

# Barriers and facilitators to accessing and sustaining nutrition and food support among food-insecure single-parents

## Background and rationale

Adequate nutrition is essential for health and social participation, yet for low-income families it is shaped less by “choices” than by unstable income, price constraints, and how support systems are designed. Single mothers face a concentrated risk profile: time poverty, administrative burden, and stigma intersect with caregiving responsibilities, making it harder to secure stable access to food and to the benefits and services that could reduce hardship. In France, single-parent households—predominantly single-mother families—face high poverty (34.3% in 2023), are over-represented among emergency food-aid users, and experienced significant food insecurity (25% in 2020; INSEE 2021). In Egypt, food insecurity and nutrition-related conditions (for example, anaemia among women) remain major concerns.

France and Egypt provide a useful comparison of how governance structures can shape everyday access to nutrition/food support: France relies largely on state-led social protection alongside a large food-aid sector, while Egypt combines public programmes with a strong role for NGOs and community actors. The key gap is that evidence on how food-insecure single parents access and sustain support in practice—and where pathways break down—remains dispersed across programme types and settings, limiting actionable guidance for service design and equity-oriented policy.

## Objectives and research questions

This project will generate actionable evidence on nutrition/food-support pathways for food-insecure single parents by (i) conducting a systematic review to synthesize barriers and facilitators to access and sustained participation across contexts and programme models; (ii) using that synthesis to structure a focused comparison of mechanisms within the French and Egyptian frameworks (e.g., eligibility and documentation requirements, administrative friction, stigma, navigation/mediation, and coordination across actors); and (iii) translating findings into practical public health recommendations and pathway tools to improve access and continuity of support.

## Methods

### Systematic review

This project begins with a systematic review to synthesize published (and, where included, grey) literature on barriers and facilitators to accessing and sustaining participation in nutrition/food support among food-insecure single-parent/single-mother households (**protocol registered in PROSPERO ID: 1320590**). Searches will be conducted in major bibliographic databases and supplemented by reference and citation tracking; studies will be screened against predefined eligibility criteria, with data extracted on populations, programme types, and reported access/retention determinants. We will include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods evidence and appraise study quality using an appropriate tool, before integrating findings through a convergent mixed-methods synthesis.

Results will be organized across key determinant domains (administrative burden, time and financial constraints, information and navigation, service design, stigma/dignity, and implementation features) to identify where pathways most commonly break down and what supports continuity.

The resulting framework will directly inform the empirical pathway mapping and interview analyses in France and Egypt.

### Policy/service mapping (France and Egypt)

A brief documentary pathway analysis will map major nutrition/food-support programmes and access routes in both countries using legal/regulatory texts, official guidance, application forms, administrative websites, and key NGO programme documents. Information will be extracted with a standardized grid (eligibility, documentation, procedural steps, renewal conditions, discretion points,

user costs, outreach/mediation) and synthesized into comparative pathway maps highlighting likely points of delay, drop-out, or exclusion.

### **Qualitative analysis (France and Egypt)**

In France, qualitative data will be drawn from two ongoing studies. PrEVE (co-constructed with the community association Ikambéré) evaluates the acceptability of a community-based sexual health screening and prevention programme delivered by trained mediators to women experiencing vulnerability and marginalisation (largely migrant women) in Île-de-France. IROND-L examines access to multidisciplinary services for women exposed to intimate partner violence and/or sexual violence across several French sites. For both datasets, analysis will focus on modules documenting food insecurity and nutrition/food-support pathways (awareness and eligibility, administrative requirements, time/transport constraints, continuity/renewal, and the role of mediation/outreach). We expect to analyse approximately 15–20 participants per French dataset, with at least ~20 food-insecure single mothers across the two studies. In addition, we will conduct ~15–20 semi-structured interviews with policymakers and frontline stakeholders across France and Egypt, in collaboration with the Egyptian Food Bank and regional officers, to document implementation realities and coordination across public and non-profit actors. All interviews will be analysed using iterative thematic analysis with a shared codebook (framework plus inductive coding), and cross-country matrices will be used to identify common mechanisms and context-specific differences..

### **Scientific mediation project (doctoral mission: ~32 days/year)**

Alongside the research, the doctoral candidate will devote the equivalent of 32 days per year to scientific mediation. These activities will aim to (i) raise public awareness about food insecurity and access to nutrition support among single-mother households, and (ii) create structured dialogue with women supported by partner organisations in France and Egypt, as well as with the professionals who work with them. Planned actions include:

- public-facing events (talks, roundtables, film screenings and discussions, and results restitution sessions) co-organised with partner NGOs and, where appropriate, participants; targeted workshops for partner associations, community mediators, and frontline practitioners to exchange on practical barriers and feasible improvements;
- and the production of accessible outreach content (short videos/podcasts, social media posts, and blog articles, including on platforms such as soepidemio.com or equivalents), complemented by briefings and seminars for associative and institutional stakeholders.

ethical requirements.

### **Co-supervision**

**Fabienne El Khoury** (epidemiologist, ESSMA–IPLESP, Sorbonne Université/Inserm; ED393) will guide the public health and social epidemiology framing, study design, analysis strategy, and French ethics/data governance, and support dissemination within ASU networks.

**Prof. Seham Elmrayed** (epidemiologist, Institute of Global Health and Human Ecology, American University in Cairo) will provide expertise in maternal/child nutrition and the Egypt context, facilitate local academic/field linkages, and contribute to cross-country interpretation and dissemination.

The project will also benefit from the collaboration of **the Egyptian food bank**.

### **Candidate profile and role**

The project is suited to a candidate with training in **public health and/or social sciences** (e.g., social epidemiology, sociology, anthropology, political science), strong **qualitative research skills** (interviews, thematic analysis), and interest in **nutrition and health inequalities**. The PhD candidate will conduct the France–Egypt comparative study, contribute to protocol/tools (documentary extraction grid, interview guides), manage and analyse qualitative data (coding, cross-country comparison), produce scientific outputs (papers, conferences), and deliver scientific mediation activities with NGOs and practitioners (seminars, workshops, online outreach content), in line with