

# Gender-centred Approach for Food and Nutritional security: A Way Forward

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Despite decades of global development efforts to combat food and nutrition insecurity, the problem of hunger and undernourishment persists, particularly in the developing world. Reports indicate that the number of undernourished people has been increasing since 2015 (UN, 2021; FAO, 2020). However, policymakers and practitioners remain committed to finding solutions to this ongoing and critical issue, which causes suffering for millions worldwide.

Certain groups are more affected by food and nutrition insecurity. Smallholder farmers in developing countries are known to be among the most food-insecure populations (Ogutu and Qaim, 2019; FAO, 2019; Fanzo, 2018; Sibhatu and Qaim, 2017). Within this group, youth, indigenous people, and especially women face even greater challenges. In 2019, food insecurity was more prevalent among women than men on all continents, and 60% of the chronically hungry population consisted of women and girls.

Evidence demonstrates that gender inequality contributes to food insecurity, with hunger being more prominent in countries with lower gender equality levels. Increasing gender equality and women's empowerment have positive effects on food security and nutrition (CARE, 2020b). Women play crucial roles in the agricultural sector, representing over 37% of the global rural agricultural workforce. This percentage rises to 48% in low-income countries and reaches as high as 80% in Sahelian countries (FAO, 2016). Additionally, women make up nearly half of the world's 600 million small-scale livestock farmers and about half of the workforce in small-scale fisheries. However, their work, often conducted informally within family settings, is frequently undervalued.

It is worth noting that if women in rural areas had the same access to productive activities as men, agricultural production would increase, potentially providing sustenance for an additional 150 million people (FAO, 2011). This underscores the recent call in

the State of Food and Nutrition Security in the World report for the inclusion of women in discussions and actions concerning the future of food systems (FAO, 2021).

This paper argues that in developing countries, a stronger gender perspective should be at the forefront of the food systems, given women's pivotal role in ensuring food security, nutrition, sustainability, and resilience of agrifood systems.

## Understanding gender duality in Food Systems

Oxfam (2019) points out that "women are vulnerable on all dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilization, and stability." This underscores the importance of integrating a strong gender perspective in discussions about food systems. Women are central to food systems, serving as both producers and the primary caretakers of households.

Women's roles in food production range from being direct producers on their account, wage workers, to unpaid labour on family farms (UNDP, 2016; Raney *et al.*, 2011).

## Women's food production role

While significant strides have been made toward achieving the fifth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender inequality remains a persistent challenge, even in advanced economies (UN, 2019; IISD, 2019). This article delves into specific obstacles that women encounter within local food systems and their food security needs.

In the realm of agriculture, deeply ingrained gender norms impose limitations on women in various ways. These norms often designate men as the heads of households, granting them control over household decision-making, which encompasses the allocation of resources, including household income and expenditures (Hillenbrand and Miruka, 2019). Another prevalent gender barrier experienced by women in rural areas is mobility restrictions, which confine them to their home areas (Diirro *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, within the economic system, women face inherent gender biases that restrict their access to

credit. Smallholder female farmers, in particular, encounter challenges in obtaining loans due to societal norms and the absence of collateral (FAO, 2019).

It is essential to recognize that different households, and consequently women from various households, encounter varying levels of constraints in economic resources and opportunities based on their socio-economic characteristics. A secure source of livelihood is paramount for individual and household food and nutrition security, making it an integral component of local food systems.

### **Women's reproductive role**

Gender disparities influence food dynamics not only on a global and community level but also in households. Women across the world undertake a disproportionate amount of reproductive work in addition to their productive responsibilities, often performing nearly two and a half times as much work as men (OECD, 2014). This includes caring for children and family members, cleaning, gathering food, fetching water and firewood, preparing meals, and feeding the family. UN-Women (UN, 2012) highlights that women in sub-Saharan Africa collectively spend up to 40 billion hours annually fetching water, a task that significantly impacts their employment opportunities. Notably, the health and general well-being of children is closely tied to the role of mothers (Halim et al., 2011; Quisumbing et al., 1996). This influence begins during women's pregnancies, as their nutritional status during pregnancy and breastfeeding plays a crucial role in the nourishment and health of their children.

Furthermore, in comparison to men, women tend to allocate a higher proportion of their income toward family expenditures related to food, health, and education (Quisumbing et al., 1996). UN-Women (UN, 2012) emphasizes that when more income is placed in the hands of women, it leads to improvements in child nutrition, health, and education. It is estimated that at least 90% of women's income is reinvested into their households and families (FAO, 2016; CGI, 2021). Paradoxically, despite being the primary caregivers and food providers in their households, women often find themselves eating last and receiving the smallest portions (CARE, 2020a).

Nutrition knowledge is a critical component of an effective food system as it contributes to the adoption of healthy diets. Notably, reports indicate that the majority of the world's illiterate individuals (75%) are women (UN, 2012). Limited access to nutrition knowledge contributes to food insecurity among women. As proposed by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS, 2021), promoting healthy diets and sustainable food systems involves empowering key actors by supporting them in enhancing their knowledge, awareness, education, the quality of information available, motivations, skills, and sustainable practices. Furthermore, evidences shows that gender-based violence is a systematic barrier to women's empowerment in food systems.

### **Conclusion**

The existing gender gap and challenges in access to productive resources, markets, and agricultural services pose a challenge to the sustainability and resilience of these food systems. Addressing gender inequality, particularly in enabling women's access to and control over land and productive resources, is perceived as a pivotal step toward enhancing food access and availability at both the community and household levels.

While there is a growing awareness of women's roles in food security, as Clement *et al.* (2019) point out, this has not translated into "actual investments dedicated to women's empowerment and resulting outcomes on gender equality and enhanced food security." It is time to systematically incorporate a robust gender perspective into food systems.

To achieve this, there are several key recommendations:

### **Incorporating a strong gender perspective**

Include a robust gender perspective, supported by accurate sex-disaggregated data at the individual level. Additionally, data should be disaggregated by other socioeconomic characteristics such as age, race, class, and geographical location. Current monitoring and evaluation approaches often fall short by primarily collecting household data and failing to delve into individual-level dynamics. Given that men often serve as the heads of households in

many rural areas, it is vital to investigate the factors influencing women's food security individually (Visser & Wangu., 2021). Much of the literature on gender focuses on social norms that are specific to local contexts. More targeted research is needed to identify patterns and pathways to advance women's empowerment across different geographies.

### Placing women at the center of food security solutions

Women's decision-making power is a cross-cutting issue, but is often studied at the individual, household, or community level. It remains understudied at the level of food systems. Research at this level would focus on strategies to increase women's voices and preferences in agricultural solutions, including technology design, extension, and adoption, and in setting research and policy priorities for food systems transformation.

### Contextual analysis of gender inequality

Gender disparities in impoverished communities are interconnected with other challenges faced by these communities, including poverty, health and well-being issues, access to clean water and sanitation, decent work, and the impacts of climate change. There is also a link between women's mental health and household nutrition. While the evidence on this is mixed and limited, some studies suggest that maternal depression can lessen household food security, and interventions that improve food security can also improve mental health. To start building this evidence, IFPRI researchers in 2021, added indicators on sexual harassment and violence against women to the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index for Market Inclusion (pro-WEAI+MI) (Njuki, *et al.*, 2021). More research is needed on these psychosocial indicators of women's health and the links between mental health and food insecurity.

Gender inequalities must be analyzed within the broader context of these challenges, highlighting the intersectionality of these issues. Different individuals within seemingly homogenous communities have varying abilities, needs, and capacities, necessitating solutions that reflect these diverse realities. This approach will contribute to a

more nuanced and effective policy and practice framework for resilient and sustainable food systems that can lead to food security for all.

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