



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

OVERVIEW



Front cover image: NIGER
- A man and a woman work
together to remove nuts
from a drying machine.



LET'S



GROW



EQUALITY

OVERVIEW

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

Agrifood systems are a major employer of women globally and constitute a more important source of livelihood for women than for men in many countries. Empowering women and closing gender gaps in agrifood systems thus enhances the well-being of women and their households, reducing hunger, boosting incomes and strengthening resilience. This report provides a comprehensive overview of the status of women in agrifood systems. It analyses the multiple sources of inequality that constrain their participation, well-being and empowerment; describes policies and approaches that have supported gender equality and women's empowerment; and details how women's equal participation in agrifood systems can transform individual and global outcomes.

Despite the importance of agrifood systems for women's livelihoods and the welfare of their families, women's roles tend to be marginalized and their working conditions are likely to be worse than men's – irregular, informal, part-time, low-skilled, labour-intensive and thus vulnerable. Women also have higher burdens of unpaid care, limiting their opportunities for education and employment. This is true both for women working in primary agricultural production, with wages and productivity systematically lower than those of men, and for women working in off-farm segments of agrifood systems, where their work is mostly in lower-value nodes. Women may not be systematically excluded from high-value, export-oriented value chains or from entrepreneurship in agrifood systems, but their participation is usually constrained by discriminatory social



© FAO/Jafar Al Merai

norms and barriers to knowledge, assets, resources and social networks.

Women's access to land, inputs, services, finance and digital technology – which is key to working in agrifood systems – continues to lag behind men's. In many countries there still is much to do to ensure that women own land in equal proportion to men and that legal frameworks protect their rights. It is alarming how little the gaps in women's access to extension and irrigation and ownership of livestock have closed over the past decade, although it is encouraging that gaps in their access to financial services, mobile internet and mobile phones are narrowing.

Discriminatory social norms and rules affecting women and girls are at the heart of gender inequality and are slow to change.

Attitudes towards women's work outside the home, the acceptability of gender-based violence and other norms affecting women's livelihoods in agrifood systems remain dangerously restrictive in much of the world. Formal policies and strategies may increasingly identify the constraints and inequalities that women face, but few national policies specify objectives to address them. This is despite the evidence that a broader approach to women's empowerment – reducing the barriers to their participation and changing the norms and rules that constrain it – has great benefits for women's well-being and for wider society as a whole. Such an approach also has substantial co-benefits for women's livelihoods, earnings, health and nutrition of their children.

↑ SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC – A woman, after collecting figs, her only source of livelihood, dries them in the sun.

Coping mechanisms and resilience to shocks and stressors are shaped by gender inequalities, and shocks and crises have a greater negative impact on women's livelihoods in agrifood systems than they do on men's. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women's food insecurity rose faster than men's, and job losses in both primary agricultural production and off-farm segments of the agrifood systems were much more pronounced for women than for men. Women were called on to draw down their more limited assets and savings more quickly than were men. During climate shocks, women's more limited resources and assets constrain their adaptive capacity and resilience.

These challenges to women's full and equal employment in agrifood systems hold back their productivity and sustain wage gaps. Closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agrifood systems would increase global gross domestic product by 1 percent (or nearly USD 1 trillion). This would reduce global food insecurity by about 2 percentage points, reducing the number of food-insecure people by 45 million.

Women's empowerment is also key to economic and social outcomes. Benefits from projects that empower women are higher than those that just mainstream gender. More than half of bilateral finance for agriculture and rural development already mainstreams gender, but only 6 percent treats gender as fundamental. If half of small-scale producers benefited from development interventions that focused on empowering women, it would significantly raise the incomes of an additional 58 million people and increase the resilience of an additional 235 million people.

Women's work in agrifood systems

Agrifood systems are a major employer of women. Globally, 36 percent of working women and 38 percent of working men work in agrifood systems as of 2019. For both women and men, this represents a decline of about 10 percentage points since 2005, driven almost exclusively by a reduction in employment in primary agricultural production.

Agrifood systems are a more important source of livelihood for women than for men in many countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, 66 percent of women's employment is in agrifood systems, compared with 60 percent of men's. In southern Asia, women overwhelmingly work in agrifood systems (71 percent of women, versus 47 percent of men), although fewer women than men are in the labour force. Agrifood systems are a key source of employment for young women, especially those aged 15–24.

In general, women account for a greater share of agricultural employment at lower levels of economic development, as inadequate education, limited access to basic infrastructure and markets, high unpaid-work burden and poor rural employment opportunities outside agriculture severely limit women's opportunities for off-farm work. Women make up well over 50 percent of the agricultural labour force in many sub-Saharan African countries. About half of the labour force in agriculture is female in several countries in Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Viet Nam.

AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS ARE A MORE IMPORTANT SOURCE OF LIVELIHOOD FOR WOMEN THAN FOR MEN IN MANY COUNTRIES.



children and other family members and the implications of this burden for women's time and employment.

↑ PERU – A rural woman in the field tending her crops.

Women's access to assets, services and resources

Women's access to assets and resources key to agrifood systems – such as land, inputs, services, finance and digital technology – continues to lag behind men's. Gaps directly related to agricultural production remain substantial, but gender gaps in education, finance and information and communications technology, which are particularly important for developing off-farm businesses and employment opportunities in agrifood systems, are closing more quickly. Nevertheless, sustained, quality access to assets and resources remains a challenge.

Women in agricultural households remain significantly disadvantaged in landownership compared with men; half the countries reporting on Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 5.a.2 have weak legal protections for women's land rights. The percentage of men who have ownership or secure tenure rights over agricultural land is twice that of women in more than 40 percent of the countries that have reported on women's landownership (Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 5.a.1), and a larger percentage of men than women have such rights in 40 of 46 countries reporting. Even so, the share of women among landowners increased in 10 of 18 countries over the last

Women who work in agricultural production tend to do so under highly unfavourable conditions. They tend to be concentrated in the poorest countries, where alternative livelihoods are not available, and they maintain the intensity of their work in conditions of climate-induced weather shocks and in situations of conflict. Women are less likely to participate as entrepreneurs and independent farmers and are engaged in the production of less lucrative crops. Often, women are unpaid family workers or casual workers in agriculture. Social norms may also constrain women from producing crops and participating in activities dominated by men. The gender gap in land productivity between female- and male-managed farms of the same size is 24 percent. On average, women earn 18.4 percent less than men in wage employment in agriculture; this means that women receive 82 cents for every dollar earned by men.

Moving from primary agricultural production to off-farm work in agrifood systems has historically led to improved livelihoods for both women and men. **However, the roles of women in off-farm work in agrifood systems are more likely to be in less profitable value chains and activities or on worse terms than those of men due to restrictive traditional social norms or poor access to assets and resources.**

Women's greater burden of unpaid domestic and care work, such as cleaning, cooking and caring for household members, **contributes to inequalities in labour-market participation and outcomes.** This is particularly evident in low- and middle-income countries. In rural areas, women's unpaid-work burden is greater than that of men in large part because of the time they spend collecting water. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the disproportionate burden women shoulder in unpaid care of

decade, with marked improvements in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia.

Progress has been slow in closing gaps in women's access to irrigation and in ownership of livestock. On average, men own more livestock than do women and are more likely than women to own large livestock such as cattle. These gaps have changed little in the last decade, although gaps in ownership of smaller species such as sheep and poultry tend to be narrower.

Women in agriculture still have significantly less access than men to inputs, including improved seeds, fertilizers and mechanized equipment. On a positive note, the gender gap in access to mobile internet in low- and middle-income countries fell from 25 percent to 16 percent between 2017 and 2021, and the gender gap in access to bank accounts narrowed from 9 to 6 percentage points. Women are as likely as men to adopt new technologies when the necessary enabling factors are put in place and they have equal access to complementary resources.

Agency, norms and policies

Discriminatory social norms in agrifood systems create power imbalances between men and women and limit the choices available to women, who usually are more involved in unpaid care and domestic work. Such norms commonly restrict women's mobility and limit their options for non-domestic work and market activities and their access to and control over assets and income. Gender-based discrimination in social institutions varies by region and country but remains unacceptably high globally. This constrains women's full and productive employment in agrifood

systems (as sellers, employers or employees) and affects their ability to access and benefit from services, technologies and rural organizations.

Advancing gender equality and women's empowerment is critical to women's well-being and to society at large and thus has intrinsic value. Significant advances in measuring women's empowerment in agrifood systems over the past decade show that women's empowerment has a positive impact on agricultural production, food security, diets and child nutrition.

Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment means addressing constraining social norms and rigid gender roles affecting how women participate in agrifood systems. Increasing attention has been placed on addressing constraints created by discriminatory social norms and gender-blind policies and laws in agrifood systems. Projects have increasingly aimed at increasing women's empowerment and at measuring the impact of interventions on both agency and empowerment. To do this effectively, men, boys and community leaders must all be engaged in gender-transformative processes.

↓ SRI-LANKA - A woman farmer watering crops.



©FAO/Ishara Kodirana

**GENDER-BASED
DISCRIMINATION IN
SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS
VARIES BY REGION AND
COUNTRY BUT REMAINS
UNACCEPTABLY
HIGH GLOBALLY.**

The extent to which national policy frameworks address gender issues improved over the past decade. National policies and budgets in East Africa and Latin America, for example, have increasingly highlighted structural gaps in access to land, inputs, services, finance and digital technology and included efforts to produce gender-responsive outcomes. However, the extent to which agricultural policies specifically address gender equality and women's empowerment varies. Even though more than 75 percent of agricultural policies that FAO analysed recognized women's roles and/or challenges in agriculture, only 19 percent had gender equality in agriculture or women's rights as explicit policy objectives. And only 13 percent encouraged rural women's participation in the policy cycle.

Resilience and adaptation to shocks

Coping mechanisms and resilience to shocks and stressors are shaped by gender inequalities. Shocks and crises have a large impact on women's livelihoods in agrifood systems, and these shocks and crises are multiple and often overlapping. In many countries, these shocks and crises occur in contexts of very high gender inequalities.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic crisis have been intensified and shaped by gender inequalities in agrifood-system livelihoods. Globally, 22 percent of women lost their jobs in off-farm agrifood systems work in the first year of the pandemic, compared with only 2 percent of men. The gap in food insecurity between men and women widened from 1.7 percentage points in 2019 to 4.3 percentage points in 2021. Women's care burden also increased: in Honduras and Uganda, for example, lockdown measures increased girls' domestic and care burden and reduced their school attendance more than they did those of boys. The incidence and perceptions of gender-based violence soared, especially domestic violence and abuse against women and girls, largely as a result of intrahousehold tensions caused by lockdowns, school closures and food and financial insecurities.

Women often have more sensitivity to climate shocks and natural disasters than do men and have different resilience capacity. While women are not inherently more at risk from climate change and shocks, resource and other constraints can make them more sensitive to their effects and less able to adapt to them, increasing their vulnerability. For example, women's work burdens, including hours worked in agriculture, tend to decline less than men's during climate shocks such as heat stress. Discriminatory gender norms limiting women's mobility and their ability to access extension services and climate information present further obstacles to climate adaptation. Women are also often underrepresented in climate policy decision-making at all levels.

Conflict and insecurity remain key drivers of food crises and food insecurity. Women are often more vulnerable than men to acute food insecurity because they face additional risks, barriers and disadvantages. Violent conflicts also have gender-differentiated impacts on mobility, gender-based violence, health and education outcomes, and political and civic engagement. Conflict increases employment in agriculture more for women than for men. However, while it reduces the working hours of both men and women, women's working hours are reduced less than those of men.

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES SHOW PROMISE IN CHANGING NORMS, ARE COST-EFFECTIVE AND HAVE HIGH RETURNS.

What has worked and how to move forward

Reducing gender inequalities in livelihoods, access to resources and resilience in agrifood systems is a critical pathway towards gender equality and women's empowerment and towards more just and sustainable agrifood systems. These improvements are possible when an enabling environment exists and interventions are well designed to tackle the multidimensional and interrelated challenges facing women and men.

Gender-transformative approaches show promise in changing discriminatory norms across a broad array of areas. Available data indicate that such approaches are cost-effective and have high returns. However, more work is needed on developing pathways to implement gender-transformative approaches at scale.

It is also critical to improve productivity and close gaps related to access to assets and resources. Interventions alleviating women's workloads and improving their productivity have been particularly successful when they address care and unpaid domestic workburdens, strengthen women's capacities through education and training, improve access to technology and resources, and strengthen land-tenure security. Access to child care has a large positive effect on mothers' employment in and returns to agrifood-system activities.

Closing the gender gaps in landownership and secure tenure is particularly important as secure land rights have multiple positive impacts. Gaps can be narrowed through a combination of implementing reforms on land registration, increasing land-rights awareness and access to community-based legal aid, and fostering women's participation in local land institutions. Additionally, services (such as

← KYRGYZSTAN - Rural women harvesting their crops.



© FAO/Wyacheslaw Oseledko



Second, localized interventions which address multiple inequalities that have been proven to close gender gaps and empower women in agrifood systems should be carefully scaled up, taking into consideration the local context. While engaging with communities and households on gender-biased local norms through gender-transformative approaches remains critical, to reach scale governments, international organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector must influence positive changes in gender norms and improve women's access to resources through national policies, campaigns and large-scale integrated programmes. Only by reaching scale can we achieve large benefits for women's well-being and significant gains in economic growth and food security.

← KENYA - Two young women inspect the health status of the local chickens.

extension) and resources (such as technology) must be designed with women's needs in mind. Digital tools and information and communications technology can facilitate closing multiple gaps.

Group-based approaches are important for increasing women's empowerment and resilience to shocks and stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. They encourage the uptake of technology and increase adaptive capacity. They can also increase women's participation in climate policy processes.

Social protection programmes have increased women's employment and enhanced women's resilience. They have facilitated climate adaptation, improved well-being in contexts where risks from climate change are high and helped in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts of extreme weather events resulting from climate change.

As a way forward, three elements are critical. **First, the collection and use of high-quality data, disaggregated by sex, age and other forms of social and economic differentiation, and the implementation of rigorous qualitative and quantitative gender research are paramount for monitoring, evaluating and accelerating progress on gender equality in agrifood systems.** Despite improvements in the past ten years, significant gaps remain in the availability, scope and granularity of data, and in the evidence on what works and under what conditions for building more inclusive agrifood systems.

Finally, interventions must be designed to close gender inequalities and empower women. Interventions are more likely to bridge gender gaps in agrifood systems and bring about positive and lasting improvements in women's welfare when they integrate explicit actions towards gender equality and women's empowerment. When possible, they should use transformative approaches at community and national level to address discriminatory gender norms and attitudes. Doing so can drive major improvements in incomes and resilience.

THE INCREASE IN SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA AND MEASUREMENT OF EMPOWERMENT ARE KEY TO EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING AND POLICY.

NUMERICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Agrifood systems are a major employer of both women and men. Globally, **36 percent** of working women are employed in agrifood systems, along with **38 percent** of working men.

For both women and men, this represents a decline of about **10 percentage points** since 2005, driven almost exclusively by a reduction in employment in primary agricultural production.

Globally, **21 percent** of all workers in the fishery and aquaculture primary sector are women and almost **50 percent** of all workers in the entire aquatic value chain (including pre- and post-harvest) are women. Female workers are significantly more likely than male workers to work part-time or in other vulnerable positions.

The gender gap in land productivity between female- and male-managed farms of the same size is **24 percent**.

Agrifood systems are a more important source of livelihood for women than for men in many countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, **66 percent** of women's employment is in agrifood systems, compared with **60 percent** of men's employment. In southern Asia, **71 percent** of women in the labour force work in agrifood systems versus **47 percent** of men.

Women engaged in wage employment in agriculture earn **82 cents** for every dollar that men earn.

Men have greater ownership or secure tenure rights over agricultural land than do women in **40 of 46 countries** reporting on Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 5.a.1.

The gender gap in women's access to mobile internet in low- and middle-income countries narrowed from **25 percent** to **16 percent** between 2017 and 2021, and the gender gap in access to bank accounts narrowed from **9 percentage points** to **6 percentage points**.

While **75 percent** of policy documents relating to agriculture and rural development from **68 countries** recognize women's roles and/or women's challenges in agriculture and rural development, only **19 percent** included policy goals related to gender.

The gap in food insecurity between men and women widened from **1.7 percentage points** in 2019 to **4.3 percentage points** in 2021.

Globally, **22 percent** of women lost their jobs in the off-farm segment of agrifood systems in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared with only **2 percent** of men.

Closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agrifood-system employment would increase global gross domestic product by **1 percent** (or nearly USD 1 trillion). This would reduce global food insecurity by about **2 percentage points**, reducing the number of food-insecure people by **45 million**.

If half of small-scale producers benefited from development interventions which focused on empowering women, it would significantly raise the incomes of an additional **58 million** people and increase the resilience of an additional **235 million** people.

POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

- Increasing women's empowerment is essential for women's well-being and has a positive impact on agricultural production, food security, diets and child nutrition.
- Gender-transformative approaches to change restrictive social norms are cost-effective and have high returns, but more work is needed on developing pathways to implement gender-transformative approaches at scale.
- Enhancing women's rights to own or have secure tenure over agricultural land has positive impacts on empowerment, investment, natural-resource management, access to services and institutions, resilience and food security, reducing gender-based violence and increasing women's bargaining power.



- Access to formal child care has a large positive effect on mothers' employment in and returns to agrifood-system activities.
- Improving women's access to agricultural extension is important to maximize food security and nutritional outcomes and to facilitate women's participation across agrifood systems.

↑ ITALY – Two small-scale food producers from Syrian Arab Republic visit the vegetable gardens of the University of Gastronomic Sciences.

INCREASING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IS ESSENTIAL FOR WOMEN'S WELL-BEING AND HAS A POSITIVE IMPACT ON AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION, FOOD SECURITY, DIETS AND CHILD NUTRITION.

ACCESS TO FORMAL CHILD CARE HAS A LARGE POSITIVE EFFECT ON MOTHERS' EMPLOYMENT IN AND RETURNS TO AGRIFOOD-SYSTEM ACTIVITIES.

- Group-based approaches are important for increasing women's empowerment and resilience to shocks and stresses such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. They have also proven effective for increasing women's participation in climate policy processes, for increasing uptake of technology and increasing adaptive capacity.
- Social protection programmes have increased women's employment and enhanced women's resilience. They have also facilitated climate adaptation, improved well-being in contexts where climate risk is high and helped in recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate shocks.
- The increase in efforts to collect sex-disaggregated data and measure empowerment in its multiple dimensions is central to improving the design and effectiveness of programming and policy in terms of gender equality and empowerment.
- However, major gaps remain in the availability of sex-disaggregated data on access to productive assets and services, climate-change adaptation and resilience, and nutrition. Data and research are also limited on women and men who face additional inequalities due to age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, Indigenous identity and remoteness.



← PAKISTAN – A woman holds her daughter as she arrives to work at a vegetable field.




**LET'S
GROW
EQUALITY**

REQUIRED CITATION

FAO. 2023. *The status of women in agrifood systems – Overview*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc5060en>



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO licence