



## GUIDANCE NOTE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTORS IN GAZA

### UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN FOOD SCARCITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

June 2025



The Gaza Strip is experiencing one of the most severe food security crises globally, with the entire population of approximately 2.1 million people now facing crisis-level food insecurity or worse (IPC Phase 3+). As of May 2025, more than one in five Gazans—about 470,000 people—are at risk of starvation (IPC Phase 5: Catastrophe), while over half are classified in Emergency (IPC Phase 4). This marks a significant deterioration compared to just one month earlier and reflects the impact of a comprehensive blockade that has restricted all humanitarian and commercial supplies since early March. Vital goods have been depleted, food prices have skyrocketed by over 3,000 percent in some areas, and coping mechanisms have all but collapsed, forcing many to scavenge for food or go without entirely. Acute malnutrition has reached serious levels and is projected to worsen, particularly in North Gaza, Gaza, and Rafah, where critical levels are expected between May and September 2025.<sup>1</sup>

Looking ahead, the food security situation is projected to decline further, with a high risk of Famine (IPC Phase 5) if current conditions persist. The recently announced Israeli distribution plan for food and non-food items is unlikely to meet essential needs or reach most of the population due to severe access constraints. At the same time, continued hostilities, mass displacement, the collapse of essential services—including water, sanitation, health, and food systems—and the breakdown of social order threaten to push Gaza beyond the famine threshold.

Urgent, sustained humanitarian access, restoration of commercial supply lines, and an immediate ceasefire are essential to avert further loss of life and irreversible harm. Without these, the projected scenario could result in catastrophic outcomes across the entire Gaza Strip.<sup>2</sup>

Food scarcity and the cooking energy crisis not only undermines physical health and survival—it also deepens gender inequality and exacerbates risks of gender-based violence (GBV), especially for women and girls. This guidance note is designed for GBV case managers in Gaza to better understand the relationship between food insecurity and GBV and outlines practical steps to support survivors and those at risk of violence in this complex context.



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<sup>1</sup> [IPC Global Initiative Special Snapshot Gaza, May 2025](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

## Understanding the Link Between Food Insecurity and GBV

Academic and humanitarian literature consistently highlights a strong correlation between food insecurity and GBV. In conflict-affected and fragile contexts, famine and acute food shortages act as multipliers of vulnerability, increasing women's exposure to various forms of violence. A study by Epstein et al. (2020) analyzing 19 countries found that severe drought—a proxy for food insecurity—was linked to a 29% increase in reported sexual violence and a 15% rise in physical intimate partner violence (IPV). The research attributes this to multiple pathways: the strain on household dynamics, shifting gender roles, and heightened dependency on external actors for food and resources.

In Gaza, these dynamics are starkly visible. Food insecurity not only elevates the risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) within households but also exposes women and girls to exploitation during their search for food and at aid distribution points. The GBV Case Management Task Team continues to

see an increase in the number of reported cases of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), survival sex, and early marriage as coping mechanisms in the face of hunger.<sup>3</sup>

The collapse of basic services in Gaza has stripped women and girls of critical protection and support. With law enforcement institutions weakened to the point of total collapse, survivors have little recourse to justice. Overcrowded shelters increase tensions and reduce privacy, leading to a spike in domestic violence. In displacement settings, where women often carry the burden of securing food and water, their movement through unsafe areas exposes them to harassment, assault, and exploitation.<sup>4</sup> Widows, adolescent girls, and female-headed households are particularly at risk.

GBV is not merely a consequence of food insecurity; it can also manifest itself through deprivation. Denial of food or control over food access within families has been identified as a form of violence. In abusive relationships, food may be used as a means of coercion, further disempowering women and entrenching dependency on abusive husbands or other male relatives.



<sup>3</sup> [GBV AoR, GBV Snapshot, Gaza, April 2025](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Ibid](#)

## How Food Insecurity Increases GBV Risks

### 1. GBV as a Consequence of Household-Level Food Scarcity

When households face chronic food shortages:

- Tensions and conflict within the home increase, often escalating into intimate partner violence (IPV), particularly when men feel their provider role is threatened.
- Women are blamed for unmet expectations of feeding children and managing household needs—despite having limited control over food access.
- Economic stress reduces household resilience and may lead to coercive coping strategies, such as exchanging sex for food or money ("survival sex") and pushing young girls into marriage to reduce family size with the purpose of reducing pressure on the head of the family.

In some cases, food deprivation itself is used as a tool of control. For example, abusive partners or family members may deliberately deny women or girls access to food as a form of punishment,

coercion, or subjugation—this constitutes economic violence, a recognized form of GBV.

### 2. Exposure to GBV During the Search for Food and Cooking Energy

As food as well as cooking energy becomes increasingly inaccessible:

- Women and girls are forced to travel longer distances and into unsafe areas to search for food, water, cooking fuel, or aid - further exposing them to harassment, assault or rape.
- Female-headed households, already overburdened, are particularly vulnerable to predation during these searches, especially when resources like transportation, safe shelter, or male accompaniment are unavailable.

The act of seeking food often occurs outside protection systems and in forced displacement ordered areas, and in the absence of community oversight - creating impunity for perpetrators.

### 3. GBV at Points of Aid Distribution

Even lifesaving humanitarian aid can become a source of harm:

- Food distribution sites are frequently overcrowded, chaotic, and unprotected - leaving women and girls vulnerable to sexual harassment or assault while queuing.
- Aid workers, guards, or community leaders may exploit power asymmetries, demanding sex in exchange for food or access to other aid supplies including cash (a form of sexual exploitation and abuse - SEA).
- The journey to and from food distribution points can be equally dangerous. Women carrying food may be targeted by those that were not able to access similar, who may then demand sexual favors or exploit their vulnerability.

In some settings, the fear of GBV has discouraged women from accessing aid altogether, trapping them in cycles of hunger and isolation.

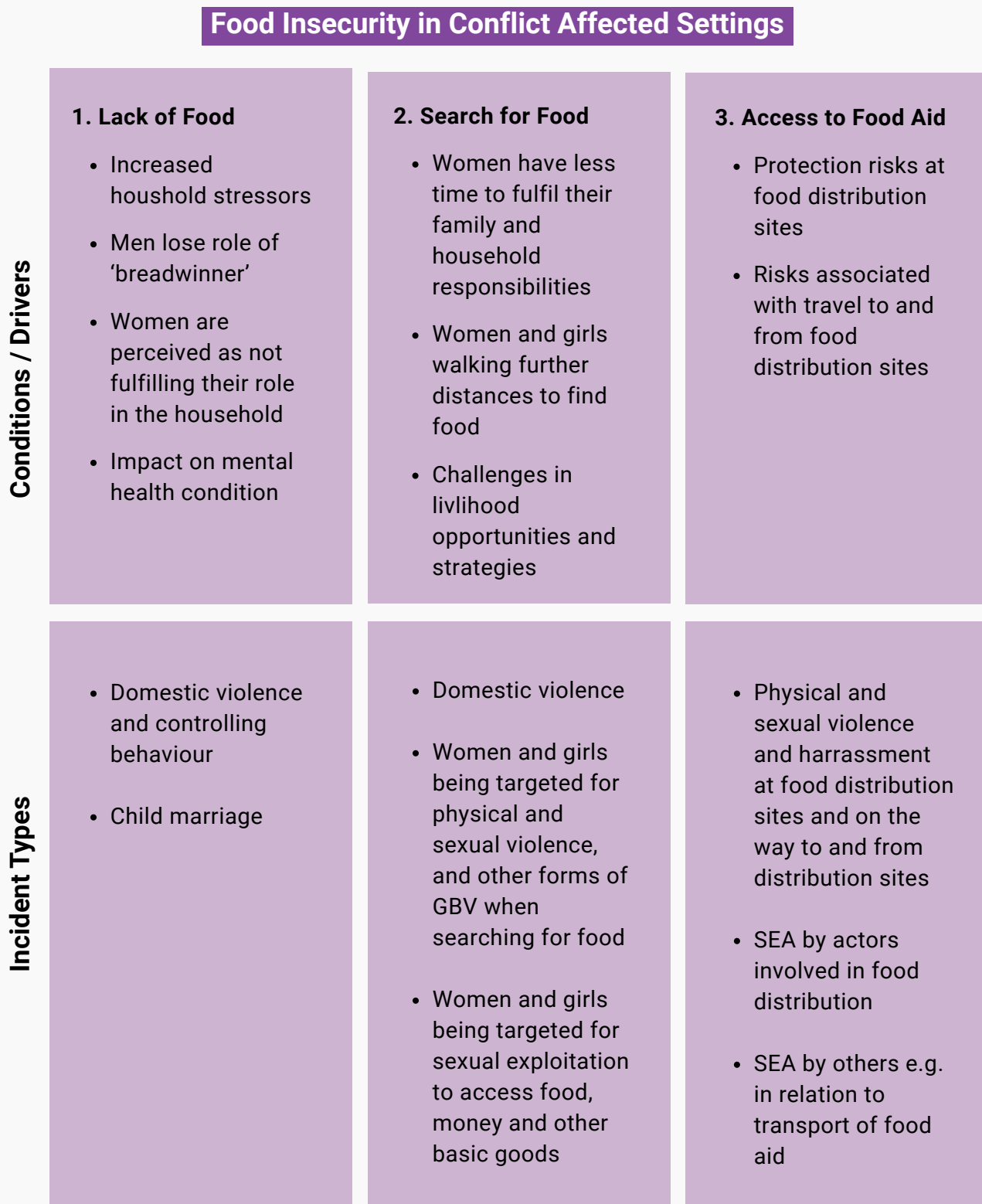
### 4. Famine as a Multiplier of Structural and Gendered Inequality

Famine conditions trigger or accelerate GBV in other structural ways:

- Child marriage increases as families seek to reduce the number of mouths to feed or obtain dowries. Girls are disproportionately forced to marry during food crises.
- Transactional sex becomes normalized in the absence of alternative income or support networks.
- Widows, divorced women, and adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation due to their limited social protection.
- The near collapse of health and social services—as in Gaza—means survivors of violence have are limited in being able to safely report or seek care, compounding trauma and perpetuating impunity.



**Diagram 1: Food Insecurity in Conflict Affected Settings<sup>5</sup>**



<sup>5</sup> [GBV AoR Help Desk, Research Query: Brief Overview of Research, Evidence and Learning on the Links between Food Insecurity and Gender-Based Violence in Conflict Affected Settings Veronica Ahlenback | November 2021](#)

## For more information on the GBV AoR

The GBV AoR, led by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), is a global forum for coordinating and collaborating on GBV prevention and response in humanitarian settings. The group brings together NGOs, UN agencies, donors, academics, and independent experts who share the goal of ensuring more predictable, accountable, and effective GBV prevention and response in emergencies. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPT), the GBV AoR is coordinating efforts of partners to meet affected populations in Gaza and the West Bank.

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