

Gender, Vulnerability, and the Dynamics of Food Insecurity in Nigeria

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Abstract:

This study explores the dynamics of food insecurity in Nigeria, with a special focus on how gender intersects with vulnerabilities. Data were collected from purposively selected communities across six states, namely, Benue and Kwara (North-Central), Oyo and Osun (South-West), and Borno and Adamawa (North-East), using a mixed-methods design. This study evaluates the magnitude of food insecurity, gender variations in vulnerabilities, and adaptation mechanisms used by households. Findings reveal that rural-dwelling female-headed households are largely constrained in accessing land, credit, and other productive resources, thereby increasing their susceptibility to food insecurity. Moreover, societal norms, patriarchal ideologies, and practices further constrain women in accessing sufficient food for their households. Through the lens of the intersection between food insecurity and gender, the study contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable development and underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions that align with national and global development agendas.

Keywords: Food insecurity, Gender, Vulnerability, Household economy, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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1. Introduction

Food insecurity is still one of the major hindrances to human development in Nigeria, impeding efforts aimed at poverty reduction, social stability, and sustainable development. Recent data revealed that millions of Nigerians face moderate or severe food insecurity, with a projected higher prevalence over the next few years, especially, in rural areas (Berebon, 2025; FAO, 2023; Ayinde et al, 2020). Food insecurity is defined as the lack of consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food necessary for an active and healthy life. It extends beyond the lack of sufficient food but rather encompasses the factors of accessibility, utilisation, and sustainability (Baspakova et al, 2024; Sassi et al, 2018; Burchi & DeMuro, 2016). Although it has been largely connected with matters of food availability and physical accessibility, the sex dimensions of vulnerability and how it shapes individual and household experiences about food scarcity have received little emphasis. Most often, structural factors, including infrastructure, climate change, and market inefficiencies, have been postulated to inhibit food security in the Nigerian socioeconomic system. However, these factors do not affect everyone equally, as women face additional layers of vulnerability that emanate from low land ownership, low credit, and low decision-making power (Gana et al, 2024; Wood et al., 2021; Mukhtar & Abdullahi, 2020; Akinyele, 2009).

Consequently, the issue of food insecurity becomes a gendered phenomenon, with women disproportionately responsible for food production but still lacking sufficient decision-making power over productive resources. This is evident by assertions of the feminist and gender-sensitive approaches, which demonstrate that it is power relations, social institutions, and social norms that influence access to food and not merely individual needs alone (Njuki et al, 2023; Visser & Wangu, 2021; El-Rhomri & Domínguez-Serrano, 2019; Lewis, 2018). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as Zero Hunger (SDG 2) and Gender Equity (SDG 5), further reinforce the gender issue, emphasizing the need for both hunger elimination and decreased gender inequality (UN SDG, 2015). However, despite the global call and advocacy, women's marginalization in agricultural production is a major factor contributing to both

household and national food insecurity in Nigeria, where agriculture is still the prominent source of income for a large percentage of the people (Anugwa et al., 2023; Nnaji et al, 2022; Ajani, 2009). This marginalization persists despite the fact that women are both producers of food and primary child caregivers.

Understanding food insecurity through the lens of vulnerability offers deeper insights into these dynamics. A state of vulnerability refers not only to the susceptibility of individuals or communities to shocks like the increase in the price of food or crop failure due to climate change, but it is also sensitive to their ability to cope with or recover from adversity (Zhai & Lee, 2024; Estoque et al, 2023; Odunsi, 2020). Women's inability to accumulate assets and their weaker bargaining power in households hinders their ability to cope with food insecurity. This makes women more vulnerable than men. In addition, women's inferior material position is coupled with patriarchal norms that accord more importance to men's consumption needs, especially in times of scarcity (Nga-Ndjobo, 2023; Nnaji et al, 2022; Garcia, 2021; Ade, 2021). This is evident by the fact that women often adopt coping strategies shaped by socially constructed caregiving roles, which may result in disproportionate nutritional sacrifices, thereby often observed to go without eating or sharing quantities of their own food with their children, out of care for their children's well-being; a burden less commonly reported among men (Mkandawire, 2022; Sedlander, 2021).

This study is motivated by the need to transcend the use of aggregate indicators to explore the role of gender in influencing or mediating the issue of food insecurity in everyday life. Therefore, the study argues that it is imperative to understand that food insecurity in Nigeria cannot be fully understood without recognising the role of gender and understanding that both men and women are not placed in equitable relations in the household economy and socio-economic structures. Moreover, it posits that empowering women with resources, agency, and recognition can yield multiplier effects, which help household wellbeing and strengthen national resilience to food insecurity. Through a mixed-method approach, this study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What is the current state of food insecurity in Nigeria? (2) How does gender influence patterns of vulnerability within households? (3) What coping measures emerge, and how are they influenced by social and cultural context? In answering these questions, this paper aims to offer

both theoretical and practical contributions to existing research discussions related to food insecurity by positioning gender not as a peripheral concern but as central to any meaningful effort to achieve food security in Nigeria. The research has direct implications for Nigeria's broader development agenda and failure to reduce gender-related inequalities in the food system could lead to cycles of poverty, malnutrition, and vulnerability, thereby undermining progress on the various SDGs that Nigeria is trying to achieve.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Food insecurity in Nigeria is a complex phenomenon that requires a multidimensional theoretical framework. To provide context for this research, three concepts are used, namely: feminist political economy, vulnerability, and the capability approach. These frameworks work in tandem to provide an understanding of the relationship between gender and socio-economic structures in determining the vulnerability of communities to food insecurity.

❖ Feminist Political Economy:

Feminist Political Economy offers a methodology that can be used to examine critical issues about how people are integrated into production and excluded from it, as well as allocated to reproductive work, which forms the basic source of inequalities. It focuses on the household, family, community, and social reproduction rather than the state and market. Consequently, the framework posits that economic systems must be viewed as being embedded in gender-based power relations. While economics tends to generalize approaches for the household by viewing it as a unitary group, feminist scholarship argues that the role of the household is one of negotiation for power relations through conflict or unequal distribution of goods (Cantillon et al, 2023; Byrne, 2020; Agarwal, 1997). In the Nigerian context, patriarchal structures strengthen men's power over means of production, such as land, while women are left with the responsibility of food provisioning without commensurate access to resources (Amusan et al, 2021; Jaiyeola, 2020). While men enjoy economic power, women feel the effects of food production marginalization. Therefore, feminist political economy provides a theoretical framework through which the

marginalization of paid and unpaid women's labor is linked to the repetition of issues related to food insecurity and gender inequality.

❖ **Vulnerability Theory:**

Vulnerability theory developed by Martha Fineman in 2008, contends that all people are vulnerable and needy because of our embodied state and because of our incorporation into social life, leaving us all potentially vulnerable to harm. The theory displaces a traditional view of autonomy and calls for a shift in focus from individualism to collective care, stating that law and social institutions ought to actively protect those broadly considered vulnerable, such as children, women, aged citizens, and people with disabilities, rather than expecting them to be autonomous. The vulnerability theory provides another layer of interpretation for this study by emphasising susceptibility, responsiveness, or adaptive ability despite shock or stressful events (Shockley, 2023).

In the Nigerian context, households face numerous vulnerabilities, such as climate change, markets, and conflicts that dispossess communities. However, the vulnerability is not uniformly distributed. Women's limited income-earning opportunities, mobility, or lack of representation in decision-making platforms undermine their adaptive ability relative to men (Anugwa et al., 2023; FAO, 2023; Ade, 2021). For instance, when food prices rise, women tend to adopt adaptive capacities by consuming less to enable their children to eat, a coping mechanism that embodies the elements of resilience but at the same time deepens gender disparities in nutritional inequalities (Akukwe et al, 2023). The application of vulnerability theory explains not only who is more vulnerable but also the significance of gender disparity in highlighting outcomes related to food insecurity.

❖ **Capability Approach:**

The capability approach is a normative framework that comprehensively assesses and judges individual well-being and social circumstances, designs of policies, and claims of social change in society. Developed by Sen (1999) and further elaborated by Nussbaum (2011), it shifts the focus from resources to what individuals can do and be. It asks whether people have substantive

freedom to achieve well-being and positions that well-being is not solely a matter of having resources, such as income, but can be attained in terms of their conversion into valued functionings. As regards food insecurity, the capability approach lays emphasis on the fact that food availability is not enough, but also the freedom to obtain, prepare, and access healthy food. Therefore, the lack of women's capability, with limited opportunities for educational equity, property ownership, and social freedom, limits their freedom to achieve food security for themselves and their family members. Without economic freedom, women cannot buy healthy food even if it is available in markets, as social customs favour men and boys with respect to intra-household food allocation (Pemjean et al, 2024; Gulema et al, 2024; Quisumbing & Smith, 2007).

Based on these theoretical approaches, this study posits that food insecurity is a gender issue that is determined by structural inequalities, vulnerabilities, and capability differences. Feminist political economy helps explain the relationship between structural inequalities in power and access to resources. Vulnerability theory considers the differences in risk and abilities of men and women to cope with resource scarcity. The capability approach helps understand the inequalities negatively affect women's freedom to live their lives. This integrated framework assists the study in moving beyond the descriptive analysis of food insecurity to explore its complexities. Finally, it explains that gender must be viewed as a key organising concept for research on food insecurity in Nigeria.

3. Methodology

This study employs a convergent mixed-method research design, involving a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the gender dimensions of food insecurity in Nigeria. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, it is expected to provide a comprehensive insights into measurable patterns, lived experiences and the structural and relational dimensions of food insecurity.

Quantitative data collection involved administration of questionnaires to 420 households purposively selected across 18 communities distributed among six different states in Nigeria: Benue and Kwara (North-Central), Oyo and Osun (South-West), and Borno and Adamawa (North-East). Multistage sampling strategy combining purposive and stratified random sampling technique ensured representation across diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts.. Measures of food insecurity included Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) and Food Consumption Score (FCS), while descriptive data analysis (frequencies and percentages) was used to analyze quantitative data and to identify patterns across households and gender groups.

Qualitative data complemented the survey data. The data entailed the identification of lived experience about food insecurity and coping mechanisms adopted by individuals. Qualitative data were collected from 180 participants using FGDs and KIIs. FGDs were conducted with 120 respondents in focus group discussions (20 per state) across the six states, while KIIs were conducted on 60 respondents, including male and female household heads, community leaders, agricultural officers, and women cooperative members. Data collected qualitatively were thematically analyzed.

Data were collected from a sample of 600 participants (420 quantitative and 180 qualitative) in total. Considering that this study employed a convergent mixed-method research design, both datasets were analyzed independently and integrated during interpretation through a thematically driven synthesis, aligning statistical patterns with qualitative insights to generate meta-inferences. This approach enhances explanatory depth by situating food insecurity as a gendered and multidimensional phenomenon within broader socio-cultural, economic, and institutional contexts.

4. Ethical Considerations and Analysis

Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant institutional review boards, and consent was obtained from all participants. Data analysis used a convergent design methodology where results were presented both quantitatively and thematically, with quantitative findings presented alongside thematic insights from

interviews. By integrating numerical trends with participant voices, the research design methodology allows a complete understanding of gender vulnerability with respect to food insecurity in Nigeria.

5. Findings

This research highlights the complex and layered dynamics of food insecurity in Nigeria and reveals an important gender dimension. Through a combination of surveys and participants' narratives, the findings reveal both the structural and the lived realities of food insecurity vulnerability. The themes which emerged in this research work include food insecurity in Nigeria, gender dynamics of vulnerability, field voices, class, regional and cultural variations, and coping mechanisms and household strategies.

Food Insecurity in Nigeria

The findings reveal that food insecurity is widespread among the sampled households with about 60% reported moderate to severe food insecurity. This pattern is more pronounced in rural areas, where a greater percentage of households with higher levels of food insecurity compared to the urban areas. These findings suggest that rural households and subsistence farming households in particular face more constraints in securing access to food.

Comparison of food insecurity levels by household headship showed variation by gender, where 68% of female headed households were found to be severely food insecure, compared to 32% for male headed households. This suggests that within the sample of households, female-headed households exhibit greater food insecurity intensity than their male-headed counterparts. This may be due to the different levels of access to productive assets and sources of livelihood among household heads. This corroborates information from national and global reports that identify Nigeria as a hub of food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa (FAO, 2023).

Meanwhile, it was also discovered that disparities exist at a regional level, which is often a result of varying cultural, environmental and social patterns, beliefs and activities in different regions.. The North-East, composed of Borno and Adamawa States exhibited more than three-quarters of households as highly food

insecure. While the South-West, made up of the Oyo and Osun States had much lower proportion of the sample with moderate and no food insecurity but still significant. The North-Central, comprising Benue and Kwara States had intermediate level. These variations show that food insecurity, although a problem in the country, is not uniform in intensity and nature across regions.

Overall, the findings show that food insecurity is widespread but heterogeneously distributed across gender, geographical locations and rural/urban locations. The identified gaps suggest different levels of risk exposure and coping ability among the households to food security.

Gender Dynamics of Vulnerability

Although food insecurity can have wide impacts on households in general, gender differences appear in how both men and women are affected by this challenge. Results demonstrate gender-based differences in productive resource ownership and experience of food insecurity with 38% of women reporting secure access to land, compared to 62% of men. Access to formal credit follows a similar pattern with less than 20% of women able to obtain loans, compared to that of the men. While in most households men are considered the major earners and providers, women provide food and manage food security in these households. Such a challenge puts women at the centre of food security, however, women appear to have considerably less access to essential resources which enhance food productivity and raise incomes.

Variations are also evident in food consumption patterns within households. Women and men differ with regard to diet patterns with 41% of women admitted skipping a meal within the last month compared to just 17% of men. This suggests that when households have deficits, women more readily take the direct brunt of reducing food intake. Patterns suggest that not everyone in a household is equally likely to suffer in the face of food shortages, revealing that the impact of food insecurity is not evenly distributed within households. The implications of this extend beyond hunger to malnutrition, particularly among women of reproductive age.

The findings further show that although women play an essential role in provision and management of food at the household level, poor access to resources places significant constraints on their ability to perform this role. The women in this study group have high responsibility for food security and low control over achieving food security at the household level. These results point to gendered patterns of vulnerability in food security. The observed disparities in resource ownership and the noted difference in the pattern of food consumption indicated that women had less access to resources, and were likely to have direct sacrifices in diet and in coping with food shortages. These patterns reflect how household roles and resource access shape the experience of food insecurity within the study population.

Narrative Voices from the Field

Qualitative interviews have provided insights into the household-level dynamics of food insecurity. The field narratives echo the voices of the marginalized women and shed light on the emotional toll of coping with food insecurity. The participants revealed the pressing burden they often bear and their coping mechanisms. A 35-year-old mother of four in Adamawa explained: *‘When food is not sufficient, I reduce my consumption or go without food so that children can take their share. My husband tries his best, but the little he brings can in no way meet all expenses. As a mother, it is my responsibility to make a sacrifice. Similarly, a respondent in Oyo State explained her struggles with food insecurity due to inflation: ‘Even if food is in abundance at markets, it is very pricey. I am not able to get much. It is really frustrating to cook smaller portions and see the children hungry even after eating.’*

While men also complained, their complaints were very likely to be about the loss of provider status. A male farmer in Osun State explained, *"In our culture, a man is measured by how he can provide for his family. I am embarrassed when I am unable to bring food into the house. Often, my wife will have to sell some small item to make ends meet, and people see me as a failed man."* Taken together, these experiences make clear how food insecurity both interacts with gender roles to create not simply a problem of material need, but a problem of social suffering, which brings particular kinds of pain to both men and women.

Class, Regional, and Cultural Context

The results show that gender vulnerability is not fixed but is nuanced by class, region, and culture. In an urban setting such as Lagos, educated women with formal employment demonstrated lowered vulnerability since their formal employment protected them from increased food prices. However, in a rural setting, women with no formal education were more likely to engage in subsistence farming and informal trade, increasing their vulnerability. Meanwhile, regional disparities were evident in the North-East, where women living in displaced persons' camps were faced with very high levels of vulnerability, with some surviving through humanitarian aid. In this case, limited mobility and increased gender violence were some of the factors aggravating food insecurity. Additionally, findings show that the South-Western region saw higher levels of resilience among women engaged in cooperative societies, where sharing of resources allowed them to access credit and food.

Moreover, it became obvious that cultural factors were also important. The findings revealed that some patriarchal systems prevented women from participating in household expenditure decision-making. A respondent who lives in Benue commented thus: *"Even if I have some money from my small trade, I am not in a position to decide whether to use it for food without consulting my husband. At times, my children go without food because of this delay."* These show how food insecurity is not simply a gender issue but a problem requiring an understanding of how gender intersects with other social relations, including class, ethnicity, and geography. Understanding the intersectionality provides a methodology in which these complexities can be decoded to show how gender inequity results in different experiences of insecurity for different women.

Coping Mechanisms and Household Strategies

The coping mechanisms used by each household to mitigate food insecurity were also gendered, with women using methods such as food restriction, reducing portions, or resorting to cheaper but less nutritious options. In addition, other women engaged in informal employment such as petty trade or casual agricultural work, to supplement their incomes. However, these methods were associated with

some personal sacrifices, such as exhaustion and reduced time to take care of children. On the other hand, the coping strategies exercised by men included seeking wage labour migration and obtaining loans from friends and relations. Although these strategies could offer some sort of temporary respite, they also resulted in exposing their families to debt and economic volatility. This difference in strategies has occurred due to the division of labour based on gender, as women are shown to be household consumption managers and men are providers. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that cooperative societies and women's organisations were identified as resilience resources. For example, in the rural area of Kwara State, women reported that they save money collectively to purchase food in bulk, thus making it affordable and accessible. This grassroots approach indicates that collective efforts can be an effective remedy to deal with food insecurity, but it is impeded by lack of institutional supports.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Integration and Gendered Analysis

The study revealed that food insecurity in Nigeria is more than a matter of physical and economic access to food, but inextricably linked to gendered social relations, institutional power relations, and asymmetric resource access. Although food insecurity is widespread among various classes and geographical areas, available evidence indicates that it disproportionately impacts women due to constraints in access to resources like land, credit and decision-making processes. The study used the perspectives of the feminist political economy approach, theory of vulnerability and the capabilities approach to better understand such processes and found that food insecurity is not just an economic state, but also an indicator of power imbalances, varying risks of vulnerability, and constraints in capability to achieve well-being. The theories provide important insight into how gender shapes both food insecurity and what can be done to rectify these discrepancies.

❖ Feminist Political Economy: Structural Inequalities, Power, and Resource Access

Feminist political economy provides a framework to illustrate how women's patriarchal structures and inequalities in resource allocation create greater vulnerability to food insecurity. Even though women are at the center of the domestic food provision and care activities, ownership and access to the productive resources required to ensure food security at household level is predominantly in the hands of males. The inequalities in land ownership and access to credit reveal how structural inequalities determine participation and livelihood strategies where only 18% of the women reported exercising their rights. As a result, limited land ownership reduces the ability of women to invest in production, access credit or to expand livelihood activities. It is common for customary land tenure systems to favour the male gender, and for women to be dependent on male relatives for access to productive resources. As a result, the inequitable treatment meted out to women manifests itself in systemic constructs of power that accord greater priority to the claims made by the male gender over the use of land.

Similarly women's exclusion from formal credit systems reflects broader inequalities within agricultural markets and financial institutions. The dependence of credit institutions on collateral, and the reliance on formalization of property rights for credit access disproportionately exclude women. Women are largely limited to small-scale informal sectors and small-scale informal economic activities, which have lower economic returns, thus limiting their capacity to provide stable food access to their households. The narratives from participants further reveal the social consequences of these inequalities. While the respondents' statements about mothers going hungry for the sake of the children describe the nature of women's increased burden with care, men's expressions of shame and frustration when they are unable to provide food, illustrate the impacts of food insecurity on men's identities as primary breadwinners. The feminist political economy approach, therefore, shows that food insecurity and gender disparities are embedded within the systems that are connected with power and economics.

❖ **Vulnerability Theory: Exposure, Sensitivity, and Adaptive Capacity**

The vulnerability framework emphasizes food insecurity as a product of households' exposure to risks, sensitivity to shocks, and capacity to adapt. In the context of Nigeria, vulnerability to risks is exacerbated by inflation, war, and

climate-related issues. The results suggested that households residing in rural communities and those living in the war-affected areas in the North-East were especially vulnerable to the crisis due to the unstable environment, lack of security and displacement, while those in the South-West appear to have been resilient to shocks due to the support provided by the cooperatives.

Sensitivity to food insecurity is gendered. Women tend to be more susceptible to food insecurity because they bear the responsibilities of providing care for children and the other household members. The higher proportions of women skipping meals as a coping mechanism indicated that the impact of lack of food has often been transferred to women through food deprivation. Differences in adaptive capacities is again evident in differences of coping strategies employed by men and women. Women were more likely to resort to coping strategies such as food rationing, petty trading and small labour market for the consumption demands of the household whereas men were more likely to adopt coping strategies such as migration and loans. These adaptive mechanisms were all short-term measures but increased risks and vulnerabilities such as child malnutrition, debt and economic uncertainty for the households.

Similarly, there were differences in outcomes on the basis of region and social classes of women. Women in war-affected areas seem to face the intersection of vulnerability on account of displacement and insecurity, the reliance on humanitarian aid and support. However, women that belong to a cooperative society in the South-West appeared to have greater coping capacity due to collective support. These variations show that vulnerability is context-specific and influenced by the interaction of gender, geography, livelihood systems, and social conditions.

❖ **Capability Approach: Agency, Dignity, and Wellbeing**

Rather than focusing on mere ownership of resources, the capability approach reconfigures the focus on peoples' abilities to attain desirable states of well-being. Food insecurity is postulated to impact people's capability to achieve their lives as they value them by depriving them of not only food but also their dignity and

agency as social beings. The findings indicate that women's capabilities are constrained by not only their scarcity of resources but also unequal power structures in household decision-making. Additionally, the women's patterns of food allocation indicate that women always cater for the needs of their children and the rest of the family members prior to their nutritional well-being. Such caring and responsive behaviour also underscores a display of bargaining constraints and lack of autonomy in household management. These sacrifices made by women can be seen as resilience, yet they also reveal a denial of basic capabilities.

Furthermore, limited ownership and control over resources also translates into a lack of women's ability to participate effectively in decision-making about household food allocation, health expenditures and investments. Similarly, even if women are economically resourceful and take part in activities such as petty trade or farming, social norms often prevent women from exercising their power within household decisions, consequently food insecurity severely compromises women's ability not only to achieve physical well-being, but also the freedoms to attain education, engage in business activities, and achieve greater quality of life. On the flip, men's capabilities are also influenced in a variety of ways. Inabilities to play roles that are expected of male breadwinners often cause shame and a lack of dignity on the men, implying a lack of well-being in an emotional sense.

Intersectionality and Differentiated Vulnerabilities

Although gender remains a fundamental focus of analysis, the conclusion of the study warns that it is not appropriate to consider women as a homogenous group. An analysis of vulnerability through an intersectional lens points out that the nature of vulnerability varies depending upon class, region and cultural norms. For example, women in urban areas, in formal employment, stable source of income and consequently less prone to food insecurity, can be seen less vulnerable than rural women whose subsistence agriculture and informal work puts them in a precarious situation. Similarly, the vulnerability that women in IDP camps face is due to limitations in their mobility, insecure environment and external dependency, while women within cooperative networks are more resilient due to the collective savings they have in banks, their resources shared within groups and their social network. These examples explain that women are not a group that can be treated identically when food security policies are implemented. By implication, effective

responses must therefore recognise how gender interacts with other dimensions of inequality to produce different experiences of vulnerability.

Food Insecurity, Gender, and the Sustainable Development Goals

The findings also illustrate the close links between food security, gender equity, poverty reduction and sustainable development. For instance, sustainable Development Goal 2 aims to overcome hunger and ensure food security, but it will not be achievable without addressing inequality between women and men (SDG 5). On the other hand, Sustainable Development Goal 1 aims for the eradication of poverty and Sustainable Development Goal 10 regarding inequality is also related to food security outcomes. Therefore, the continuing gap in access to productive resources and decision making processes, keeps the Sustainable Development goals from being achieved. This is reflected in the participants' emotional and social well-being accounts, which demonstrate the extent to which food insecurity evolves beyond basic survival; including anxiety, stress and exclusion and can impact the well being of individuals and society. Therefore, achieving the SDGs requires integrated strategies that recognise food security as both a gendered and multidimensional challenge.

7. Implications for Policy and Practice

Several important policy approaches are identified as imperative in resolving the food insecurity issues prevalent in Nigeria. The findings indicate that multidimensional, gender-responsive policy interventions are required in reducing food insecurity in Nigeria. Because access to resources, institutional constraints and socio-cultural conventions determine people's vulnerability to food insecurity, policy interventions must move beyond direct food assistance to respond to the structural causes of persistent insecurity.

By implication, interventions aimed at improving women's access to productive resources must be prioritized. Ensuring women have secure ownership of land, inputs, credit, extension services and technology increases women's productive capacity and minimizes their dependence on potentially harmful coping strategies. In the same vein, it becomes important that reforms to the law and institutions are required to combat discriminatory land tenure practices. This is

essential to ensure the empowerment of women to better take care of their families and stop reliance on precarious strategies to ends meet.

Food security interventions must be gender-responsive and be context-specific according to region, class and cultural traditions when implementing any mechanism to address the issues of food insecurity. The ways in which rural people, displaced persons and those affected by conflict suffer from food insecurity must be taken into account, leading to targeted interventions that suit the locality and livelihood circumstances. Additionally, improving the functionality of women's cooperatives and other community-based support systems would enhance household level resilience. Cooperative systems increase access to information, credit, the markets and the provision of social support.

Enhancing social protection programs with a gender perspective is also important. These programs will include conditional cash transfers, school feeding programs, subsidized agricultural inputs and targeted food assistance for the most vulnerable people, particularly women headed households and displaced populations. Moreover, targeted food assistance in conflict areas would need to be accompanied with protections against gender-based violence and insecurity.

Similarly, in light of intensifying vulnerability from global climatic changes, responsive agricultural policy would need to continue addressing this vulnerability through investment in drought-resistant technology, irrigation systems, appropriate seeds and improved land use methods, and women need to be involved in the design of such programs due to their roles in household provisioning. These results suggest that a purely economic based approach would adequately not address the problem of food insecurity, therefore plausible solution to gendered food insecurity dynamics will require integrated strategies that combine gender equity, institutional reform, social protection, and community resilience.

8. Limitations of the Study

Despite the useful findings obtained in this study, certain inherent limitations exist. First, the use of purposive and stratified sampling design across a number of communities has constrained the generalisability of the findings to the

whole Nigerian populace. Although the study has considered different aspects of gender and food security across some regions of the country, it has not adequately explored the different cultural and socio-economic context of Nigeria as a whole. In similar vein, the cross-sectional nature of data collection has prevented the ability to establish a causal relationship between gender and food insecurity. The findings can only portray a given situation at one specific point and thus do not effectively capture seasonal variations and trends of food insecurity and vulnerability.

Thirdly, though the mixed-methods approach enhances the breadth and depth of the findings, the reliance on self-reported information is potentially susceptible to response bias. Respondents could potentially underreport or over-report their experiences of food insecurity and vulnerability in their households, particularly regarding intra-household distribution and coping mechanisms due to social desirability and recall problems as a function of both time and topic sensitivity. Additionally, the qualitative phase although providing richer insights in terms of context and real-life experiences, it is based on a smaller sample and does not necessarily capture all the diversity of lived experiences along gender, class and regional groups. Moreover certain vulnerable groups, including populations especially those in highly insecure or inaccessible areas (e.g. Conflict areas) might have been underrepresented.

Lastly, the study primarily focuses on gender as a central analytical lens, which may have limited deeper exploration of other intersecting factors such as ethnicity, religion, and disability that also shape vulnerability to food insecurity.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between food insecurity and gendered vulnerability in Nigeria using a mixed-methods approach grounded in feminist political economy, vulnerability theory, and the capability approach. The findings demonstrate that food insecurity is not simply a problem of inadequate food supply, but a multidimensional issue shaped by structural inequalities, social norms, and unequal access to resources.

It also reveals that women experience disproportionate vulnerability because of limited access to land, credit, and decision-making power despite their central role in household food provisioning. Women's coping strategies frequently involve personal sacrifices that negatively affect their health and well-being, while men experience social and emotional pressures associated with provider expectations. These experiences vary across regions and socioeconomic groups, particularly within rural and conflict-affected communities.

The findings also demonstrate that food insecurity is both structural and relational. Structurally, inequalities in resource ownership, agricultural systems, and institutional support create uneven opportunities for securing food. Relationally, household power dynamics and cultural expectations shape how food insecurity is experienced and managed within families.

By integrating gender analysis with broader discussions of vulnerability and capability, this study contributes to understanding food insecurity as a social and developmental challenge that requires comprehensive and context-sensitive responses. Addressing food insecurity in Nigeria requires policies that not only improve food availability but also reduce inequalities, strengthen social protection, expand women's agency, and support sustainable livelihoods.

Ultimately, meaningful progress toward food security and sustainable development will depend on gender recognition as a central factor in shaping vulnerability, resilience, and access to well-being.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following are the key recommendations:

1) Strengthen Women's Access to Productive Resources: Land rights, credit, and agricultural extension services must be given due importance to women. When women gain direct access to productive resources, it is anticipated that it would diminish their dependence on vulnerability coping strategies and improve

their household food security. Furthermore, legal reforms, along with awareness campaigns, should be implemented to eliminate restrictions against women's participation in land ownership.

2) Support Gender-Sensitive Agricultural Policies: Gender impacts should be factored into agricultural policies' design and execution. Seed distribution programs, irrigation projects, and projects to improve market access should also incorporate female farmers who are often left behind despite their major contributions to food production.

3) Encourage and Support Coping Strategies at the Community Level: Women's cooperative societies have been identified as an important factor in building resilience. Policy-level support can help strengthen and enhance cooperative societies by providing microfinance, training facilities, and infrastructure. These cooperatives also help create settings for mutual support, allowing women to collectively bargain for better terms and advocate for their rights.

4) Integrating Food Security with Overall Development Initiatives: There is a need to integrate food insecurity needs with initiatives aimed at meeting overall sustainable development, specifically Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities). It is necessary to recognise linkages between hunger, poverty, inequality, and improved health.

5) Strengthen Social Protection Programs: Safety nets, including conditional cash transfer programs, school feeding programs, and food assistance targeting specific vulnerable communities, including women-headed households, need to be expanded. In the case of displaced women in conflict zones, food assistance must extend to protection from Gender-Based Violence.

6) Strengthen the Call for Cultural Change and the Role of Women: To devise sustainable solutions to this issue, advancing transformations in the concerned culture to retain gender equality in the distribution of food or decision-making processes is important. Engaging with the concerned social and religious leaders may also facilitate the acceptance of gender equity reforms.

7) Support Climate-Resilient Agriculture: With the situation of food insecurity worsening because of climate change, there is a need to increase support for climate-resilient agricultural practices, including drought-tolerant crops and water conservation methods, and agroforestry, among others, and women, who are most affected, must be put at the forefront of such plans.

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