home weak and exhausted there is no food to eat in the house. Because of the lack of proper care, they stated, most animals have wandered off, while others have died due to inadequate access to water and pasture, and as a result they were being beaten by their parents.

Further issues to emerge were the fact that hunger and malnutrition make people sick and weak, which limits the ability of farmers to do the exhausting job of digging the soil, which is an inherent source of livelihoods. In a vicious circle, this further increases their vulnerability to recurrent food security shocks. In Pibor, female participants in FGDs stated that cultivation was mainly confined to nursery beds where they grew a few greens. Consequently, their reliance has increased on cereals provided as relief, though these are arriving less frequently due to the challenges that agencies are facing with access. Interviewees also reported that the variety of food was limited, with most households depending on sorghum grains and significantly smaller quantities of maize.

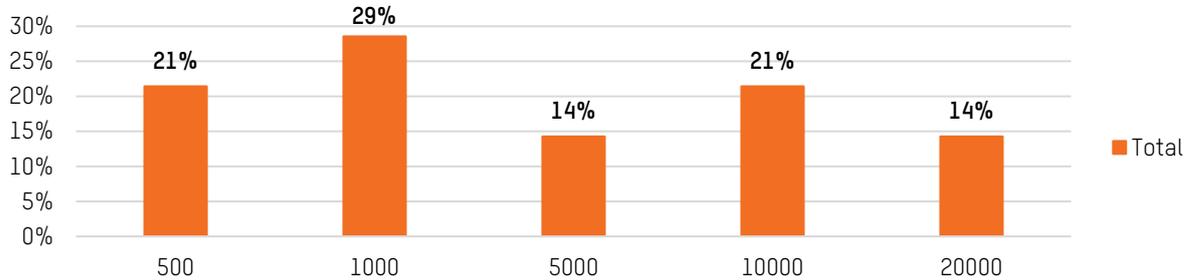
In Pibor, when KII respondents were asked to estimate the number of people who did not have enough food to meet basic household needs in the payams in question, 36% said that more than 5,000 people were in this situation while 29% stated that it was more than 10,000 people, and another 29% estimated more than 20,000 people (Figure 1).

Figure 1: KII respondents' estimates of the number of people without sufficient food to meet basic household needs in Pibor payams



Looking at the impact on women, when interviewees were asked how many of those without enough food were women and girls, 29% said that more than 1,000 women and girls did not have enough food and 21% said that more than 10,000 women and girls did not have enough food (Figure 2).

Figure 2: KII respondents’ estimates of the number of women and girls without sufficient food to meet basic needs in Pibor payams



Similarly, in Akobo the biggest percentage of KII respondents (63%) estimated that more than 1,000 people did not have enough food for their household (Figure 3), while 50% estimated that more than 1,000 women and girls did not have enough food to meet their basic needs (Figure 4).

Figure 3: KII respondents’ estimates of the number of people without sufficient food to meet basic household needs in Akobo Payams

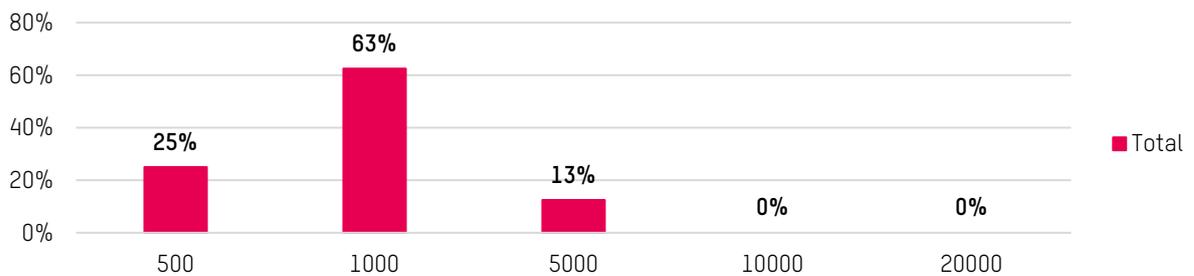
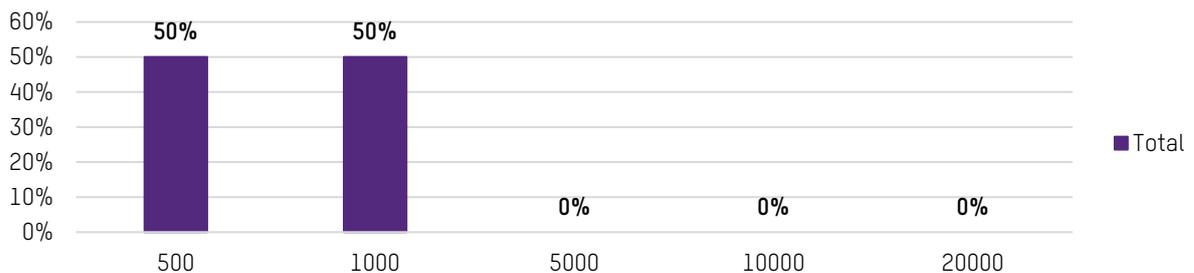
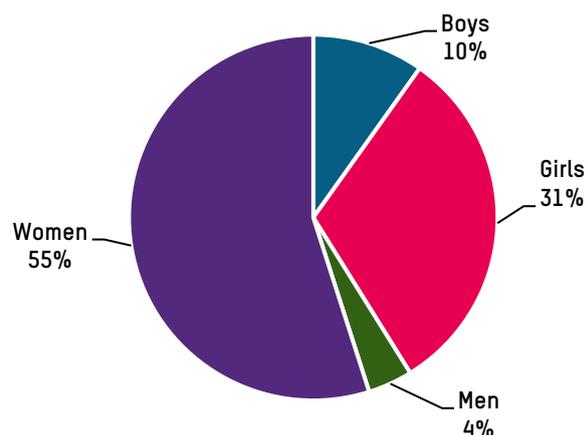


Figure 4: KII respondents’ estimates of the number of women and girls without sufficient food to meet basic needs in Akobo payams



Furthermore, of the different population groups women and girls were considered to be the most vulnerable, with 55% of KII respondents believing this to be the case, compared with 31% saying girls, 10% boys and 4% men (Figure 5).

Figure 5: KII respondents' views of the most vulnerable and most affected groups



Both Pibor and Akobo are agricultural and pastoral zones, with female-headed households performing a significant amount of farming and animal husbandry work. However, the food security crisis has had significant impacts on these traditional livelihood sources, as indicated by the KIIs in both locations. As the food crisis has worsened, most female-headed households have had to survive by selling productive assets such as livestock (cows, goats, sheep) and farm tools to purchase food items from the market, at inflated prices. However, as interviewees pointed out, their ability to use the sale of assets as a coping strategy has been exhausted to the point of depletion, which is one indication of the recurrent nature of food insecurity.

Women FGD respondents in Pibor County said that all their traditional livelihoods had been severely affected, and none are still viable. Consequently, while the sale of household assets may absorb some of the shocks and stressors in the short term, it tends to undermine recovery and resilience to recurrent shocks, ultimately leading to increased reliance on humanitarian aid. Some women respondents said that there were already serious issues arising due to food insecurity which proved that households had nothing to eat, notably begging and transactional sex, both of which are unusual in the culture of local communities. Those who are most vulnerable are female-headed households displaced from neighbouring payams because of violent conflict. They have come with little or nothing at all, one respondent said.

In both locations, respondents noted that collecting firewood, fetching water for sale and small-scale vegetable farming were some of the ways in which women were trying to survive. These activities, however, were described as being very time-consuming and tedious. FGD respondents in both Pibor and Akobo also said that they ate one meal a day, skipping food for a day or two or allowing children to eat first and adults later. It is usually women who eat last, which means that if the food is finished before their turn they go to sleep hungry, even though it is they who perform the bulk of the work to ensure that there is food on the table to begin with.

2.2 FOOD INSECURITY AND PROTECTION RISKS

Participants in the FGDs explained that the situation of local insecurity created by clashes between the Nuer, Dinka and Murle communities had not only displaced people from their homes but had also created fear among farmers, as they ran the risk of being killed in the farmlands. For women and girls, the risk was that they would be physically harassed, and potentially also abducted and raped or killed. These fears had affected agricultural production locally, leading to inadequate yields and a lack of food.

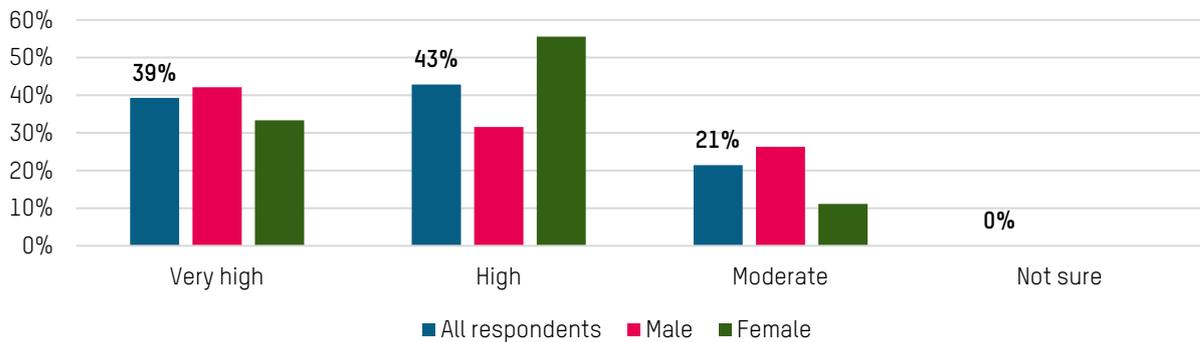
Internal displacement has another negative impact on host communities in that it creates competition over meagre local resources. As the FGD respondents in Bathikajach and Pibor payam stated, the arrival of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Gumuruk had created food shortages,

including in the market, and had limited access to agricultural land, making host communities more vulnerable to food insecurity.

According to both men and women in FGDs in Gumuruk, another driver of food insecurity in the area was fights between age sets. These are related to struggles for power and resources, and in most cases involve the looting of livestock. In Pibor payam, men in an FGD also identified intercommunal cattle raids as a trigger of food insecurity.

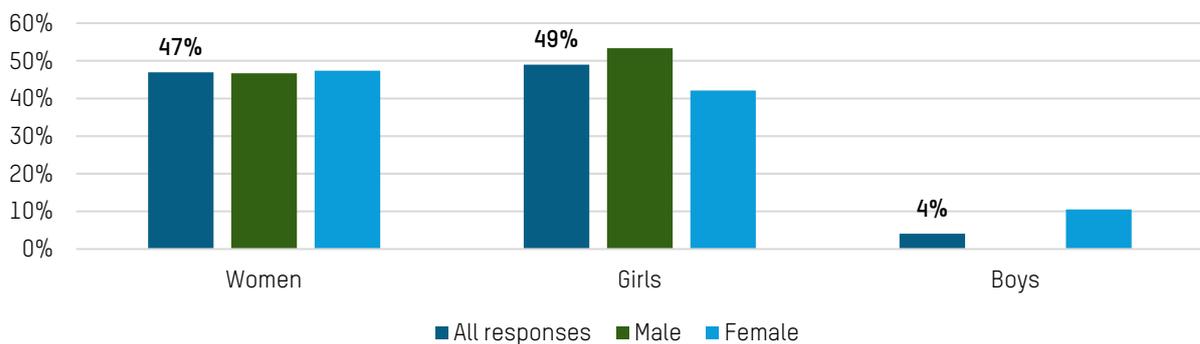
The safety and security of women and girls have been further compromised by the food crisis, as data collected from the KIIs illustrate. Figure 6 combines responses from interviewees in the two counties on their perceptions of the severity of protection risks. Just over 43% of respondents stated that the impact was high, while 39% said that it was very high (note that Figure 6 shows percentages only for the totals and not for female and male responses separately).

Figure 6: KII respondents’ perceptions of the impact of food insecurity on the safety and security of women and girls in Pibor and Akobo Counties



Additional protection risks to which women and girls are vulnerable as a result of food insecurity include different forms of GBV. There is limited official information on the number of women and girls affected by GBV, but the KIIs in both counties indicated that they are at much greater risk of GBV related to food security than men and boys (Figure 7). This is not to say that boys and men are free from risks: in the FGDs, boys confirmed that they were also vulnerable, mainly to being forcibly recruited into gangs to raid cattle.

Figure 7: KII respondents’ perceptions of groups most at risk of GBV related to food insecurity in Pibor and Akobo



Other protection risks for women and girls stemming from food insecurity include the time-consuming and labour-intensive task of collecting firewood. Participants in the FGDs pointed out that women and girls risked being abducted and raped or killed as they collected firewood. To enhance safety and security, FGD respondents stated that they usually moved in groups while carrying out these activities. It should be noted, however, that GBV is seen as an internal family issue by local government officials, who do not believe that it is their duty to interfere in people’s family and relationship affairs. In some cases, parents do not report GBV cases involving rape against girls, in order to protect their integrity. This limits the support available to victims. In

addition, women and girls also lack adequate information about GBV services operating in their areas.

Another huge impact of food insecurity on women and girls, and a form of GBV, is early marriage. This was confirmed by FGD participants, who said that marrying off young girls to obtain money was another strategy used to keep families afloat during the crisis. This is in line with warnings from other organizations that the hunger crisis is leading to early marriage of girls in Pibor.¹² This suggests that, despite the prevailing narrative that culture is the main driver of early marriage, there is social recognition among communities that for families, conditions of food insecurity are a variable that explains the increasing number of cases. Early marriage was mentioned by male and female participants in FGDs across the locations, with women in one group saying that girls are considered as a kind of resource and that they are 'grown for marriage'. It is evident that, during a time of food insecurity and acute economic stress, marrying off daughters provides a source of income to meet immediate food needs. As a female FGD participant in Walgak payam stated, 'Because of the household suffering due to lack of food, family members can decide to force you to get married to obtain money.' Respondents described how money gained in this way would then be used to support the family economically as a coping mechanism, especially when livelihoods (livestock or crops) had been lost or the household breadwinner had died or was incapacitated. Forced early marriage then becomes a way of temporarily alleviating poverty and hunger within the family, if the groom's family can raise a large enough dowry. KI respondents confirmed this, pointing out that food insecurity has a very serious impact on girls' marriage options. A recent report from UNICEF highlights the facts that 52% of girls in South Sudan are married before the age of 18 and that about one-third of all girls are pregnant before they turn 15.¹³ This also partly explains the lack of education for girls in these two counties (for more on this, see section 2.3 on education below).

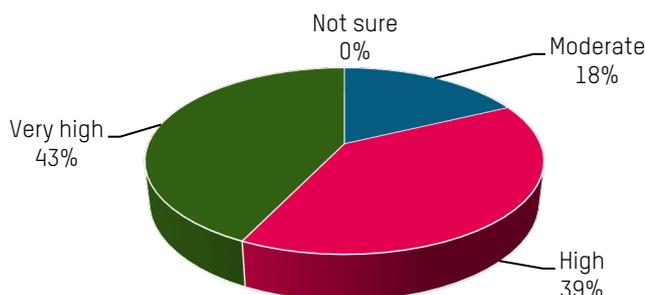
Another GBV issue exacerbated by food insecurity is intimate partner violence (IPV) against women, a form of domestic violence. Female FGD respondents in Pibor payam reported that men coercively demand full control over all finances obtained from petty trading and from assistance channels. Men have limited resources themselves and IPV is a way to ensure that they maintain their status as breadwinners.

Last but not least, at the community level, FGD respondents stated that female-headed households have become key targets for robbery targeting their productive assets (livestock and farm tools), owing to their perceived weakness. Also, as reported in an FGD for women in Golgothin, women are not being paid for their labour when they fetch firewood and water for other businesses.

2.3 FOOD INSECURITY AND EDUCATION

Food insecurity is also acting as a significant barrier to education for girls. Findings from the KIIs indicate that its impact on girls' education is mostly perceived to be either high or very high (Figure 8).

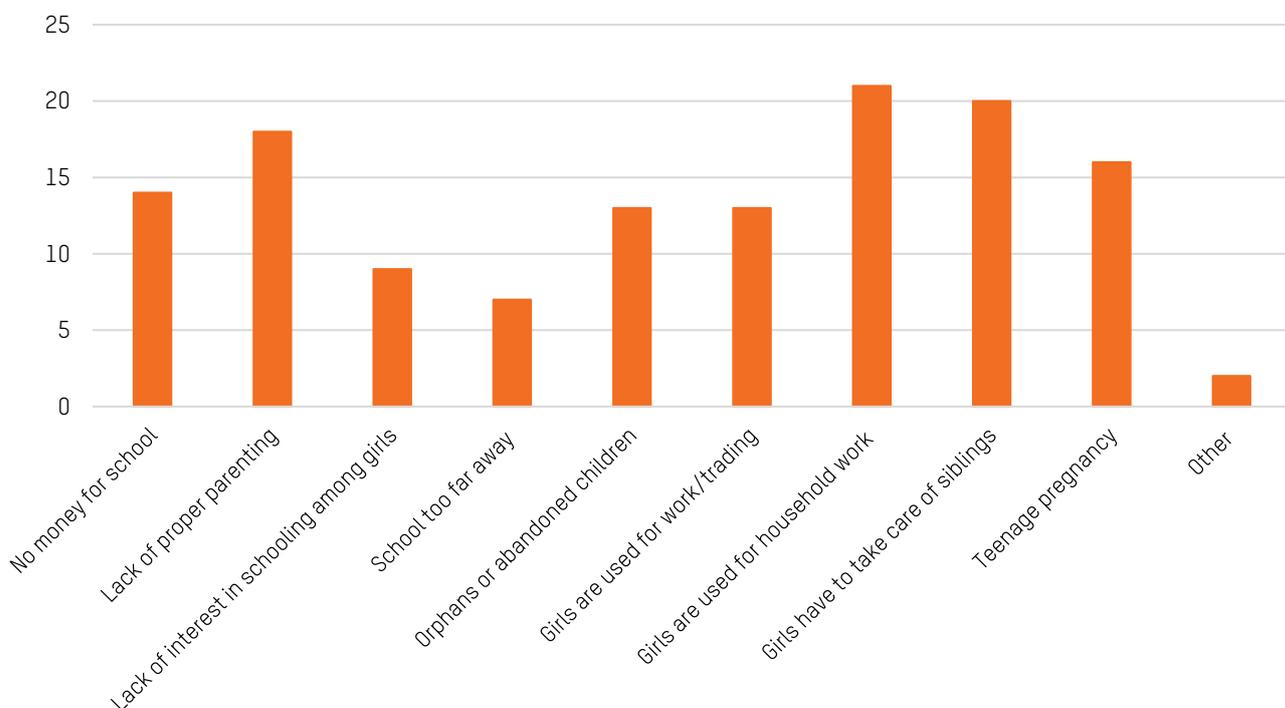
Figure 8: KI respondents' perceptions of level of impact of food insecurity on girls' education in Pibor and Akobo



More than 50% of FGD respondents meanwhile reported that girls spent a lot of time preparing food and taking care of younger siblings and elderly family members, collecting firewood and fetching water for cooking and for sale, while boys looked after animals, in addition to doing school homework. In particular, collecting firewood and fetching water were identified as coping strategies related to food insecurity in both Pibor and Akobo. However, due to the exhausting nature of these tasks girls become weaker, which reduces their concentration in school and curbs their performance and progress. Some participants in the FGDs noted that the number of girls not attending school in both Pibor and Akobo had also increased because of the long distances involved and the fact that hunger was making them too tired to walk back and forth to school. This is in line with literature on the topic, which indicates that food insecurity in families is having a negative influence on girls' capacity to lead healthy lives and concentrate in school, and often requires them to take on extra household labour.¹⁴

When those participating in KIIs were asked why girls in their counties were not attending school, the three reasons they gave most often were that girls were being used for household work, that they were taking care of siblings, and a lack of proper parenting (Figure 9). Other reasons included teenage pregnancies and lack of finances. This is confirmed by a forthcoming Oxfam Gender and Protection analysis, which explores in more depth the different barriers to education.¹⁵

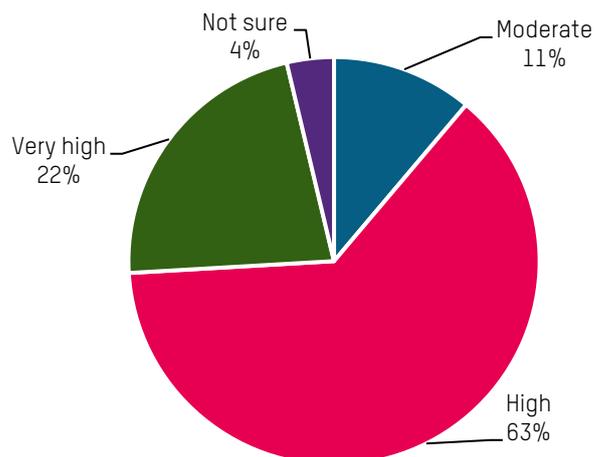
Figure 9: KII respondents' perceptions of reasons why girls are not attending school in Pibor and Akobo



2.4 FOOD INSECURITY AND HEALTH AND NUTRITION

The health and nutrition status of women and girls in Pibor and Akobo is also suffering. KII respondents described the impact of food insecurity on women's and girls' health and nutrition as either high (63%) or very high (22%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10: KII respondents' perceptions of impact of food insecurity on women's and girls' health and nutrition in Pibor and Akobo



In Pibor, levels of GAM stand at 21.6%, making it the second worst hotspot for acute malnutrition after Aweil South (23.1%).¹⁶ While recent statistics for individual cases in Pibor are limited, OCHA's HNO report indicates that 676,000 pregnant and lactating women in South Sudan are acutely malnourished and in need of treatment. This implies that Pibor County could be hosting a significant number of women in need of treatment for malnutrition. In Akobo, GAM levels are estimated at between 15% and 29%, which is above the global threshold of 15%.

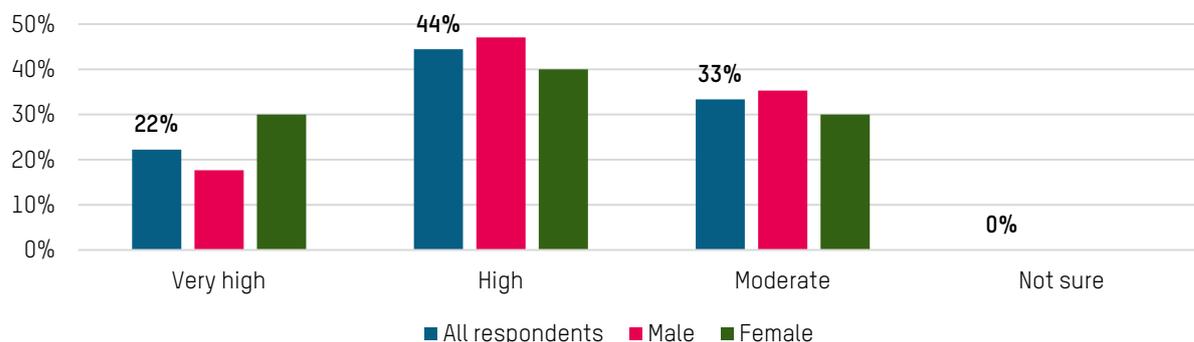
Data from the field also indicate severe impacts due to malnutrition. According to participants in the FGDs, there have been cases of morbidity and mortality among older women and children (FGDs with men and women, Akilo and Bathikajach payams). In some FGDs, participants said that some women have become infertile due to malnutrition, while newborn children weigh very little (FGDs with men and women in Golgothin). Both FGD and KII respondents reported that water sources were very dirty, as communities relied mainly on rivers and wells for water. This could lead to waterborne diseases having further impacts on health and nutrition. Cases of diarrhoea, malaria, typhoid and respiratory infections were all attributed to the poor quality of water. Sexually transmitted diseases were also mentioned on numerous occasions as a serious problem for women, including breastfeeding and lactating mothers. At the same time, women and men heads of family have reduced spending on health as a coping mechanism. There is also a lack of access to health services; these are generally of poor quality due to limited government capacity and difficulties in access for humanitarian organizations, given the poor roads and levels of insecurity and in Pibor the recent destruction of health infrastructure.

2.5 FOOD INSECURITY AND GENDER ROLES

Gender roles in both locations have been affected in different ways by food insecurity. The research found that the workload of women and girls has increased significantly in both Pibor and Akobo counties, as collecting firewood and wild foods and fetching water for sale have become important survival strategies during the crisis (this was mentioned across FGDs and KIIs). Some women are further engaged in petty trading in markets in order to earn money for household survival (KII respondents), while girls who have gone to the animal camps also carry out milking and grazing tasks. This is in addition to the usual responsibilities that women and girls have (including household work such as taking care of children and sick family members, cleaning and sweeping, fetching water, cooking, washing, pounding and grinding sorghum and collecting firewood¹⁷). When FGD participants were asked who they thought was doing more work owing to the food security situation, out of women, girls, men and boys, a large majority stated that it was mostly women. As one woman in an FGD in Akilo stated, 'Women are the busiest people in the family, as they are considered the household breadwinners.' The KIIs confirmed this (Figure 11), with 44% of interviewees perceiving the impact of food insecurity on the household tasks of women and girls to

be high (30% male and 14% female interviewees, though note that Figure 11 does not include a breakdown of numbers).

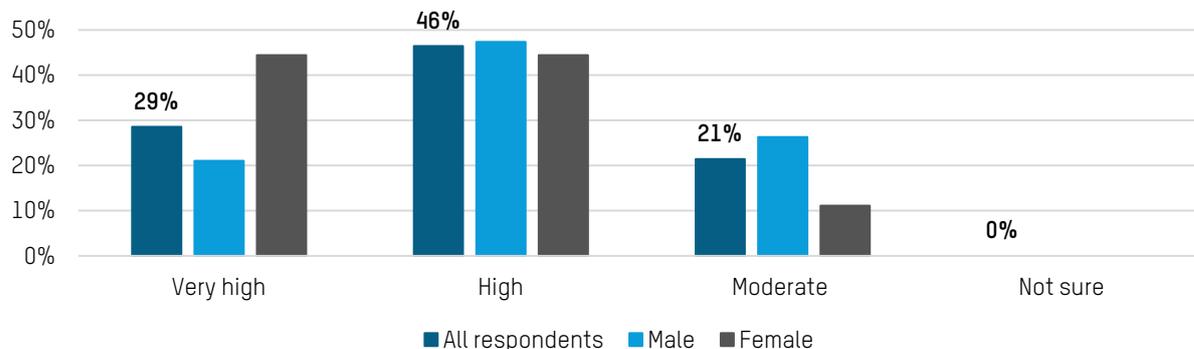
Figure 11: KII respondents’ perceptions of the impact of food insecurity on family chores of women and girls in Pibor and Akobo



By comparison, men and boys have not been affected to the same extent. Men were said to be staying at home without working – they do not go to the bush to collect firewood because they feel ashamed, considering this to be a woman’s role. There is also the risk that they could be killed in the bush, while the chances were that women and girls could ‘just be raped and not killed’, as members of a boys’ FGD in Barmach put it. This is in line with UNOHCHR’s reports on Jonglei, which found out that most of the casualties during the violence were men, while women mainly suffered rape and sexual enslavement.¹⁸ The major task for men and boys is looking after livestock. Similarly, an analysis of coping strategies among men and women shows that men tend to migrate more than women as food insecurity increases (as mentioned in the KIIs).

The crisis has increased gender inequality, with men controlling the most productive assets, making most of the decisions relating to food security and consumption and taking most of the employment opportunities, compared with women. As indicated by an evaluation report by the Government of South Sudan, men are regarded as the most dominant group in most social spheres and they control the most important productive assets and have the most power, privileges and authority.¹⁹ This has been reinforced by the food security crisis in Pibor and Akobo, as female participants in FGDs pointed out: most women are deprived of access to and control over productive resources (land, livestock, finances, farm inputs, etc.), as decision making rests solely with men. Women and girls have been restricted to the care economy, where they carry out exhausting and time-consuming household tasks such as collecting firewood or collecting wild fruits for sale to buy food for the household, further widening the gender equality gap. Just over 46% of KII respondents indicated that the impact of food insecurity on the social status of women and girls was high (Figure 12).

Figure 12: KII respondents’ perceptions of the impact of food insecurity on the social status of women and girls in Pibor and Akobo

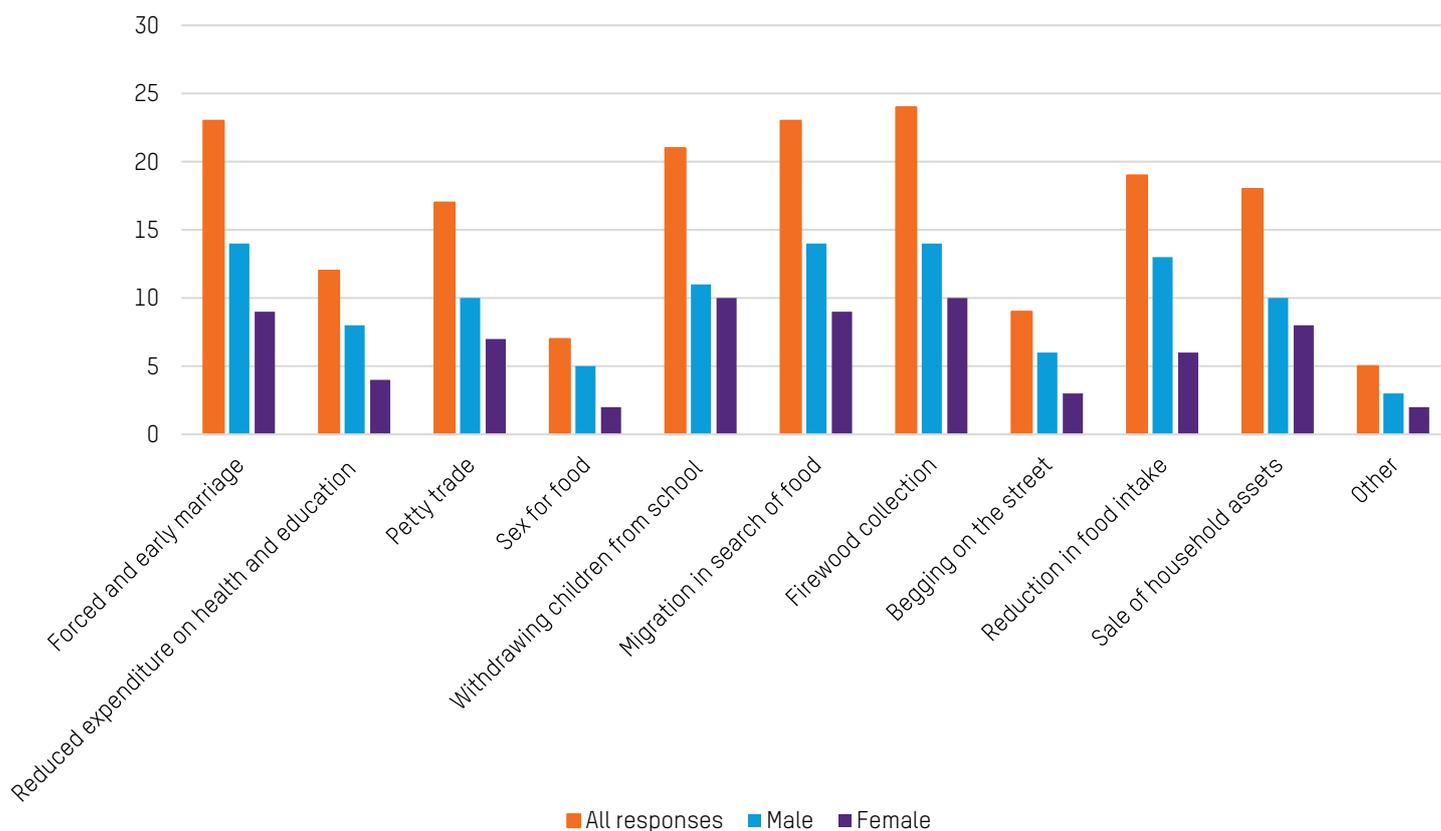


2.6 FOOD INSECURITY AND COPING STRATEGIES

As a result of their overwhelming food security needs, communities have adopted a variety of different coping strategies, depending on household resources and levels of shock and stressors. According to the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), South Sudan saw the biggest increase in the adoption of harmful coping strategies at the beginning of 2021, with the most common being a reduction in food intake (eating less preferred foods, limiting the size of meals, reducing adult consumption and eating fewer meals).²⁰ The FGDs for this study indicated that another significant coping mechanism was to borrow food or money from relatives; this was practised in Buong payam, as reported in FGDs for both men and women).

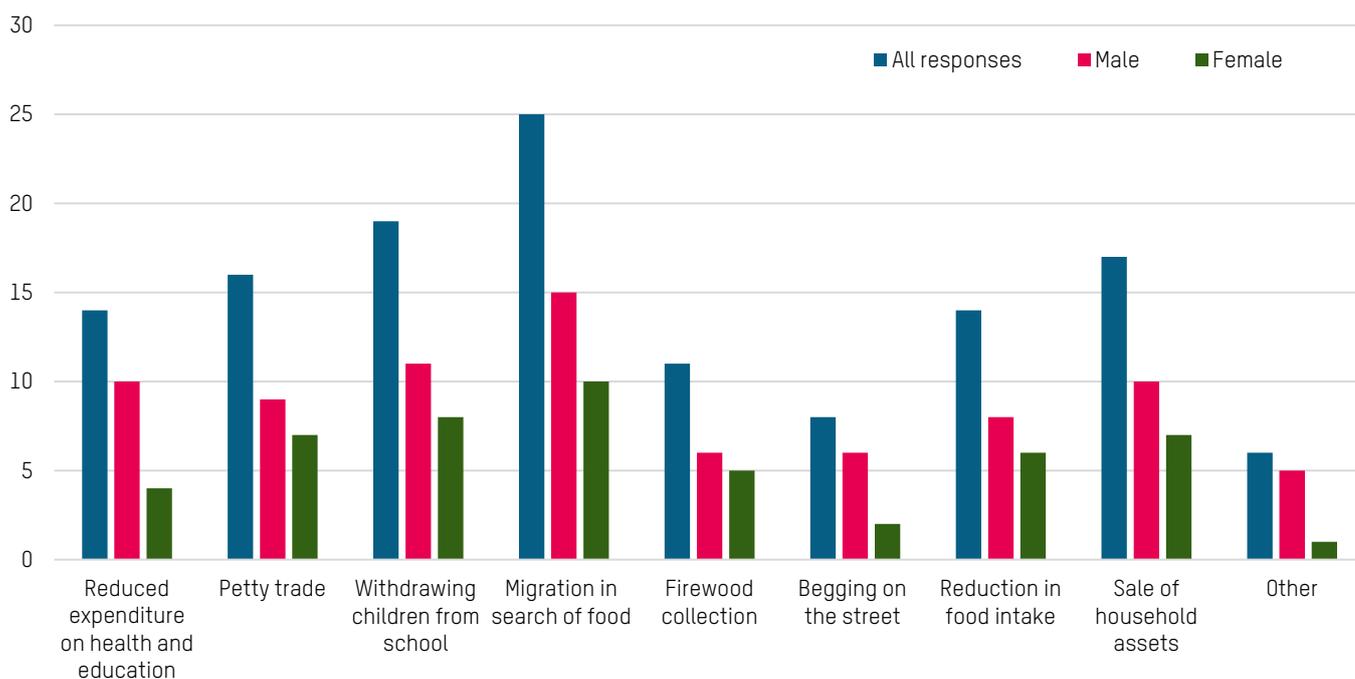
Consequently, consumption-related coping strategies have negative impacts on women and girls. For example, reducing food intake and relying on less expensive foods or eating wild fruits further affects their health and nutrition status, leading to weak immune systems and vulnerability to diseases. According to KII interviewees, the coping techniques most commonly adopted by women and girls were, in order of frequency, collecting firewood; forced and early marriage (though it should be noted that this is a decision mainly taken by parents, particularly fathers); migration in search of food; withdrawing children from school; reduction in food intake; sale of household assets; petty trading; begging on the streets; and exchanging sex for food, plus others (collecting firewood, or fruits in the forest – as per the FGDs). Figure 13 shows these different coping strategies, as reported by interviewees.

Figure 13: Coping mechanisms adopted by women and girls in Pibor and Akobo, as reported in KIIs



For men and boys, the most commonly adopted coping mechanisms were, in order of frequency, migration in search of food; withdrawing children from school; sale of household assets (cows, goats, sheep); petty trading; reduction in food intake; reduced expenditure on health and education; firewood collection; and begging on the streets (Figure 14). Male FGD respondents in Gumuruk reported that other traditional coping techniques included fishing, hunting and collecting wild fruits, though these are limited by a lack of fishing gear and by flooding.

Figure 14: Coping strategies adopted by men and boys in Pibor and Akobo, as reported in KIIs



With a focus on mainly negative coping mechanisms, a combined analysis of data from the KIIs and FGDs shows that consumption-related coping strategies such as reduced food intake, food rationing and skipping meals are the most commonly employed in both counties. The vast majority of FGD respondents mentioned reduced food intake and rationing as key survival strategies. In Pibor payam, male FGD participants said that households had adjusted the number of meals from two to one a day as food shortages mounted. In some cases, participants reported that children were being given priority over adults; as one participant underscored, at the same time illustrating household decision-making dynamics and clear gender roles: ‘I have ordered my wife to reduce and restrict food for adults, especially me and her’ (FGD for men in Menydekel, Pibor). In Akobo County, similar stories were told of reducing food intake and skipping meals: ‘We eat once a day, then none for the next two days’, said women participants in an FGD in Barmach, Akobo. Other negative coping mechanisms for boys and men were revealed to be drug abuse and cattle raiding (Diror payam, male FGD). These findings were confirmed by Oxfam’s forthcoming Gender and Protection analysis.²¹

These findings show the sale of productive assets (cows, goats, sheep, farm tools) to be the fourth most commonly adopted coping mechanism for women and girls and the third most utilized by men and boys. Selling these resources to the point of depletion is considered to be an adverse coping strategy as it undermines resilience to future shocks and stressors.

2.7 HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Humanitarian assistance plays a significant role in supporting the communities of Pibor and Akobo to survive the food security crisis. However, although humanitarian organizations have been supporting communities with relief services, most respondents stated that the assistance they received was too little, and at times it came too late, to meet the growing needs of the people. Too many households, including female-headed ones, have not received any assistance and are in critical need of food. Similarly, there are gaps in communication on targeting procedures for assistance, with male respondents complaining of being left off the distribution roll in favour of women; this could cause risks for women, and a clear communications strategy with a safe programming approach is needed.

Generally, when interviewees were asked whether organizations provided humanitarian assistance, most of the community leaders and institutional respondents said yes. In Akobo, all KII respondents said that their community did receive support. However, in Pibor, a minority suggested that they did not receive any humanitarian assistance. In some payams, community leaders and institutional respondents said that no relief aid had been delivered since mid-2021, including Golgothin and Gumuruk in Pibor County. Respondents also identified a number of national and international partners and the kinds of support they are providing to communities.

For humanitarian aid organizations working in Pibor, the main challenges to the delivery of adequate humanitarian assistance include poor accessibility due to flooding, poor road networks and insecurity. They also face financial and logistical constraints. The IPC Famine Review Committee has noted that since September 2020 WFP assistance in Pibor had been delivered mainly via airlift or airdrops. However, since October, only airdrops are possible due to flooding affecting airstrips, with Pibor, Gumuruk and Lekuangle being the main airdrop centres.²² That means populations living further away have to walk for one to two days to reach these distribution centres.²³ In terms of security, one institutional respondent in Pibor stated that the organization could not reach other payams of Pibor County because of security concerns, so they were confined to just Pibor payam.

2.8 HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

The most urgent needs mentioned by respondents in the two counties analysed relate to the timely provision of food and water of adequate quality and in adequate quantity. Both female and male respondents reported longstanding concerns around nutrition and food diversity. Respondents said that there was a need to diversify food sources from sorghum to include adequate maize and rice. Clean drinking water was also mentioned, and linked to health and nutrition. Other needs prioritized by respondents included farm tools, seeds and hand water pumps for agriculture and access to productive land, seeds and materials/implements for farming, especially for displaced female-headed households. Most respondents, both male and female, cited as important long-term structural priorities the need to improve access to productive land and other resources such as mechanized farm tools and livestock, water supply structures and segregated latrines for women and girls.

Women and girls mentioned the need for menstrual towels, underwear, pads, soap, cooking sets and learning materials. Boys mentioned the need for learning materials, while men identified buckets and plastic sheets needed for shelters. Respondents said that if these needs were met, households could save money that they could then use to buy food from nearby markets.

Cash distribution was also identified as an essential priority. Some female respondents preferred a cash-for-work approach. Oxfam's already existing cash transfer scheme was viewed very favourably by respondents as it allows households to buy their preferred food choices, while adding value and strength to the local economy by boosting the capacity of local petty traders (who are predominantly women). As a result, more cash distribution was requested to scale up income-

generating activities (IGAs) for women and girls. Women identified starting small businesses such as tailors' shops, petty trading and small-scale household gardening as ways to improve their economic conditions and resilience. Girls identified scholarships or cash for education as ways to overcome barriers to education for girls.

Female respondents also wanted more training for women in agriculture, trade, economic empowerment and leadership to help them improve crop yields, become effective in markets, increase their influence in decision making at community level on matters relating to food security, and set up small businesses to generate income. Women in Akobo requested the creation of women's savings groups or village savings and loans associations (FGD for women in Barmach, Akobo).

Lastly, reducing intercommunal violence to ensure the safety and security of farmers so that they can restart cultivation during the lean period was noted as being of crucial importance. Respondents suggested an approach to conflict resolution focused on changing attitudes through advocacy and awareness raising, combined with humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs. Security partners will need to play a key role in this.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GENDER-SENSITIVE PROGRAMMING BY NGOS, DONORS AND GOVERNMENT

Given these findings, the differential impacts on women and men, girls and boys, and the immediate as well as long term-needs of communities, the following recommendations are proposed for different areas of humanitarian programming.

FOOD SECURITY AND LIVELIHOODS

- Ensure that at least 50% of food security and nutrition funding directly supports women, with a specific focus on the most vulnerable (e.g. female-headed households), with clear communication in the community as to why this target group has been chosen and with risk analysis being conducted to ensure that a 'do no harm' approach is followed.
- Deliver livelihoods support through improving market access and providing seeds and tools (farm inputs) and training on livelihood diversification and better farming methods to stimulate production levels. This should be supplemented with food and livelihoods support for returning populations to enhance their integration into communities.
- Support the creation of women's savings groups, to be rolled out with support for men and general sensitization on changing roles within the household in order to reduce the incidence of intimate partner violence.
- Provide opportunities for income-generating activities in a gender-sensitive way, targeting more women while communicating with and sensitizing men on the reasons for targeting and ensuring a safe programming approach.
- Scale up unconditional cash assistance to poor households generally, with a specific focus on female-headed households across the assessed locations, conducting thorough risk assessments on the safety of such distributions.
- Support the creation of women's organizations and agricultural cooperatives and roll out capacity-building and training programmes on empowerment and advocacy on economic inclusion, GBV and other women's rights themes. Ensure sensitization of men and boys at the same time.
- Provide or support local manufacturing of fuel-efficient as well as solar stoves by women to mitigate risks of violence when collecting firewood. This could be an important alternative livelihood opportunity, alongside training and educating women on the development and management of wood lots.
- Scale up assistance to address deficits in food security, targeting women and girls, not just those assessed to be in IPC Phase 5 (Famine) but also those in IPC Phase 3 (Crisis) onwards. Food assistance should also support school feeding programmes for girls and boys to increase attendance.
- Pre-position commodities and stocks for humanitarian delivery in eastern parts of Pibor in order to rapidly respond to the needs of large numbers of displaced people.
- Scale up gender-sensitive livestock health intervention programmes by training new community animal health workers and expanding delivery of animal health services.

PROTECTION

- Establish or support the establishment of efficient referral systems in order to rapidly respond to food security-related protection risks or violations of the rights of women and girls.
- Continue to monitor the protection situation in areas where humanitarian WASH and EFSVL programmes are running and communicate to the community on the local partners available to provide GBV services.
- Support the organization and implementation of awareness campaigns on incidents of GBV and robbery related to food security.
- Play an advocacy role to duty bearers and peace partners at different levels of government, to prevent the resurgence of conflict by providing support to conflict resolution and peace-building mechanisms that address the root causes of the current conflict. This should be conducted with reference to UNSCR 1325, which emphasizes the role of women in peace-building, and the national action plan for implementation of the Resolution.

EDUCATION

- Support girls' education through cash-for-education projects or scholarship assistance, to enhance school enrolment rates. This should target female-headed households with girls in school. School feeding programmes should also be included.
- Provide tailored literacy courses for women to inspire them to acquire skills and professional qualifications in order to achieve social and economic integration and avoid exclusion based on educational levels.
- Build educational and vocational skills for girls and boys. This will boost their incomes and increase skill sets for more work and livelihoods opportunities.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

- Prioritize the delivery of life-saving health and nutrition services, including commodities of higher nutritional value, as a famine prevention measure in the affected payams. This should target in particular vulnerable female-headed households.
- Enhance the knowledge, skills and capacity of women, girls, men and boys and of local community leaders around nutrition-sensitive livelihood support.

GENDER JUSTICE

- Tackle the care burden of women and girls and ensure that it is redistributed among family members by holding sensitization sessions with men and boys on gender roles, as well as with women and girls.
- Support transformations in food systems that recognize women and girls as leaders in such systems and pave the way to equal access and rights in the food production and consumption chains.
- Advocate to other humanitarian and development partners to ensure that development and humanitarian funding supports gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

WASH

- Restore access to clean water and to an acceptable standard of sanitation for both IDPs and host communities. This can be done through the installation of water supply hardware, with participatory mechanisms for women, girls, boys and men.
- Ensure that latrines have lockable doors and are segregated. Consider also local customs to avoid communal resistance.
- Regularly distribute dignity kits for women and girls. Girls and women could also be trained on how to make reusable menstrual pads in the long term.
- Support health promotion activities and training on disease prevention, with emphasis on handwashing and water treatment for women, men, boys and girls.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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