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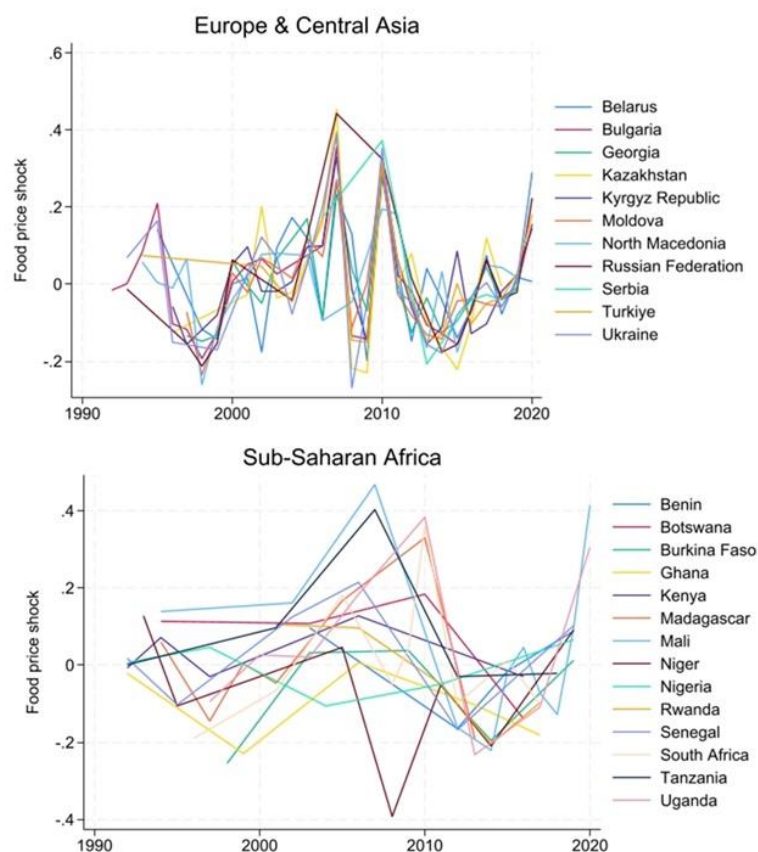
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Global Food Price Shocks and Poverty: What can be done?

Marta Marson and Donatella Saccone

Over the past years, the world has witnessed growing instability in global food markets, triggered by overlapping crises—from extreme climate events and supply chain disruptions to geopolitical instability and pandemics (Figure 1). These developments have repeatedly driven up international food prices, often with sudden and dramatic consequences.

Figure 1. Price shocks over time for some of the world regions



While the 2007–08 and 2010–11 food crises served as early warning signs, the more recent waves of price shocks — led by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and worsening climate conditions — have revealed the structural vulnerabilities of global food systems. In this context, the recent research article [International food prices, poverty and hunger](#) that we published on the [Italian Economic Journal](#) contributes to shed light on the impact that food price shocks have on poverty and its multiple dimensions, including monetary poverty, multidimensional deprivation and hunger. To this purpose, the paper analyzes a sample of 117 developed and developing countries observed in the period 1990-2020 and uses a country-specific international food price index derived from 17 commodities, while poverty is alternatively measured by: the mean income of the poorest deciles and percentiles, the headcount ratios of people living below the three international poverty lines adopted by the World Bank, the headcount ratios of people living in multidimensional poverty ([WB MPM](#)), the headcount ratios corresponding to its five specific components (income, sanitation, electricity, drinking water, education), and the prevalence of undernourishment.

The analysis finds strong, statistically significant evidence that increases in global food prices disproportionately reduce the real incomes of the poorest deciles in developing countries, with the effect growing even more severe at lower percentiles. This is also confirmed by the positive association found between spikes in food prices and the prevalence of monetary and multidimensional poverty and of undernourishment in the same group of countries. Conversely, the wealthiest deciles seem to gain from food price shocks, probably because of land ownership, export positions, and speculation, thus suggesting multiple effects on income distribution (as also shown in another paper that we recently published on [Food Policy: The effect of food price upsurges on income inequality: The richest win and the poorest lose](#)).

This underscores a troubling reality: international food price shocks are not just neutral market fluctuations — rather they are regressive events that deepen poverty, aggravate hunger and widen inequality, particularly in the Global South. It is worth specifying that the absence of statistically significant results for developed countries may be driven by the poverty measures used in the analysis rather than by a real absence of effects on the poor. The adoption of different metrics for poverty and malnutrition that are more appropriate and responsive in high-income country settings (such as relative poverty instead of absolute thresholds, as well as indicators of micronutrient deficiencies, overweight, and obesity) may indeed unveil even more widespread effects than those reported in the paper.

The policy implications of the study are far-reaching and urgent. In an era where economic resilience is unevenly distributed, and where the poor are the most exposed to external shocks, relying on market self-correction is no longer defensible. In particular, the study highlights three key areas to mitigate the impact of food price shocks on vulnerable people, while enabling them to share in any potential benefits. *First*, on the consumer side, countries need strong and flexible social protection systems that can expand quickly in response to shocks. This includes conditional and unconditional cash transfers, food vouchers, public work programs (e.g., food-for-work), and nutrition-based interventions such as school feeding and maternal support. Such programs must be targeted, data-driven, and adapted to local contexts, with particular attention to poor urban populations who are

largely net food consumers. Importantly, social safety nets should not be temporary crisis responses; they must be institutionalized as core components of development strategy.

Secondly, and in connection with this, policies should focus on maintaining stable domestic food prices by carefully regulating the use and release of public food reserves, curbing the allocation of food resources to non-consumable uses such as biofuel production, and, only when strictly necessary, introducing restrictions on food exports. *Third*, stabilizing food prices also involves strengthening domestic producers and increasing local agricultural output. Evidence from some studies (Headey, 2018; Headey & Hirvonen, 2023) indicates that, in certain contexts, higher food prices may correlate with poverty reduction. This is likely because poor groups still depend significantly on agriculture and related activities for their livelihoods (Headey, 2018). When adequately supported, these groups can potentially benefit from food price surges. In this view, food policies should focus on integrating small-scale farmers into supply chains, improving their productivity, and enhancing their resilience to shocks and market volatility by expanding their access to land, financial resources, and essential inputs. This need is especially critical in developing countries, where the poor are often more vulnerable to international price fluctuations—particularly when their economies rely heavily on agricultural exports. To address this, targeted measures such as subsidies for smallholders, crop insurance, microfinance, land reform, and investments in rural infrastructure and agricultural technology can be highly effective — if they are customized to the specific conditions and challenges faced by low-income farmers (see Huang et al., 2015, for more on pro-poor agricultural strategies).

Given the global nature of recent shocks, also food policy at the international level should be strengthened to promote coherent and cooperative coordination that is essential to mitigate the cross-border spillovers of food price volatility. During past crises, indeed, unilateral export bans and trade restrictions by key producers exacerbated global scarcity and price surges. These beggar-thy-neighbor policies not only hurt food-importing countries but also destabilize fragile economies and fuel political unrest. Such behaviors, moreover, disproportionately affect developing countries and the most food-insecure households. To address this, global institutions must play a stronger role in promoting transparency, collaborative response mechanisms and policy dialogue. Also regional cooperation should be expanded to facilitate food storage sharing, coordinated trade strategies, and regional safety nets. In addition, national and international effort must also address structural inequities in food supply chains, which are often controlled by large intermediaries, big traders and multinational firms. To this purpose, regulatory frameworks and competition policy should be strengthened to prevent excessive concentration and ensure that value is more equitably distributed along the chain (on the concentration of global food value chains and profiteering, see [UNCTAD, 2023](#)).

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Career Break Around Childbirth: The Role of Individual Preferences and Social Norms

Debora Di Gioacchino, Emanuela Ghignoni and Alina Verashchagina

Maternity leave policies provide women the right to a period of job-protected leave around childbirth and are a way to reduce the ‘cost of motherhood’, acting on both employment and fertility. Nevertheless, similar duration of mandatory [maternity leave throughout Europe](#) is coupled with very different outcomes in terms of actual length of career break and female labour force participation.

In our recent study, we examine the issue from both theoretical and empirical point of view ([Di Gioacchino et al. 2025](#)). The theoretical model highlights trade-offs faced by women regarding the job type, whether to have kids and then how much time to devote to childrearing. The outcome of interest depends crucially on such characteristics as woman’s wage (expected to reduce the career break) and preferences for parenting (expected to increase the career break). Preferences for parenting are known to condition fertility choices, whereas our study highlights they would also impact on the decision how much time to stay out of work following childbirth, adding to the debate about heterogeneity among women (Hakim 2004).

The theoretical model is tested using the [PLUS](#) 2014 and 2021 surveys on Italy. The country is characterized by low female labour force participation and fertility rates.¹ Despite the quite generous maternity leave legislation, a large majority of mothers in Italy stay at home longer than the five-month obligatory paid maternity leave or permanently drop out from the labour market at some point after childbirth ([Minello 2025](#)). The PLUS survey provides valuable information on the actual duration of continuous absence from work following childbirth, rarely available in other datasets, and the intentions to have children in the near future. The latter is used to construct the measure of ‘desired number of children’², which serves as a proxy for parenting time preferences, or the value attached to children (see e.g. [Luppi et al. 2024](#)). It is expected to capture the importance of childbearing for personal fulfilment or for the individual’s needs satisfaction in general.

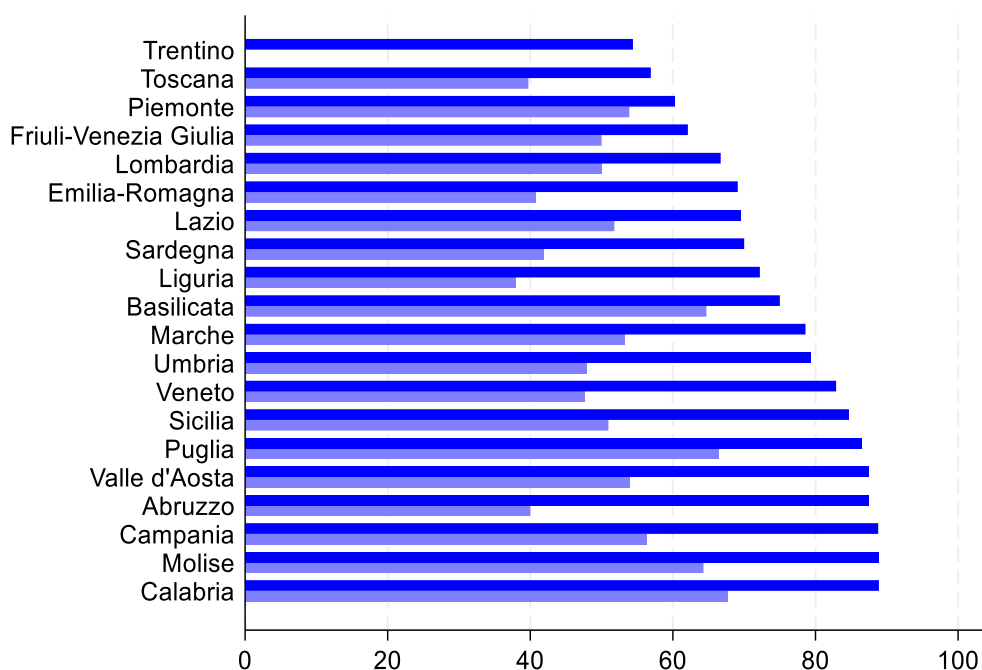
¹In 2024, the total fertility rate in Italy was 1.18, the third lowest in the EU27 after Malta (1.08) and Spain (1.16), whereas female employment rate in Italy (57.4%) was the lowest (age group 20-64), followed by Greece (59.9%) (Eurostat).

² Note, it is different from the ‘ideal number of children’, also discussed in the literature (see e.g. [UNFPA 2025](#)).

Put together, the results of our theoretical and empirical analyses suggest that women in high-career jobs tend to stay less out of the labour market following childbirth. Preferences for parenting time, instead, were associated to longer duration of career break in earlier years. More recently a divide has been revealed between low and highly educated women: while for the former the preferences for parenting time are no longer an obstacle for paid employment, for the latter it even became a push factor to work more. This can be partly explained by the diffusion of one-child-family model, as well as the change in parenting style. Other factors that motivate a woman's choice are job security, the availability of childcare facilities, and the presence of a collaborative partner.

In addition, contextual characteristics are important. For example, when mothers are expected to devote more time to childcare or otherwise be judged as 'bad mothers', women generally spend more time in this activity. Remarkably, the social norms are changing quite rapidly in this respect. As Figure 1 shows below, in a matter of 10 years, the percentage of respondents who reported that 'a pre-school child is likely to suffer if the mother works' reduced significantly in all Italian regions.

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who agree that 'a pre-school child suffers if the mother works'



Note: Dark-blue bars refer to the data from the European Value Survey 2008, light-blue bars to EVS 2018.

Source: own elaborations

Policies should thus prioritize challenging existing social norms and stereotypes about gender roles, which requires time and can be a matter of several generations. This strategy touches different areas of intervention, including regulation of advertising/language, and media more broadly, textbooks and other activities at school.

Our empirical findings suggest that education is negatively associated to the duration of career break for women. Plausible channels for this effect to manifest are better job quality and higher job satisfaction, less fragmented employment trajectories and prospects of career growth, higher self-esteem among women with higher educational attainments. Policies aimed at enhancing educational level and preventing dropouts from upper secondary and tertiary education are thus needed.

Another significant factor is the balance of power within couples. The availability of a collaborative partner allows to reduce career breaks, suggesting that promoting equal division of housework and care would improve the chances for women to remain at work after childbirth. The shared responsibility for kids is an issue, which also needs to reach employers, as longer and atypical working hours for men are often an impediment for the equal sharing of duties at home. More balanced parenting time would benefit children, mothers, and fathers.

Firms could also have a role in favouring more equal take up between parents of career breaks to care for children and in promoting equal pay and equal career opportunities for men and women. Policy should help incentivizing firms' 'gender-equal' behaviour and/or requiring transparency about wages, career progression, employment shares and opportunities in the advancement of skills.

On the labour market side, we also highlight the importance of working conditions for mothers. Our estimates show that mothers employed in the public sector, characterised by more secure jobs, spend less time out of work following childbirth. Actions are thus needed to effectively protect (potential) mothers at work, also in the private sector, otherwise chances are high that many women are expelled from the labour market. Those who remain at work, after the period of maternity leave, should also be encouraged to maintain and develop their skills, not to be pushed towards routine and less creative tasks affecting job satisfaction.

Finally, an important feature of the local context, reflecting the perception of women's role in politics and society at large, is female representation in local administration. Our results suggest that promoting gender equality in policy circles is crucial for enhancing women's participation in the labour market.

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