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**PRACTICE GUIDELINES IN RELATION TO KEY INFORMANTS'
PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD SECURITY AMONG FEMALE-HEADED
HOUSEHOLDS IN KENYA: A CASE OF VOI DIVISION IN TAITA-TAVETA
COUNTY, KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

Food security is a key development agenda. Food security exists when all people, always have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) one and two generally aim at eradicating poverty and achieving food security, respectively. Currently, food security is explored as a rights-based issue whether at an individual or collective level. Ecological system theory illuminates the importance of interlinkages between environmental (sub) systems to attain a holistic system including a food secure system. In existence are regulations highlighting food security as a right to be enjoyed by all humans including females. Even though females are the primary caregivers and heads of their households, they have not enjoyed the right to acceptable food security due to socio-cultural and systemic exclusions, despite the existing legislations. This study on food security among female-headed households (FHHs) was conducted in Voi Division in Taita-Taveta County in Kenya. Fifteen key informants were purposively selected from organisations dealing with the matter of food security in the area. The sample was conveniently acquired by researchers requesting team leaders of the organisations to identify relevant key informants for the interview. As part of the main study, the key informants were requested to express their perspectives on plausible practice guidelines for promoting food security among female-headed households especially in Voi Division. For the purposes of the interviews, *verbatim* responses of 14 key informants were considered, which ultimately inform the formulation of the practice guidelines by the authors as backed up by literature. The guidelines are recommended for programme planning, for policy and programme implementation. The guidelines for programme planning are conducting participatory rural-appraisals with vulnerable groups, formulating female-friendly policies, and planning for economic empowerment. The guidelines for policy and programme implementation include poverty eradication through formation of self-help groups and implementing female-centred education policies, implementing nutritional programmes, and establishing irrigation projects.

Key words: practice guidelines, food security, female-headed households, policy, programme



INTRODUCTION

Food security exists when all people always have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life [1]. Currently, food security is explored as a rights-based issue whether at an individual or collective level. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched by the United Nations (UN) aim to address development in a sustainable and rights-based manner [2]. For example, the general aim of SDG 2 is to achieve food security [2]. The attainment of this goal is faced with a myriad of challenges.

The proportion of the world population facing chronic hunger in 2022 was about 9.2%, compared with 7.9% in 2019, more than 3.1 billion people in the world (42%) were unable to afford a healthy diet in 2021 [3]. Income losses due to Covid-19 epidemic contributed to an increase of about 38 million in the estimated number of people experiencing hunger in 2021; besides, in 2022, the war in Ukraine erupted involving two major producers of agricultural commodities in the world [3]. These scenarios may have jeopardised the attainment of the SDG 2 in the world, including in Africa.

Hunger affects 21% of the population in Africa, compared with 9% in Asia and 9.1% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and more than one-third of the world's undernourished persons are found in Africa (282 million) [4]. In 2022, the Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU) in Africa continued to rise from 19.4% in 2021 to 19.7% – the equivalent of 11 million more people in one year and nearly 57 million more since the outbreak of the pandemic [3]. Moreover, hunger increased throughout all sub-regions of Africa in 2022. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), hunger increased from 22.2% to 22.5%, which translates into 9 million more people compared to 2021 [3]. Moreover, there was an increase in PoU among the region's population from 20.1% in 2019 to 23.2% in 2021 [5]. The PoU in East Africa is 28.1% [5].

The number of food insecure people in Kenya rose from 739,000 in June 2020 to 3.1 million in February 2022 out of the country's population of 47.6 million persons [6]. Nearly 30% of the Kenyan population were undernourished in the period between 2016 and 2018 [7]. According to Mutea [8], only 70% of households in Taita-Taveta County, in which the study location, Voi Division is situated, are deemed to be food secure. The study location is an arid and semi-arid area (ASAL) with high vulnerability to food insecurity.

Shelton [9] illustrates that a system, based on Ecological Systems Perspective by Urie Bronfenbrenner, as comprising of environmental (sub) systems linked together.



The interlinkages of the (sub) systems can accelerate development sustainably, including food security. The proximal ecological level, the *microsystem*, includes the settings in which individuals directly interact [10]. The female-headed households (FHHs) provide an interactive environment for children and the mother or the female caregiver. The second level, the *mesosystem*, refers to the interaction between various microsystems. Many microsystems interact with activities to influence development [10]. As social entities, social organisations can collaborate with research in promoting food security among the FHHs, including through adopting practice guidelines from the research.

In existence are regulations highlighting food security as a right to be enjoyed by all humans including females. For example, Kenya's Bill of Rights in chapter four of the *Constitution of Kenya 2010* stipulates the right of every person to be free from hunger, and to have adequate access to quality food. Despite the stipulations, there exists a gap in practice guidelines tailored for basic levels of the society, including the FHHs. More efforts are needed for adaptation and formulation of practice guidelines applicable at the grassroots levels.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research site

Voi Division is equivalent to Voi Sub-County or Constituency. It is in Taita-Taveta County in Kenya. Its approximate distance from the Kenya's capital city, Nairobi, is 304 km, and lies in an elevation of 580 m and coordinates of 03°23'26" S latitude and 38°34'37" E longitude. As mentioned earlier, it is an ASAL and experiences frequent droughts.

Figure 1 below illustrates the study area.

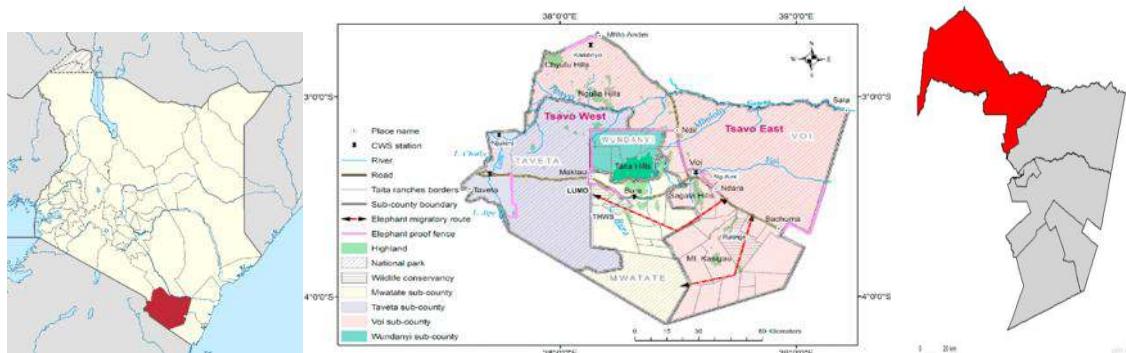


Figure 1: The map of the study area (source: Global Ecology and Conservation)

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, while permission to conduct the research was granted by the Kenya National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation. Moreover, the key informants signed consent forms to indicate their voluntary participation in the interviews and data was voice recorded with their prior permission [1]. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured by selecting the key informants from various agencies intervening in food security in Voi Division and using self-reflexivity on issues that could hinder objectivity in the interpretation of the data [1].

Sampling

There is no fixed structure for calculating sample size in qualitative research, since sample size is based on informational needs and/or data saturation (when there is no longer new information being revealed by the participants) [11]. The sample of fifteen key informants was conveniently acquired through the main researcher requesting team leaders of the agencies to identify relevant key informants for the interview. The names of the organisations and the number count of participants in each organisation were: Reach Out Centre Trust (2), the World Vision (2), administration office (2), a Community Based Organisation (1), the Ministry of Water and Irrigation (1), the Ministry of Agriculture (4) and the National Drought Management Authority (2).

Data collection and formulation of the practice guidelines

As part of the main study and broader interviews, the key informants were requested to express their perspectives on plausible practice guidelines for promoting food security among FHHs especially in Voi Division. For the purposes of the interviews, results from 14 key informants were considered. Those from one key informant were discarded due to biasness. The practice guidelines in this article are self-formulated by the authors and are backed up by *verbatim* responses of the participants and literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The audio-recorded interviews were analysed by transcribing them *verbatim*, thereby generating themes, including the theme on interventions for food security in Voi Division and among the FHHs in the division. The responses on this theme informed the formulation of the practice guidelines.

Biographical profiles of the participants

Table 1 below shows biographical profiles of the participants.

The participants' age range was 26-50 years with minimum education level of college certificate. Being of mature age, the key informants were also well



educated and had clear mastery on issues concerning food security. These aspects are vital for credibility of the data.

Practice guidelines

The guidelines proposed are for the following purposes: guidelines for planning, and for policy and programme implementation.

Figure 2 herein illustrates the practice guidelines proposed.

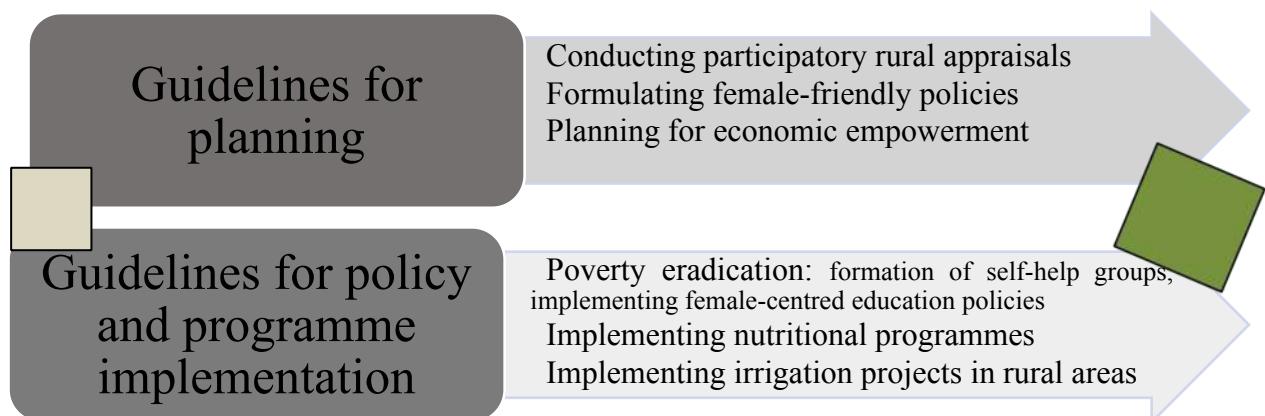


Figure 2: Practice guidelines proposed

Guidelines for programme planning

According to Gute and Nkosi [12], “gender accommodating” programmes recognize specific gender roles and inequalities and include actions that address and respond to these, without seeking to transform them. The following approaches in planning for programmes and policies aim at bridging gender-inequality in food security: Conducting participatory rural appraisals, formulating female-friendly policies, and planning for economic empowerment.

Conducting participatory rural-appraisals with vulnerable groups

The *verbatim* response herein demonstrates the need for participatory rural-appraisals among FHHs:

“... If the county government should mobilise these women and come up together in a forum –for the women to air their views and the challenges that they have. Out of those forums, they can come up with tangible and all the needed mitigations.” (P13)

Through community participatory approach, development agents can better understand the challenges and opportunities facing different communities and design more effective and relevant services [13]. Moreover, supporting women’s voices in household and farming decisions is a strategy for promoting food security among the vulnerable group [14]. As a guideline for this, the local community leaders, the NGOs and the Government of Kenya (GoK) should conduct

neighbourhood social mapping, a methodology of identifying vulnerable households to food insecurity. This practice will ensure food projects and assistance reach where they are most needed, enlist the FHHs as a vulnerable group to food insecurity, let the FHHs participate in identifying their inherent needs to be planned for and prioritise the needs, and in partnership, plan for interventions according to the needs and decisions arrived at.

The significance of participatory rural appraisals is illustrated by Brogan *et al.* [15], that women who had engaged in cooperatives in the villages of Rwanda, experienced positive impacts on their household food security, for they had participated in decision-making on food choices. This is because the cooperatives had provided them with a platform for airing their views hence boosting their confidence in decision-making.

Formulating female-friendly policies

The following quotes illustrate the need for workable policies.

“...the law should be reviewed to consider female children and be allowed to inherit family land.” (P13)

“I feel if the government would have taken their other part in the helping the community to do terraces, the technology of zai pits so that it becomes a kind a law, rule or policy ...” (P2)

Food policies are regulations that guide or govern food interventions towards realising food security. According to FAO, discriminatory norms and customs, compounded with weak legal protections and a limited voice constrain women's and adolescent girls' access to food and other resources [12]. Efforts to eliminate such constraints can be designed through formulating female-friendly food security policies that protect females and inform change agents on strategies of customising programmes to meet the gender needs. Consequently, the GoK should: formulate policies that ensure equity in resource access, including economic and food security resources by FHHs, especially through land ownership. The following passage extracted from United States Agency for International Development (USAID) [16] emphasises a similar point:

“Women's access to and ownership of quality, productive land can lead to improved social and economic stability, as well as increased autonomy from partners and other relatives. Secure land rights provide women with an asset base that can be used to obtain credit for business investments, help plan and budget long-term, and reduce risky spending or borrowing. Several studies indicate that women with property and inheritance rights earn nearly four times more income than those without such rights,



increasing resilience in the face of economic shocks. Research from Tanzania in particular, shows that women who have secure land rights were almost 35% more likely to have individual savings. This greater economic security likely has cascading effects for many households. Research from Indonesia and Central America, for example, found that increased landholdings for women are associated with higher levels of spending on children's education, which in turn leads to greater economic security."

Planning for economic empowerment

When asked what they perceived as the economic needs of the FHHs, a vast majority of the key informants indicated that the FHHs need finances, as exemplified in the following *verbatim* responses:

"...the source of income" (P2)

"It's hard for them to get casual labour." (P6)

"... economic activities where they can get money." (P11)

"... access to financial services" (P5)

"You may wish you had enough money to help her." (P13)

A follow up question was asked on solutions to the problems and the following responses were given:

"... need empowerment to purchase more" (P2)

"... empower the community on issues of entrepreneurship ..." (P5)

"... they should be empowered to get those sources kama ni pesa (such as finances), maji (water), business, mambo na (something to do with) income" (P4)

Social networks provide women with greater access to resources, information, and social mobility to change their diets [15]. The GoK in conjunction with other development stakeholders should plan for strategies of creating social networks with the FHHs and establish financial generation platforms, including ways of credit acquisition without or with reasonable interest rates; plan for expansion in employment opportunities and wages that promote economic status of the FHHs.

Evidence reveals benefits of the small loans, especially in establishing smallholder businesses. Findings by Bahiru *et al.* [17], Senapathy and Bojago demonstrate that credit use increased income-generating activities of households in Humbo District in Southern Ethiopia, resulting in increased derived income and purchasing power of the household to avoid the risk of food insecurity. Moreover, a study by Yobo

and Gnedeka in Togo showed that household food security increased with increased income (of the household head), especially through employment [18].

Guidelines for policy and programme implementation

Sustainable outcomes of policy formulation and planning are attainable only if policy guidelines and planned strategies are implemented effectively. In *lieu* of this, this article outlines guidelines for policy and programme implementation on poverty eradication, implementing nutritional programmes, and implementing irrigation projects in rural areas.

Poverty eradication

Poverty is also a major concern for food security among the FHHs as cited in the following responses:

“... they are trying to survive in one way or the other, using the given the resources that they have.” (P13)

“... the purchasing power of the people ... it is low” (P10)

“Purchasing power is low.” (P1)

Poverty eradication strategies can promote sustainable food security among the FHHs. Countries like Indonesia have such strategies in place. The Government of Indonesia has undertaken poverty reduction programmes such as the Joint Business Groups [19]. Programmes such as formation of self-help groups and implementing female education policies can promote food security among the FHHs in Voi Division.

Formation of self-help groups

The following *verbatims* emphasise the need for formation of self-help groups as poverty alleviation strategy:

“At least they form some groups whereby they can be contributing a small amount (of money) ... they can make table-banking whereby when you are hit by a need, it is easier to access the money... then they can buy food. Because kama huna chakula (if you do not have food), you can go and borrow a small “loan.” (P1)

“Maybe formation of groups, and then they get involved in small businesses, table banking. You know when they are in groups, wanaweza ku-access loans (they can access loans).” (P2)

“... form groups and participate in activities that are not capital intensive” (P5)

Women self-help is a strategy for community empowerment [20]. Table banking (mentioned in the *verbatim* quotes) is a strategy of self-help in Kenya, whereby members of a group pull resources such as money together, and consequently lend out the money in small loans to its members. Therefore, for economic self-empowerment, the FHHs' heads should form self-help groups by adopting the following guidelines: Formulate criteria for the group membership, formulate the group's constitution, identify and list down strategies of self-empowerment and implement them. A study by Brogan *et al.* [15] reveals that, diets among women in cooperatives (social groups) improved, since the cooperatives provided the women involved with decent work and the ability to move upward in their economic mobility, which also allowed them to reduce poverty and hunger within their households.

Implementing female-centred education policies

“Gender transformative” programmes seek to address the underlying structural causes of gender inequalities and transform unequal gender roles and relations, for example, by strengthening or creating positive gender norms, equitable power relations and social systems that promote gender equality [12]. There is a vicious gender inequality in the education sector. A study by Brogan *et al.* [15] reveals that women in Rwanda exhibited lack of formal education and there was no nutrition education programme in place before their project - thereby creating significant barriers to healthy diets among the women. To bridge such a gap in Kenya, including in the study location, the GoK should: Supervise effective implementation of the already existing free primary education especially among girls, stringently supervise the implementation of strategies for free secondary education and create incentives for female school retention, including among teenage mothers. This would help minimise school drop-out among the girls.

Educating females is associated with a myriad of benefits. A model result by Bahiru *et al.* [17] illustrates a significant positive association of education and household caloric consumption. Because of financial stability, the women under the study in Rwanda also mentioned having greater freedom to choose what they wanted to eat versus finding cheap food to maintain daily life and survive, for they were able to choose a variety of food items since the initiation of the project [17].

Implementing nutritional programmes

The following *verbatim* quotes indicate compromised food intake among the FHHs: “*Some getting a balanced diet, it is expensive.*” (P13)

“*I tend to think not (balanced) because of the level of poverty.*” (P2)

“*Most people are not having a balanced diet. Three meals in a day is not possible*” (P4)



The responses illuminate low dietary intake/undernutrition including among under-age members of the FHHs. Undernutrition, especially in children, is associated with impaired brain development and lower intelligence quotient, weakened immune system leading to increased risk of infectious diseases, premature death, stunting and reduced productivity including in school performance [21]. Lack of nutrition education in food can also influence the FHHs health badly.

Lack of available nutrition education in developing countries creates significant barriers to healthy diets, therefore, nutrition education programs should be examined for potential benefits for women and children [21]. As a guideline of mitigating the effects of the undernutrition, food agencies should consider integrating diversity of food items in each of their food allocations by ensuring that there is enough diversity of the food items, in order to meet acceptable dietary diversity. They should also organise seminars and workshops for capacity building on nutrition knowledge among the FHHs and educate the FHHs heads on proper household nutrition and food security strategies.

Positive impacts of implementing nutritional programmes is exemplified in that, community-based education programmes held in conjunction with food security projects have positively contributed towards improving children and family nutrition in various parts of East Africa - for instance, before nutritional training, women in Imani Village in Rwanda exhibited great urge to have sugar-loaded foods rather than local healthy vegetables [15]. However, their perspective changed with the training.

Implementing irrigation projects in rural areas

The following quotes illustrate the need for irrigation:

“...having irrigation to the people who have lands to do irrigation for agriculture..., lakini sasa (but now) it’s dry they don’t have source of water...”
(P2)

“There is a need to change the current farming system to climate-smart. Because there is a lot of effect due to climate change: improving on ... water conservation especially water harvesting - we should get at least several waters pans so that people can harvest water and use it for irrigation...” (P3)

“... having irrigation to the people who have lands to do irrigation for agriculture...” (P13)

One of the sustainable strategies of mitigating effects of droughts and crop failure is irrigation. This is consistent with Sibanda *et al.* [14] assertion that increasing

area of land under irrigation is a feasible strategy of promoting a natural resource base for food security. This is especially through increasing agricultural production and productivity [17]. The following guidelines are useful in establishing irrigation water supply in Voi Division: The local water agency, Taita-Taveta Water and Sewerage Company (TAVEVO) should implement irrigation water supply to all farming areas in the division, development stakeholders including the GoK and Taita-Taveta County Government should mobilise resources, especially funds to facilitate the water agency to construct the irrigation water infrastructure and TAVEVO should write grant proposals to foundations for extra funding besides the GoK funding. Extra donations by external agencies would be useful in expanding the project and mitigating project failure. Studies by Rusmayandi *et al.* [19] on the impacts of climate change on agricultural production in rural districts in Indonesia found that climate-change-resilient agricultural practices such as improved irrigation systems have helped mitigate the negative impacts of climate change on crops including rice and maize in the country [19].

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Gender equality strategies are vital for food security among the FHHs. Women's participation in rural appraisals creates a platform for them to make decisions concerning farming choices and food needs. This plays a key role in designing food intervention strategies that sustainably address their needs. Well-designed food policies address gender inequality and promote resource access among the FHHs. Moreover, family land inheritance by women provides them with farming plots for participation in farming practices for their household food requirements. Moreover, social networks, especially financial generating ones such as self-help groups boost their food purchasing power.

Poverty eradication strategies such as employment and affordable loans empower women economically for easy food access. Furthermore, well-designed female-centred education policies are easy to implement therefore transforming gender inequality in food security. Nutrition education, including conducting community-based nutritional education programmes among women are associated with positive outcomes. Studies show prevalence of better health among children from FHHs where the primary caregiver is educated in contrast with the non-educated. Irrigation mitigates effects of droughts, crop failure and increases agricultural production. Therefore, resource mobilisation, establishing and sustaining irrigation infrastructure are important in promoting food security among the FHHs in the study area.



Table 1: Biographical profiles of the key informants

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Highest level of education	Work experience	Nature of work
1	43	Male	Degree	11	Field monitor/office
2	30	Female	Diploma	5	Field monitor/officer
3	44	Male	Master's degree	16	Director NDMA
4	36	Male	Degree	6	Coordinator Asset Creation Project
5	48	Male	Diploma	16	Chief executive officer
6	34	Female	Diploma	10	Disaster response officer
7	26	Male	Diploma	5	Volunteer
8	49	Male	Degree	10	District Officer (administrative)
9	42	Male	Advanced college certificate	5	Clerical officer
10	50	Male	College certificate	30	Agricultural extension officer
11	33	Male	Degree	8	Sub-county agri-business development officer
12	38	Male	Degree	15	Agricultural production officer
13	44	Male	Degree	19	Business Administration & Managing director of Water Company
14	Skipped	Female	Degree	8	Crop development officer



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