

GENDERED FOOD INSECURITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Pakistan's food insecurity crisis is well documented, yet its gendered dimensions remain peripheral to national security discourse. This paper argues that gendered food insecurity, the structurally unequal experience of food deprivation by women, constitutes a direct and compounding threat to Pakistan's stability. Drawing on Bina Agarwal's feminist political economy framework, the study advances two arguments. Empirically, women's chronic exclusion from food, assets, and economic participation suppresses female labour force participation, drives girls out of education, accelerates child marriage, and normalises gender-based violence, each pathway eroding the human capital and fiscal foundations on which national security rests. Theoretically, drawing on comparative case studies from Yemen, Nigeria, and Afghanistan, the paper constructs a plausible pathway from gendered food deprivation to household desperation, state delegitimation, and eventual militant recruitment. The paper concludes that gendered food insecurity is not a social welfare concern at the margins of security policy, but a structural vulnerability at its centre.

Keywords: Gendered Food Insecurity, Food Security, National Security, Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan faces a food insecurity crisis of significant scale, yet the gendered dimensions of this crisis, and their implications for national security, have remained largely invisible in policy and academic discourse. Women in Pakistan are disproportionately food insecure, structurally excluded from land, income, and household decision-making, and routinely deprioritised in humanitarian responses. This paper argues that this is not merely a development failure; it is a security failure. When women are chronically deprived of adequate food and productive resources, the consequences cascade across generations, suppressing economic output, depleting human capital, and fracturing community resilience in precisely the provinces where Pakistan is most vulnerable to instability and militant recruitment. This paper examines these linkages systematically, placing gendered food insecurity at the centre of Pakistan's national security conversation.

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a systematic literature review and comparative case analysis. Secondary data sources, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, and Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) reports, alongside peer-reviewed scholarship and policy documents, are used to establish the empirical landscape of gendered food insecurity in Pakistan. Gender-disaggregated evidence is drawn from national surveys, humanitarian assessments, and regional studies to substantiate the empirical argument. The theoretical argument is constructed through a structured comparative analysis of three cases, Yemen, Nigeria, and Afghanistan, where the food insecurity–militant recruitment nexus is documented. Bina Agarwal's feminist political economy framework serves as the analytical lens throughout, connecting structural asset deprivation to national security outcomes.

Literature Review

Food insecurity in Pakistan is a well-documented problem, but its gendered dimensions have received far less attention than they deserve, and its link to national security has received far less. A growing body of scholarship on women's nutritional deprivation makes the connection between the causes of malnutrition and its consequences for household welfare, but the literature has been slow to make systematic linkages between women's structural exclusion from food systems and the wider stability of Pakistan. This study builds on the literature by advancing two fundamental arguments. The first is empirical: when women are food insecure, as they are on the scale seen in Pakistan, a significant share of the population cannot reach its productive potential, and the effects are carried forward in the next generation in the form of malnutrition, stunting, and reduced human capital, all of which affect the state's economic and social foundations and hence national security. The second argument is theoretical: Gendered food insecurity, because it deepens poverty and undermines community faith in the state, is a contributing factor to the grievous circumstances that militant organizations can exploit for recruitment in the conflict-affected regions of Pakistan. This literature review maps the current scholarship in five fields: conceptual foundations, structural drivers, gendered deprivation, security implications, and the recruitment pathway, and identifies the gap this research seeks to fill.

Conceptualizing Food Security and the FIES Measure

The FAO defines food security as a state in which all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to enough, safe, and nutritious food that satisfies their dietary needs for an active and healthy life.¹ Four pillars must be met at the same time:

availability (sufficient quantities of food are available); access (people can obtain food through monetization for income or entitlements); utilisation (the body can use the food, which is dependent on health and sanitation); and stability (all three are consistently present over time).² Chronic food insecurity represents long-term poverty and is linked to structural causes tied to an unequal distribution of resources and persistent poverty, while transitory food insecurity describes the condition of food insecurity, which is caused by a short-term trigger, such as floods, increases in food prices, or conflict.³ Sen's entitlement theory laid down the argument that food insecurity results not from the lack of food but from failures in the rights and resources through which individuals can command access to food, which is especially true in Pakistan, where aggregate measures of production are concealing severe failure along class, regional, and gender lines.⁴ Both forms, chronic and transitory, exist within Pakistan, often side by side and in the same regions.⁵

Measuring food insecurity accurately requires food measurement tools that go beyond national other caloric averages. The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), a food insecurity scale drafted as part of the FAO's Voices of the Hungry initiative, captures food insecurity in people's experiences, with a set of eight questions that range from worrying about running out of food to starving a whole day without eating.⁶ Its value lies in making visible the intra-household inequalities, including the extent of the gendered inequalities hidden behind the aggregate statistics. Applying FIES to Pakistan, Afridi et al. conclude that about 16% population experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2018-19, and rates were higher in the provinces of Sindh (19.51%) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (16.73%), and that rural people and women are generally far worse off than urban or male respondents.⁷

Structural Drivers and Climate Vulnerability

Pakistan's food security dilemma is paradoxical: Pakistan is a major agricultural producer, while millions of people go hungry.⁸ This is not so much a matter of supply, but a problem of distribution and governance. The main structural drivers, Khan and Shah find, are agricultural instability, widespread poverty, inadequate rural infrastructure, and market failures, including hoarding and smuggling.⁹ Ishaq, Khalid, and Ahmad's regional analysis reveals that Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) have consistently higher rates of undernourishment than Punjab, a pattern that tracks with poverty and infrastructural gaps.¹⁰ Arshad et al. state that more than 45 per cent of the population of Sindh and almost half of the people in KP are suffering from some level of food insecurity, where poverty and market fragmentation were the major reasons.¹¹

Climate shocks add to these structural flaws. The 2022 monsoon floods were of devastating scale: where the 2021 floods inundated over 33 million people in various parts of the country, destroyed about 45% of crops worth in Sindh and Balochistan, destroyed

millions of livestock, and caused an estimated USD 30 billion in damage.¹² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) reported that the floods caused about 9.4 million people to be in acute food insecurity, disrupted food supply chains, and large numbers of women and children faced significant barriers to humanitarian assistance due to gender-blind relief protocols.¹³ UNICEF confirmed the spread of acute child malnutrition in the flood-affected districts in Sindh.¹⁴ Ullah et al. document how women shouldered the heaviest burdens after climate-forced displacement and had the least say in household survival decisions.¹⁵ The monsoon floods in 2025 caused further destruction in Sindh and Balochistan, again shaking the agricultural livelihoods of already vulnerable communities. By middle 2025, the FAO said that more than 11 million Pakistanis were facing acute food insecurity, a figure that illustrates greater failure to enhance structural resilience between crises.¹⁶

Gendered Food Insecurity: Structural Causes and Outcomes

Gendered food insecurity is when the insecurity is experienced by boys and girls differently. Food insecurity in Pakistan is not equally experienced across the gender lines. It is affected by deeply embedded patriarchal norms and economic structures, which limit women's access to resources, income, and their role in decision-making at all levels.¹⁷ Hartmann's analysis of the structural relationship between patriarchy and capitalism is instructive here: the two systems operate jointly to deny women autonomous access to productive resources and income, making their food insecurity an outcome of political economy rather than cultural circumstance.¹⁸ Looking at South Asia, Mawani's analysis reveals the very contradiction: in which women do the bulk of agricultural work but are excluded from ownership of land, credit, and income, which would enable them to provide food security for themselves and their families.¹⁹ In Pakistan, women account for around 40 per cent of the agricultural workforce and own only 3-12 per cent of the agricultural land.²⁰ Ramachandran's comparative South Asian study links this back to broader failures of entitlement - restrictions on legal rights, mobility, and participation in the markets all mean that women have less access to food than men in similar household situations.²¹ A significant gender wage gap exists across sexes: According to UN Pakistan data of 2025, women are still earning substantially less than men for equal work, which not only impairs their independent spending but also aggravates their food insecurity.²²

The nutritional implications of these structural exclusions are severe. Naz et al.'s geospatial analysis - the latest available - indicates that almost 65% of Pakistani women of reproductive age are malnourished and more than 41% are anaemic.²³ Rao's cross-national research concludes that South Asian women suffer from food and nutritional disadvantage even in households where food is nominally available, due to the systematic

favouring of men and boys within households.²⁴ The FAO estimates that closing gender gaps in agricultural access could slash the number of hungry people in developing countries by 12% - 17%, which suggests that women's exclusion is not a side effect of food insecurity but one of its causes.²⁵ Iqbal, Ahmad, and Mustafa's study of rural Pakistan adds that women farmers are "underpaid, overworked, and exploited" and among the first exposed to agricultural disruption caused by a changing climate because they lack the resources and power to absorb shocks.²⁶ The experience of the period of Covid-19 underlined the speed with which these vulnerabilities can grow: According to Shahzad et al, since income for households in the Punjab was reduced from various working sectors by lockdowns, 72% of surveyed households experienced incomes below PKR 10,000 per month during lockdowns: Women's responses primarily included reducing meal quantity and meal size as a coping mechanism whereas the Ehsaas emergency assistance only reached 10.8% of the affected households.²⁷

The Empirical Argument: Human Capital and Intergenerational Deprivation

The most direct national security consequences of gendered food insecurity occur via human capital. When women are malnourished at the scale that we have seen in Pakistan, the consequences never stay at the individual level -- they trickle forward. Malnourished mothers are much more likely to have low-birth-weight babies, who are in turn at much higher risk of stunting, poor immune systems, and poor cognitive development.²⁸ Pakistan currently has one of the highest rates of stunting among children under age five (42%) in the world, and maternal malnutrition is one of the major drivers of this rate.²⁹ The World Bank has estimated the cost of early childhood stunting to be about USD 1 trillion per year in lost productivity to developing economies: this illustrates that women's food deprivation is an economic and security liability for the state in the coming years.³⁰

The size of this problem is large in the Pakistani context. A sizable portion of the current female population -- because of a lack of nutritionally adequate food, limited educational opportunities, and poor economic participation -- is not realizing its maximum productive potential.³¹ This has very real implications for economic production, workforce potential, and fiscal strength. Malnourished women are more likely to become sick, have unsafe pregnancies, and make use of the health services, which are already crowded, further straining health and public systems.³² Justino et al.'s multi-country empirical study demonstrates that food security, gender equality, and stable governance reinforce each other: wherever women have been permitted to take part in food systems, communities are more resilient, and the quality of governance tends to be on a higher level.³³ Pakistan's continued failure to achieve this reinforcing dynamic, especially in

Sindh, Balochistan, and KP means that gendered food insecurity is actively undermining the social and economic building blocks on which national security rests.³⁴

The Theoretical Argument: Food Insecurity and Militant Recruitment

The second argument of this study is towards the relationship between gendered food insecurity and militant recruitment. This argument is theoretical in nature: there is limited direct empirical evidence in the specific link between food deprivation of women and terrorist recruitment in Pakistan, and this particular study does not claim otherwise. What the findings section will do is construct a theoretical case of how this connection could plausibly work based on the existing scholarship reviewed here.

The seminal work in this area was done in the field of conflict economics. Collier and Hoeffler's analysis of the onset of civil war argues that economic deprivation -- including hunger and the unmet basic needs of the population -- makes the opportunity cost of joining a rebellion lower, and it makes it easier for non-state organizations to recruit from economically marginalized communities.³⁵ Hathaway's edited volume on Pakistan offers some important contextual support: In KP and Balochistan, food shortages and the absence of food have driven families into militant patronage networks, with organisations clearly exploiting the provision of food and other economic relief to buy local loyalty and fill the vacuum.³⁶ Kabeer's capability framework allows for another explanation, the gendered dimension of this dynamic: where women lack agency in the home, access to food, it weakens collective community responses to deprivation, and these communities also become less resilient to the patronage strategies of non-state actors.³⁷

The theoretical pathway, then, is from the structural food deprivation of women to household economic desperation to community alienation from the state to the eventual grievance conditions that are exploited by the militant organizations. This is not a direct or necessary relationship, but it is a theoretically consistent one -- and one that the findings section of this study will develop more within the context of Pakistan's political and security situation.

Research Gap

Taken together, the literature that exists provides important foundations but leaves several gaps unaddressed. Studies on food insecurity in Pakistan have been largely aggregate in nature and have largely addressed the distributional pattern without giving proper centrality to gender as a structural driver of deprivation.³⁸ Where concern with gendered food insecurity has been investigated, the emphasis has been placed on welfare or development issues rather than those of national security.³⁹ The two arguments that this study pursues the empirical case that women's food deprivation exhausts the current

and future human capital at a scale that endangers Pakistan's stability, and the theoretical case that this debasement contributes to the conditions that can allow militant recruitment have not been brought together into a single analytical framework. This research identifies these gaps, placing gendered food insecurity at the centre - not as a social problem at the margins of national security discourses.

Results and Findings

I. Empirical Argument: Gendered Food Insecurity as a Direct Threat to Pakistan's National Security

Bina Agarwal's *A Field of One's Own* (1994) gives the framework for this analysis from a feminist political economy perspective. Agarwal goes on to prove that women's exclusion from productive assets, land, income, and credit stripped them of their bargaining power within the household and the state, which created a cascade of deprivations that is consistently reinforced across generations.⁴⁰ The gist of this section is that in Pakistan, when women experience gendered food insecurity, it leads to four measurable national security costs: a suppressed economy and weakened state finances, depletion of the future workforce through educational exclusion, a deepening cycle of intergenerational poverty through early marriage, and social fragmentation in the state's most volatile provinces through gender-based violence. Each pathway is discussed below; there are explicit links between gendered food insecurity and national security at each step.⁴¹

Gendered Food Insecurity Suppresses Female Economic Participation and Weakens State Finances

Pakistan's female labour force participation (FLFP) rate is at around 24%, amongst the lowest in the world.⁴² A major cause for this is gendered food insecurity. Chronic undernourishment of women leads to higher rates of anaemia, fatigue, and illness, as well as obstetric complications, which lead to a decrease in women's physical abilities to work in sustained employment.⁴³ They have disproportionate burdens of caring, since the children of food-insecure households are themselves sick and stunted, requiring intensive care that falls almost totally on women.⁴⁴ The result is a female population that is structurally unable to participate in and remain within the formal economy - not due to legal exclusion in itself, but because gendered food insecurity has physically and logistically ruled out female participation.⁴⁵

The cost of this suppression to national security is fiscal. The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) 2024 article 4 consultation with Pakistan specifically names low female economic participation as a binding constraint to growth in Pakistan, estimating

that closing the gender gap in the labour market would create significant extra national output.⁴⁶ A state that suffers this loss in output collects less tax revenue, spends much more on avoidable illnesses in overstretched public hospitals, and operates from a tighter economic base.⁴⁷ In the case of Pakistan, where the government is already struggling with the twin challenges of funding essential servicing and security operations in Balochistan and KP, this fiscal crunch carries direct security implications: less money means less ability to expand government reach, less ability to deliver services, and maintain a security presence in the provinces that experience insecurity.⁴⁸

Gendered food insecurity is therefore not only a welfare problem when women are chronically ill, overburdened, and out of the economy; it drains the fiscal resources which Pakistan's security apparatus depends on to function.

Gendered Food Insecurity Removes Girls from School

One of the most harmful effects of gendered food insecurity is what it means for girls' education.⁴⁹ When households are food-stressed, the first to be pulled out of school are daughters.⁵⁰ This is not arbitrary: Agarwal's analysis shows that in households where women have no assets and autonomy over the use of household money is limited, educational spending on the girls is the first item to be reduced under scarcity.⁵¹ The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan 2022 establishes the fact that gender gaps in school enrolment and completion have been greatest precisely in the food-insecure districts of rural Sindh and Balochistan.⁵² Data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics ranks Pakistan among the worst performers in the world on the gender parity index in secondary education, again, with the food-insecure provinces at the bottom.⁵³

The security result is a depleted human capital base. A girl pulled out of school because her household can no longer both feed her and educate her at the same time grows up illiterate and unskilled, economically dependent, and unable to make her own decisions when it comes to her own nutrition or her children's health.⁵⁴ Scaled across the hundreds of thousands of girls affected annually in the food-insecure provinces of Pakistan, this creates a structurally impaired female population: one unable to contribute to the economic output, unable to exercise the maternal agency that has been linked by research to increase child nutrition, and unable to participate in the civic and governance mechanisms by which communities function.⁵⁵

Pakistan cannot stabilise its most volatile provinces with a female population whose basic productive and civic capacities have been destroyed by food insecurity before adult life. The educational exclusion that gendered food insecurity results in not only has a social character but is also a national security issue.

Gendered Food Insecurity Drives Early Marriage and Locks Pakistan into a Generational Security Trap

When food insecurity makes it too expensive to feed a daughter, households in Pakistan choose to marry them early to shift the cost elsewhere.⁵⁶ UNICEF data reveal that about 18 percent of Pakistani girls are married below the age of 18 years, a rate that is much higher in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan, where food insecurity is severe.⁵⁷ Agarwal's bargaining framework attributes this to rational household behaviour in response to structural rather than individual scarcity; marrying a daughter reduces the number of dependents and reduces the burden of feeding.⁵⁸ This is driven by food insecurity, and the consequences directly feed back into the national security picture.

Girls who are married before 18 years join reproductive life before their bodies are well developed. They produce low-weight babies at elevated rates, have higher maternal mortality, and withdraw from education for the rest of their lives.⁵⁹ Crucially, today's young mothers themselves are products of gendered food insecurity and have the least capacity to nourish their children.⁶⁰ They possess limited assets, limited knowledge of nutrition, and limited bargaining power in their new households.⁶¹ Their children are therefore highly likely to be food insecure from birth, and the same cycle starts again.⁶² This generational reproduction of gendered food insecurity means that each cohort of food-insecure mothers is producing the next.⁶³

The human capital deficit does not remain steady, it gets compounded over time. For Pakistan's national security, it is not an abstract projection: It means that if gendered food insecurity is not structurally interrupted, Pakistan will be producing generations that are progressively weaker, less educated, and less economically capable in provinces such as Sindh, Balochistan, and KP - the same provinces where Pakistan needs more resilient and stable communities and a more productive population.

Gendered Food Insecurity Fuels Gender-Based Violence and Fractures Communities in Conflict-Prone Provinces

Gendered food insecurity does not just weaken individuals - it breaks apart the communities around them. The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017-18 documents that rates of spousal violence are highest in Balochistan and KP, which are the same provinces where the levels of food insecurity are severe.⁶⁴ The link is structural: gendered food insecurity generates extreme levels of household economic stress, increases women's dependence on providers (typically male), and compromises women's ability to seek recourse.⁶⁵ Agarwal calls this a direct result of asset deprivation: if the women have nothing of their own, they have no exit and no leverage.⁶⁶

The security cost is fragmentation on the community level. Communities where gender-based violence (GBV) is normalised have poorer social capital, lower institutional trust, and less capacity for collective action - all of which are preconditions for effective local governance and resistance by community members to militant influence at the local level.⁶⁷ In Balochistan and in KP, communities that are fragmented by the household violence that gendered food insecurity induces are less able to resist militant patronage offers, and less able to cooperate with state security institutions.⁶⁸ The state has always, however, prioritized GBV in these provinces as a law and order or social welfare issue.⁶⁹

The evidence here reframes it: GBV concentrated in food-insecure conflict zones is a national security threat, because it corrodes the community trust and community capacity that are the last available buffer between a vulnerable population and the militant organisations that prey on their desperation.⁷⁰

II. Theoretical Argument: Gendered Food Insecurity and Militant Recruitment

The theoretical argument is that gendered food insecurity, by eroding household economic agency and delegitimising the state, can create the structural conditions in which militant recruitment operates. Since direct empirical evidence linking women's food insecurity to recruitment in Pakistan is limited, the argument is constructed comparatively: three cases in which the food insecurity-recruitment nexus is empirically documented are examined, and the framework is then applied to Pakistan.

Case Study I: Yemen and the Houthis

The World Food Programme (WFP) has assessed that tens of millions of Yemenis face acute food insecurity, driven by conflict and the destruction of food infrastructure.⁷¹ Brandt's study of the Houthi conflict documents how the movement built its base in Saada and Hajja governorates, areas of extreme poverty and food scarcity historically neglected by the central state, by providing food, dispute resolution, and material relief that the government could not deliver.⁷² The Houthis did not win these communities through ideology; they won them through food. Community loyalty and military recruitment followed from material dependency, not belief.⁷³ The gendered dimension is central: where women had no independent access to food or income, male household heads made survival decisions based entirely on who provided most reliably.⁷⁴ Women's structural exclusion from food access made households maximally dependent on external providers, and the Houthis ensured they were that provider.⁷⁵

Case Study II: Nigeria and Boko Haram

Mercy Corps' field research among former Boko Haram combatants in northeastern Nigeria found that economic deprivation, the inability to meet basic food and household needs, was among the primary reported motivations for joining, frequently independent of religious conviction.⁷⁶ WFP assessments confirm that food insecurity rates in Boko Haram's operational areas significantly exceed the Nigerian national average.⁷⁷ The organisation used food provision, material incentives, and marriage networks as deliberate recruitment tools, exploiting the governance vacuum left by the Nigerian state.⁷⁸ Women's food insecurity amplified this vulnerability: with no independent economic standing, households had no capacity to absorb shocks independently, making the organisation's material offers structurally attractive.⁷⁹ The state's failure to deliver food security was read as a withdrawal of legitimacy, and Boko Haram stepped into that space.

Case Study III: Afghanistan and the Taliban

Giustozzi's analysis of the neo-Taliban insurgency documents how the organisation established legitimacy in Helmand, Kandahar, and Kunduz, districts with chronic food insecurity, through food assistance and economic relief.⁸⁰ The Taliban presented themselves as the competent governing authority by feeding people. Material provision preceded ideological incorporation, and recruitment followed from dependency.⁸¹ Women's absence of economic agency was directly exploited: with no independent access to food or income, households were entirely reliant on male heads whose calculations the Taliban shaped through targeted welfare distribution, deepening dependency and making resistance materially impossible.⁸²

Application to Pakistan

All three cases share the same structure: gendered food insecurity and a non-state organisation that converts household desperation into loyalty and recruitment leverage. All three conditions are present in Pakistan, as documented in the existing literature.⁸³ The comparative framework adds the gendered mechanism: it argues that women's exclusion from food access and productive resources deepens household vulnerability to non-state patronage. When women cannot function as independent economic agents, household survival becomes structurally dependent on whoever provides most reliably. In Pakistan, militant organisations can position themselves as that provider, and they can exploit precisely the household desperation that gendered food insecurity produces.

The argument is not that food-insecure women join militant organisations. It is that gendered food insecurity produces the household desperation, community fragmentation, and state de-legitimisation that can make militant recruitment possible

and sustainable in Balochistan and KP. Pakistan's security responses have focused on ideology and counterinsurgency as the primary drivers of recruitment. The comparative evidence reviewed here argues that these responses are addressing the symptom rather than the cause. Until gendered food insecurity is recognised and treated as a structural security vulnerability, not a social welfare concern, the conditions enabling recruitment in Pakistan's most volatile provinces will remain firmly in place.

Way Forward

Tackling Pakistan's gendered food insecurity demands dismantling the patriarchal-capitalist structures that perpetuate it, recognizing this as fundamental to national security. Concrete, targeted interventions are critical:

- 1. Secure Women's Resource Rights:** Enforce existing land inheritance laws and launch campaigns to register agricultural land in women's names. Provide targeted subsidies for female farmers, ensuring direct access to credit, quality seeds, fertilizers, and technology. This empowers economic agencies and buffers households against shocks.
- 2. Eliminate Economic Discrimination:** Legislate and enforce equal pay for equal work, particularly in agriculture, where women form most of the workforce. Invest in skills training and market linkages for women in food processing and value chains, moving beyond exploitative labour. Expand social safety nets (BISP, Ehsaas) with explicit gender-sensitive targeting and higher benefit levels for female-headed households.
- 3. Integrate Gender into Food Governance:** Mandate women's representation (minimum 30%) in local agricultural committees, food councils, and disaster management bodies. Design national food security programs (e.g., future "Zero Hunger" initiatives) with specific, measurable nutrition targets for women and girls, including fortified foods and supplements for pregnant/lactating women. Public fund behaviours change campaigns challenging intra-household food discrimination.
- 4. Build Climate-Resilient, Gender-Responsive Systems:** Invest in climate-smart agriculture infrastructure in vulnerable regions (Sindh, Balochistan, and KP), prioritizing women's access and training. Develop early warning systems and shock-responsive social protection explicitly designed to reach women during floods/droughts, preventing distress migration and exploitation.
- 5. Reframe Nutrition as Security Investment:** Allocate significant, sustained budget lines specifically for maternal and child nutrition programs, recognizing their impact on stunting reduction, future workforce capacity, and military recruitment viability. Monitor progress through sex-disaggregated national nutrition surveys every 2-3 years.

Success hinges on political will to treat women's food security not as charity, but as a

strategic imperative. Prioritizing women's land ownership, fair wages, nutritional health, and decision-making power breaks the intergenerational cycle of deprivation, directly strengthening Pakistan's economic resilience, social cohesion, and long-term national security. Failure perpetuates instability.

Conclusion

Gendered food insecurity in Pakistan is not just a welfare issue in isolation. It is a structural condition that systematically undermines the human capital, fiscal capacity, and community cohesion that national stability is based on. This paper has shown that when women are chronically excluded from productive resources and food, the consequences are not reversible nor contained in the short term. They compound across generations, weakening especially the provinces most exposed to militant exploitation. The comparative evidence of Yemen, Nigeria, and Afghanistan confirms this further as non-state actors have converted gendered food deprivation into recruitment leverage. Pakistan's security architecture cannot afford to be blind to this dynamic. Addressing gendered food insecurity needs reframing and shift the narrative from a social development imperative to an urgent and fundamental national security imperative.

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