



REGIONAL BUREAU BANGKOK



**SAVING
LIVES
CHANGING
LIVES**

Gender and Diversity Inclusion Brief

United Nations World Food Programme Tajikistan

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) Tajikistan's current five-year Country Strategic Plan (CSP) (2019-2024) focuses on supporting national social protection and safety nets, nutrition, climate change adaptation, resilience-building and disasters risk reduction, whilst aligning to national priorities and in synergy with the action of other partners in an inclusive manner that leaves no one behind. To achieve its mandate of Zero Hunger, WFP Tajikistan recognizes the importance of ensuring gender equality, women's empowerment and diversity inclusion mainstreaming in all its activities, to ensure that the different food security and nutritional needs of men, women, boys and girls of diverse groups are addressed.

WFP Tajikistan has conducted a Gender and Diversity

Inclusion Analysis on its operations, in adherence to the WFP Protection and Accountability Policy, the WFP Gender Policy, Disability Inclusion Roadmap and three of the guiding principles of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework¹:

- i) leave no one behind;
- ii) apply a human rights-based approach to development;
- iii) promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

The key objectives of this Gender and Diversity Inclusion Analysis are:

- To analyze how sociocultural gendered roles and relations, as well as cross-border instability and various shocks such as natural disasters, economic downturn and

¹ <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/In-Brief-UN-Sustainable-Development-Cooperation.pdf>

COVID-19 can influence and/or affect an individual's and/or group's food security and nutrition outcomes, and

- To inform strategic and programmatic planning processes for the development of the new WFP Tajikistan Country Strategic Plan (2023-2026) to strengthen WFP's efforts on transformative Gender and Diversity Inclusion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study comprised of a mixed methodology including:

- i) a secondary desk review;
- ii) stakeholder consultations;
- iii) semi-structured Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).

The study was undertaken during September to November 2021 across Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), Khatlon, Sughd and Districts of Republic Subordination (DRS-Rasht and Dushanbe).

Five (5) FGDs were undertaken across the following four population groups: young women (18-30 years), older women (31-60 years), men (18-60 years) and mixed groups of men and women across each of the four regions. An FGD with diverse populations consisting of people with disabilities and those of ethnic minority groups was added in GBAO and DRS. Semi-structured KIIs were also undertaken with government stakeholders, international organisations, NGOs, as well as with representatives from local civil society organisations working with women, girls and people with disabilities. Limited data is available on ethnic minorities and refugees in Tajikistan. It is important to note that data collection in Isfara, Sughd, was limited due to ongoing border conflict sensitivities.

KEY FINDINGS

The analysis of the key findings in relation to gender and diversity is across the following key thematic areas: livelihood and resilience, education, food security and nutrition, shock-responsiveness, and conflict sensitivity.

Livelihood and Resilience

Seventy-five (75) percent of people in the country live in rural areas and work in the agricultural sector.² Fifty-three (53)

percent of economically active population in the agricultural sector are women.³ Female FGDs participants reported receiving low wages and salaries and no social protection benefits, such as maternity leave or pension payments, despite numerous hours of physical agricultural labour. Women's lower educational levels and professional qualifications, in addition to their lower capacity to access assets, influences their access to paid economic opportunities, rendering them increasingly vulnerable and disempowered and contributes to an increased feminization of poverty.⁴⁵

During the FGDs with people with disabilities, participants in both urban and rural areas reported facing discrimination to engage in employment opportunities and fully integrate as active members of their society and are thus, often found to be in the most economically vulnerable situations, resulting in their increased dependency on other family members. In some areas, NGOs and/or local civil society organisations (CSOs) provide psychological and financial support to people with disabilities, as well as support to learn skills.⁶

Women spend 70 percent of their time in unpaid roles and domestic work, compared with their male counterparts who spend approximately the same proportion of their time in paid work.⁷

The majority of men noted during FGDs that men aged 18-60 years, particularly in rural areas, generally leave Tajikistan in search for better paid opportunities. FGD and KII respondents noted migration as the only option for adolescent men aged 17-19 years, due to their lack of desire to work in the fields and an increased socialization from friends, social media and their community to '*see the world*' and '*become independent*'. Women's migration has increased over the past years, as some accompany their husbands abroad as a means to cope with poverty.⁸

Men noted during FGDs that men who remain in Tajikistan tend to engage in private sector employment such as car repairs, car wash, construction and/or sales, besides agricultural work. FGD respondents noted that women are increasingly involved in subsistence and commercial farming; because most women do not own the land, there is therefore a need to work on their family's land or private land in exchange for cash or agricultural goods. Further to this, FGD participants

² Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2016. *Sector Assessment (Summary): Agriculture and Natural Resources, Country Partnership Strategy – Tajikistan 2016 – 2020*. Manila

³ *Idem*

⁴ Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2018. *Institutional Development of the State Agency for Hydrometeorology of Tajikistan. Gender Assessment*. Tajikistan

⁵ Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2020. *Women's Time Use in Rural Tajikistan*

⁶ Association of Parents with children with disabilities (Dushanbe), Resource Center 'Incluzyia' (Khorog), NGO Iroda (Dushanbe), National association of deaf people (Dushanbe) Civil Society Organization of youth with disabilities 'Noil' (Dushanbe) National Association of blind people (Dushanbe), Women with disability 'Safai Konibodom' (Sughd), League of women with disabilities (Dangara)

⁷ *Idem*

⁸ World Food Programme (WFP). 2018. *Gender Analysis in Tajikistan*

reported sewing traditional clothes and embroidery as common livelihood activities for women in rural areas. According to key informants however, these activities tend to be highly competitive due to many other women possessing the same skills. FGD participants noted that women are also able to engage in teaching jobs, work as healthcare providers and nurses in rural areas, whereas their urban counterparts engage in activities such as salespersons, housekeepers, taxi/bus drivers, childcare and nursery staffs, or manage their own small businesses.

FGD participants noted that married women have limited decision-making power on their engagement in employment opportunities. For example, in Rasht, FGD participants noted that women are expected to stay at home and occupy unpaid and domestic roles, such as looking after their children and/or the elderly. In GBAO and Sughd, FGD participants noted that women have higher educational levels and are able to seek employment opportunities. Further to this, during FGDs with women, those living closer to the city centre in Dushanbe noted that they are able to engage in both paid and unpaid work, whereas women living on the outskirts noted their inability to engage in other activities outside of the household.

“

I work as a cleaner at school. My son is in Russia and sends money when he can but to make it easier for him, I still work. My daughter-in-law has two small children and does the household work.

”

- Female, 69 years old, Rasht

Depending on the socioeconomic status of the household, older female FGD participants noted that they may also be required to engage in work activities to provide food for their families, but the majority do not engage in household chores as it is perceived to be the responsibility of their daughter- or daughters-in-law.

Education

Despite high enrolment rates for school-aged girls and boys in primary school⁹, FGD participants noted a decline of girls' participation in school beginning from grade six. Parents noted during FGD discussions that boys' education is often prioritized over girls' education, given that men bring more financial benefits to the family. In rural areas of Khatlon and Rasht, parent FGD participants placed minimal importance on girls' education, especially after the age of 14. In Dushanbe, Sughd

and GBAO, FGD participants reported that both boy and girl school-aged children complete their secondary education in all regions except for GBAO, where the future of girls is solely associated with marriage.



Traditional sociocultural gendered norms are known to dictate that husbands should be more educated than their wives, discouraging girls from becoming educated to avoid jeopardizing their marriage prospects.¹⁰

“

My brother wanted me to stop going to school after I turned 13. My father supported the idea and after I turned 14, I stopped (going to school). My mother also stopped going to school when she was the same age, so she was fine with it...My mother told me if I know how to read and write that is enough because when I get married, I will be able to help my children do their homework. What else would I do with education?

”

- Female, 18 years old, Khatlon

Despite marriage being illegal under the age of 19, female FGD participants noted young women dropping out of school early for marriage as common due to social expectations on the importance of marriage in both urban and rural areas. Female FGD participants also reported that those who married early became economically dependent on their husbands; however given that their marriages cannot be officially registered, in the case that the marriage ends, some may find themselves abandoned with children without legal recourse, financial income and/or skills to make a living.

Children with disabilities are often not registered with the

⁹ Statistics Agency of Tajikistan, 2017

¹⁰ Harris, C. 2004. *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan*

government.¹¹ FGD and KII participants noted that parents prefer to keep their children with disabilities out of school and/or place them in segregated boarding schools due to social stigma. FGD respondents also noted that children with disabilities lack access to receive social services due to limited knowledge within the family on how to register their children, and/or lack of financial resources given administrative fees associated with registering them with the state. According to FGD participants, children with disabilities reportedly face discrimination particularly in urban areas, including from school administration personnel who refuse to work with them and bullying from their peers. They noted however, an increased acceptance of children with disabilities in rural areas by their classmates, who provide them with assistance to access the school building and/or during class lessons. Despite vocational adult education opportunities being available to improve the livelihoods for people with disabilities, key informants noted that vocational training centres are often not inclusive and/or do not accommodate to the needs of people with disabilities. From time to time, vocational trainings adapted to their specific needs may become available, however they are not sustainable given their dependence of financial support from international organisations.

Food Security and Nutrition

Dependence on agriculture, remittances and imported foods with fluctuating prices are major drivers for food insecurity in Tajikistan.¹² Households dependent on agriculture may not be food secure, as availability of food varies throughout the different seasons and depends on the volume of crop production. FGD respondents reported that nutritional outcomes are associated with the financial wellbeing of households, as impoverished households tend to consume highly caloric food with low macro and micronutrients.

According to the FGDs, households spend approximately 60 to 70 percent of their income on food. WFP's Food Security Assessment (2021) classified 20 percent of households as food-insecure across Tajikistan. It also highlighted that female-headed households faced increased challenges with food accessibility (28 percent food-insecure) compared with male-headed households (18 percent food-insecure), such as those with husbands, brothers or fathers in both rural and urban areas. Additionally, a higher proportion of female-headed households (48 percent) adopted severe levels of coping strategies compared to male-headed households, which was 41 percent.

Female FGD respondents noted that households with men were in better economic situations than households without

men. Women in FGDs noted that married women do not need to worry about food availability as this is perceived to be the 'man's' job, regardless of whether the men work in the country, have migrated and/or are unemployed. Women also reported that wives, elder women and/or mothers-in-laws make decisions on food purchases, whilst men are responsible for purchasing the food from the markets or shops for women to prepare it.

FGD participants reported that female-headed households in rural areas can sell their agricultural produce in exchange for purchasing core necessities, whereas some female-headed households in the capital that lack income generating opportunities adopt negative coping mechanisms such as relying on close relatives for support and/or neighbours for leftovers. According to FGD respondents, some young women may even opt to becoming the second or third wives of men for shelter and food security, particularly those with lower educational levels and/or skills. FGD participants also reported that female-headed households spend more time in agricultural activities, in addition to their already burdensome domestic and unpaid work, which can result in a lack of time available to prepare nutritious meals for their families.

“

While my husband was alive, I did not know how much potatoes or meat cost. I only made a list of products and he provided and paid all the bills, including the school fee for my children. After he (my husband) died from COVID-19 last year, I am struggling to provide for my children...

”

- Female, 45 years old, Dushanbe

Women's limited decision-making power and lack of access to and control over resources such as income, land and social protection benefits (e.g., maternity leave, pension, etc.) contribute to their poor food security and nutrition status. Traditional sociocultural gendered norms dictate food distribution and consumption patterns within the household as reflected within discussions with various FGD participants. For example, it is common that women in poorer households reported a tendency to eat last and least, giving food to men, elderly and children before eating the leftovers.

Traditional myths or taboos can lead to pregnant and lactating women not receiving their required dietary diversity or nutrition needs, as these norms dictate what women and children can or cannot eat across various life stages. Both male

¹¹ Bureau on Human Rights and Rule of Law, Ishtirok, Nota Bene, & International Partnership for Human Rights (2018). *Persons with disabilities in Tajikistan: Pushed to the margins*. Retrieved from: <https://iphronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Tj-disabilities-report-updated-compressed.pdf>

¹² United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). 2018. *Fill the Nutrient Gap (FNG) in Tajikistan*. October 2018

and female FGD respondents noted that pregnant women should avoid or reduce their oil consumption and consumption of 'heavy' foods such as bread, pasta and grains, as it is perceived to be associated with experiencing delivery issues due to the heavy weight gain of infants. FGD respondents also noted that lactating women should avoid consuming fruits and vegetables, as it may cause diarrhoea and/or an upset stomach in their infants. Male FGD respondents believed that children under five should not consume any fruits or vegetables as consumption may lead to diarrhoea and risks of choking, whereas women FGD respondents perceived this to be acceptable in the case that fruits and vegetables were 'mashed' and/or chewed by their mother prior to consumption. Both male and female FGD participants agreed that children under five should not consume meat, bread, or pasta as they were perceived to be difficult to digest.

Parents noted during FGDs in Dushanbe that adolescent girls are at-risk of inadequate nutrient intake given the heavy influence by social media, leading to unhealthy food choices. Children who are left behind by migratory parents may also be at-risk of malnutrition, as FGD participants noted that in some households these children received leftovers of meals or were served last. Female FGD participants noted that children were sometimes left with complete strangers, neighbours, schoolteachers and/or their mother's boyfriend. There is a risk that some children left behind not only lack access to nutritious foods, but also face abuse and neglect.

Given that people with disabilities depend on others for support, many participants of the FGD with persons with disabilities reported feelings of frustration and/or lack of hope, in relation to food availability.

Shock-responsiveness

Tajikistan is prone to a diverse range of natural disasters and climatic shocks such as earthquakes, landslides, floods, mudslides, droughts, avalanches and extreme temperatures.¹³ The impact of natural disasters impacts on the country's agriculture, water availability, loss of assets such as households and destroying of arable lands, leading to increased food insecurity and destabilized livelihoods.¹⁴

FGD participants noted that households spend their available savings on agricultural products to rebuild their assets. Both women and men noted during FGDs that households with men rebuild their houses and re-establish access to food more quickly than those led by women and the elderly, given men's

ability to repair damage themselves and/or borrow money from relatives, friends or the bank. Families with household members working abroad reported during FGDs that they use their remittances to repair their assets. FGD participants noted that women-led and elderly-led households, as well as households with people with disabilities that experience shock are found to be in the most vulnerable situations, as they find themselves with less opportunities to rebuild and are often dependent on food assistance from the government and/or humanitarian organisations.

According to FGDs, urban and rural households faced additional risks of aggravation of food insecurity and nutrition outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic, given the increasing cost of food prices, loss of livelihood opportunities and decreased remittances. According to a World Bank analysis, 41 percent of households reported the need to purchase less expensive food, limit the quantities of meals per day, and purchase predominantly staple foods, such as oil and flour, during the pandemic.¹⁵ Despite responsibility for purchasing food for the household, during FGDs with men, men did not perceive food availability as an issue and were unaware of how long the food lasts. This can be linked to their lack of knowledge on food preparation as well as gendered food distribution patterns at the household level, given men typically receive their meals first. Women on the other hand, reported during FGDs having increased restrictions on their food consumption patterns, privileging men, children and elderly. Key informants from local women's organisations reported that domestic violence rates against women and children doubled during the pandemic within households facing economic shocks, due to men's increased stress resulting from loss of livelihoods given their inability to travel abroad for employment opportunities and increased food insecurity, particularly amongst women and children.

FGD participants noted that women in single-headed households in urban areas were found to be worse off economically than rural women engaged in paid work. In rural areas, women were able to consume, sell and exchange agricultural products, fruits and livestock for other goods as a negative coping strategy, whereas unemployed women in urban areas struggle to find food and end up in extreme poverty.

According to FGDs, communities reported having limited capacity in terms of finances and resources to provide households in vulnerable situations with crisis support, however some communities noted to have established their

¹³ United Nations Development Programme. 2010. Republic of Tajikistan: National Disaster Risk Management Strategy for 2010– 2015. Dushanbe. http://www.untj.org/docs/country_context/NDRM_Strategy_English-revised_15.04.10.pdf

¹⁴ CARITAS. 2019. Disaster Risk Reduction in Tajikistan. Opportunities for sustained action to reduce vulnerability and exposure

¹⁵ World Bank. 2020b. Tajikistan Overview. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tajikistan/overview>

own system to support female-headed households, households with elderly, households in extreme poverty and households with persons with disabilities. In Sughd and GBAO, community members pooled funds for community celebrations and used the remaining funds to provide support to households with people with disabilities to integrate into society and female-headed households with household maintenance work that they were unable to do themselves. In Khorog, women established a savings group where each member contributed small amounts of money on a monthly basis and took turns to use the funds when needed most.

Conflict Sensitivity

Following the conflict on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border in April 2021, which centred on disputes over natural resources, access to water and pasture,¹⁶ FGD respondents reported that households living in the border areas received fewer products from the agricultural fields and were worse off in terms of food availability compared to previous years, given their lack of freedom of movement. Key informants also noted that female-headed households and households with people with disabilities were affected due to their inability to work in the field, lack of accessibility to water and pasture.

According to FGDs respondents, based on best practices and lessons learned of projects previously implemented at the border, projects working on improving the social sector such as building schools, healthcare facilities and other infrastructure, provision of training and capacity building activities for youth and women were perceived as more successful than those focusing on natural resources, given it being a main driver for dispute and potentially causing increased tension and/or unrest amongst communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Gender and Diversity Inclusion Analysis provides an understanding of how key gender norms and dynamics affect food security and nutrition outcomes of households across Tajikistan, including after various shocks.

These recommendations are intended to support WFP and relevant actors to address the differential vulnerabilities, capacities and needs of men, women, boys and girls of diverse groups for an inclusive, equitable and efficient response. A complete set of recommendations, including by key thematic areas, are listed in the full report.

1. **Promote women's economic empowerment in both rural and urban areas** through the provision of tailored and diversified vocational education training opportunities

based on the market's needs, with a focus on traditional and non-traditional skills.

2. **Strengthen focus in working with youth and young people, both women and men**, through provision of capacity development activities on agriculture and targeted awareness raising activities on nutrition and dietary diversity, gender equality and family planning.
3. **Strengthen social and behavioural communication change (SBCC) activities to challenge traditional sociocultural and gender norms and practices** that may prevent and/or inhibit women, girls and persons with disabilities from effectively integrating within the society. Activities should be gender and age specific.
4. **Build collaborative partnerships with national NGOs, local civil society organisations and international organisations working on gender equality and organisations with people with disabilities** to provide small grants and/or connect them with local enterprises for employment opportunities.
5. **Strengthen the capacity of state institutions to ensure gender mainstreaming and diversity inclusion** is integrated in the design and implementation of national policies, programmes, strategies and priorities, specifically in relation to food security, nutrition, and dietary diversity.
6. **Develop cross-border projects between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan**, with a key focus on peacebuilding efforts through the implementation of income generation and capacity strengthening activities.
7. **Work closely with local community members to develop community response and readiness plans**, inclusive of women, elderly and people with disabilities to ensure an inclusive preparation and response to climatic shocks and natural disasters.
8. **Strengthen awareness raising amongst decision-makers at the household and community level** on the importance of nutrition and dietary diversity, food availability and food preparation for children, adolescents, pregnant and lactating women.
9. Cooperate with key stakeholders in-country to **analyse the impacts of migration on children's nutritional outcomes**.

Photo page 1: © WFP/Nasrullo Ramazonov

WFP supported the establishment of local women's production groups in Muminobod District.

Photo page 3: © WFP/Emma Khachatryan

WFP provides daily school meals to students in more than 2,000 schools in rural areas.

¹⁶ Mulojanov, P. *Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan: Traditions of Good Neighborliness and Prospects for Peacebuilding*. CABAR.