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MULTI-SECTORAL NUTRITION TECHNICAL GUIDANCE BRIEF

Working within the Food System: Gender Considerations for Achieving Improved Diets

Credit: Feed the Future

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This brief is part of a series of technical briefs that provide guidance for developing and implementing multi-sectoral nutrition programming across agriculture and food systems in support of the U.S. Government Global Food Security Strategy (GFSS) and the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID's) plan under the strategy. It is designed to be used by agriculture and nutrition staff, both within and outside USAID, to apply technical guidance to practice.

The brief suggests how to take evidence-based actions that consider gender when designing and implementing approaches to improve diets for all through the food system. It offers ideas across the food system for promoting gender equality while improving diets. The brief reinforces the importance of considering the programming context to prioritize actions that address barriers and support practices most likely to impact diet and nutrition outcomes.

BOX 1. KEY MESSAGES

Investments to improve diets and nutrition through food systems should—

- Enhance women's roles in agriculture and food systems and address barriers to accessing activities and technologies that decrease labor burdens
- Facilitate women's participation in diversified off-farm livelihoods as processors, entrepreneurs, traders, and wage workers, and include workplace support to offset risks to household nutrition
- Ensure women's opportunities for income generation, decision-making, and control over household income
- Strengthen access to high-quality social and behavior change for women and men
- Involve men and boys when seeking to address gender norms that restrict women's and girls' participation in the food system.

CAUSE OR CONSEQUENCE?

Gender inequality is both a cause and consequence of malnutrition. Women play a critical role in the nutrition and health of their families, yet they— along with children—are often the hardest hit by malnutrition. When women experience poor nutrition early in life, it reduces their learning potential, increases reproductive and maternal health risks, and lowers productivity, limiting women's access to resources (Mucha 2012). Gender roles, norms, and gendered access to and control over resources influence how women and men contribute to and benefit from the food system (Harris-Fry et al. 2020). This is particularly true in rural areas of low- and middle-income countries, where 40 percent of people work in the agricultural sector and large gender inequalities remain (Gindling 2014).

GENDER AND FOOD SYSTEMS

If we are to reach the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, we must transform the food system to be more resilient and sustainable. This transformation will foster access to affordable, safe, and nutritious diets, especially for the populations most vulnerable to malnutrition, such as women and children. As outlined in USAID's *Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy 2014–2025*, alongside investments in nutrition-specific actions, investments in nutrition-sensitive actions through the food system promote an enabling environment for improving nutrition (USAID 2014).

The *GFSS* elevates equity and inclusion, especially of women and youth, across food production systems and surrounding economies, viewing food security through an intersectional lens that includes gender, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and other characteristics.

BOX 2. WHY WE PRIORITIZE GENDER EQUALITY IN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS

- Gender inequalities are both a cause and an outcome of unsustainable food systems and of inequitable food access, consumption, and production.
- Gender inequalities in the food system negatively impact the diets and health of women and children and limit the potential of the agriculture sector as a whole.
- Women are essential actors in food systems but face societal constraints and barriers that limit their agency and compensation.
- Both women and men are critical participants in development approaches to reduce food systems inequalities and contribute to improving poverty and malnutrition.

Gender is a critical component of this transformation. The food system encompasses the entirety of the production-to-plate journey, defined in the GFSS as, "interrelated components of people, behaviors, relationships, and material goods that interact in the production, processing, packaging, transporting, trade, marketing, consumption, and use of food, feed, and fiber through aquaculture, farming, wild fisheries, forestry, and pastoralism." (USAID 2021b, p. 84). All of these elements affect consumer behavior, diets, and, ultimately, nutrition outcomes.

The USAID Bureau for Resilience and Food Security (RFS) Food Systems Conceptual Framework (figure 1) illustrates three main components representing food system supply and demand: food supply, food environment, and food and water utilization. Food system supply and demand are affected by and also affect external drivers both negatively and positively. External investment levers are the actions of actors, such as USAID and other donors, and of public and private sector entities, that can influence food system transformation positively and affect development outcomes of diets, income, health and nutrition, and environmental sustainability. Though not explicitly highlighted in the framework, gender roles, gender norms, and gendered resource allocations impact food system drivers, supply and demand, and outcomes significantly.

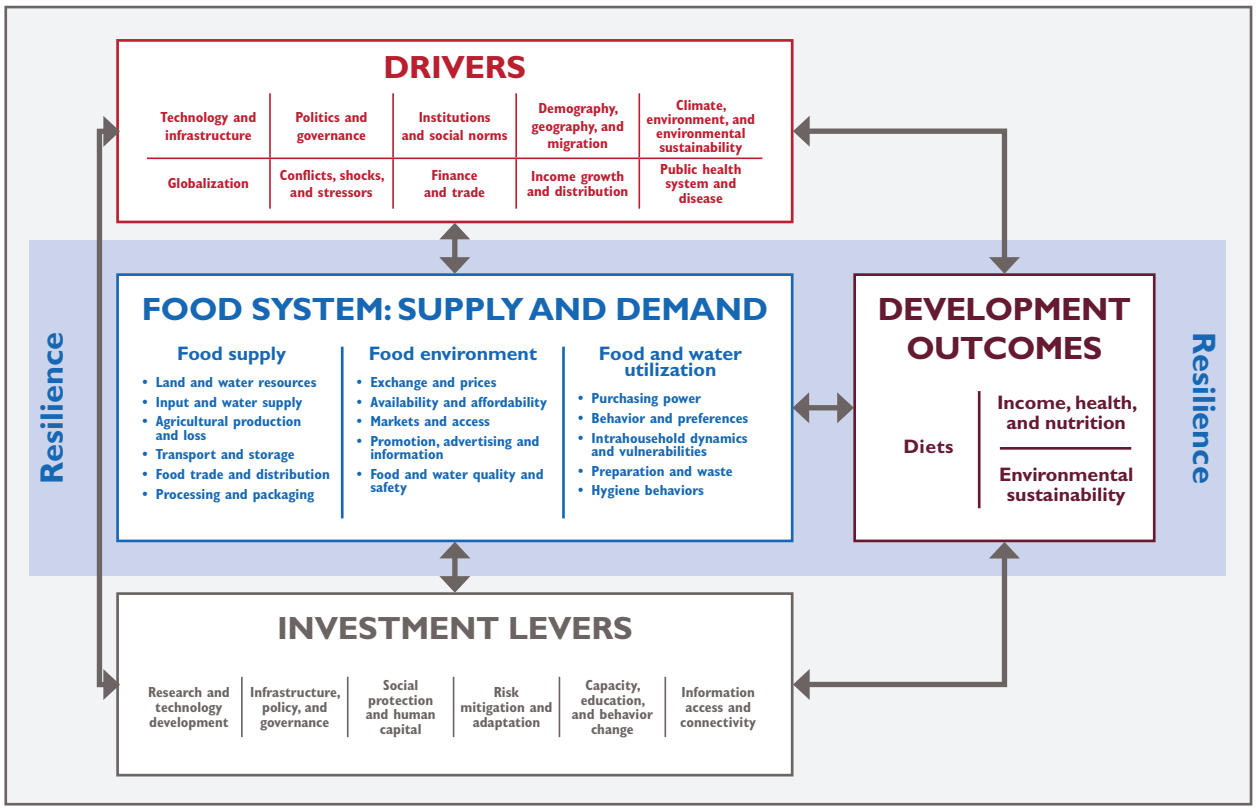
BOX 3. WHAT IS GENDER?

Gender is a social construct influenced by the roles, rights, responsibilities, entitlements, and obligations of females and males in societies. The understanding of what it means to be female or male varies across cultures and over time (USAID 2010).

In many contexts, gender is a key determinant of who has access to and control over resources, how those resources are used across food systems, and how outputs and resulting incomes are managed. In periods of stress or crisis, gender norms affect who is exposed to which stresses and shocks. Norms also shape men and women's roles, voices, and agency in food system institutions, informing decisions such as—

- who produces different agricultural products
- how labor and inputs are allocated across agricultural production and other economic activities
- how and by whom outputs are distributed and processed across the food system (Malapit 2019).

Figure 1. RFS Food Systems Conceptual Framework



Source: (USAID 2021a)

Gender-based inequalities frequently occur across the food system. Women are more likely than men to start businesses in the food sector, but they face greater barriers. Women are also more likely to have poor access to financing and financial networks, have low literacy and limited business skills, and face challenges that arise from gender norms, including limited mobility (Nordhagen 2020). Vulnerability to chronic food insecurity and malnutrition, especially as a result of shocks, persists among women (Madzorera 2020).

Women and girls play pivotal roles in food production, income generation, and caregiving, which means they are central to influencing diet and nutrition outcomes. Increasing women's access to resources and income-generating opportunities, control over income, and ability to balance time and labor burdens would improve gender equality and women's empowerment in the food system (Njuki et al. 2021).

Women are often disadvantaged for reasons other than their gender. For example, the way women's communities perceive their age, caste, sexual identify, disability status, or ethnicity may also influence their access to institutions and determine whether they live in poverty. Understanding the intersectionality of these issues—why and how different groups are disadvantaged in particular circumstances—is vital to addressing inequalities across the food system (Malapit and Hodur 2020).

HOW TO REDUCE GENDER INEQUALITIES IN PROGRAMS FOR IMPROVED DIETS AND NUTRITION

This section summarizes recent evidence on gender considerations for improved diets related

to five key components of the RFS Food Systems Conceptual Framework (figure 1): Food Supply, Food Environment, Food and Water Utilization, Drivers, and Investment Levers. Each subsection highlights illustrative actions that promote gender equality and women's empowerment within the food system. These suggestions reinforce the importance of developing evidence-based, context-specific approaches.

Food Supply

In the RFS Conceptual Framework, the food supply box depicts how food moves from production to consumption, including production, storage, distribution, processing, and packaging. Decisions made along the supply chain can influence the types of food that are available and accessible and the way they are produced and consumed.

Men and women engage in various roles that impact the food supply. Women take part (or contribute to) **agriculture production and loss, transport and storage, food trade and distribution, and processing and packaging**. However, they are often limited to the lowest-paying, or unpaid, agriculture work and home-based processing (FAO 2017; Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021).

A review by Njuki et al. (2021) summarized available evidence on the roles of women in the food system. In Ethiopia, for example, women are responsible for storage preparation, postharvest processing, milk processing, caring for newborn livestock, and working with men to weed, harvest, and thresh. Women in Benin engage in agricultural processing, but only in production if they have access to land. In Benin and Tanzania, men manage higher-value sales and marketing for both product quantity and sale price, while women manage marketing and negotiation of small-value sales of goods. In Nepal, women and men participate equally in productive work that requires a high-labor burden, but women are also responsible for reproductive work, leaving little time for rest (Njuki et al. 2021).

BOX 4. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AGRICULTURE INDEX

In 2011, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) created the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) to measure women's empowerment and inclusion in agriculture, relative to men, across five domains: decisions about production, access to resources, control of income, leadership, and time use. The WEAI is used to identify the economic constraints that limit women's contributions to households and communities, track gender equality, and measure empowerment and women's inclusion in the agriculture sector (USAID 2021b). IFPRI adapted the index into the project-level WEAI (pro-WEAI) to adjust to project-specific contexts and most recently for market inclusion (pro-WEAI+MI), to identify women's barriers to market access and across value chains (IFPRI 2020).

While women's participation in food systems as producers and suppliers can be empowering, this empowerment is mediated by a number of factors. Women may be benefiting from increased income, improved agency, and self-efficacy, but their engagement in an increasingly commercialized and globalized food system does not guarantee empowerment. For engagement to truly be empowering, women need secure livelihoods, control over income, and the ability to balance their workloads. These conditions may promote respect and help prevent women from facing social consequences, such as violence from family, neighbors, community members, or employers for challenging gender norms (Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021; Malapit et al 2020b).

Globally, less than 15 percent of all landholders are women (FAO 2018). Women having secure **land and water resources** is associated with

higher levels of investment and productivity in agriculture and higher economic security (Tantoh 2021). Land rights for women are often correlated with positive health and nutrition outcomes, including greater bargaining power at household and community levels, better child nutrition, and lower levels of gender-based violence (GBV) (FAO 2018). Although the relationship between GBV and land ownership is complex and context-dependent (Castañeda Camey et al. 2020), a review by Hughes and Richardson (2015) across South Asia, Latin America, and Africa showed that having land rights provided women with income, economic independence, and bargaining power, which reduced their dependence on their partners and their risk of GBV.

With regard to agricultural land ownership, management, and transfer, women's rights are disadvantaged relative to men. When men and women have joint land ownership, rights and benefits are not necessarily shared equally (FAO 2018). This limits women's ability to decide what they can grow, what to keep or sell, and how to spend money earned. Moreover, it impedes women's access to financing to invest in their land and to obtain **adequate input and water supplies**, such as fertilizer, irrigation, and labor, thus limiting productivity and resilience (Tantoh 2021).

A study by Theriault et al. (2017) found that female plot managers in Burkina Faso were less likely than men to invest in yield-enhancing (e.g., fertilizer and improved seed) and soil-restoring (e.g., manure and minimum tillage) strategies due to unequal levels of access to important resources, such as income or credit options to invest in agricultural plots or additional labor. These constraints can negatively impact household diets.

To promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the food supply, development practitioners can take these evidence-based actions:

- **Help women be successful** as producers, entrepreneurs, employees, managers, policymakers, and leaders in the food and agricultural sector by facilitating capacity strengthening that supports equal access to such roles.
- **Design contextually appropriate** gender-inclusive and gender-transformative approaches, such as increased access to climate-smart technologies, financial and extension services, and markets to enhance women's productivity and reduce chronic vulnerabilities.
- **Establish a monitoring system** and mitigation approaches, as necessary, to identify and address the unintended negative consequences of activities, including GBV and the overburdening of women's time and workloads.

Food Environment

The food environment is where consumers directly procure food. Dimensions of the food environment include food affordability and availability, food exchange and prices, marketing activities and access, food promotion and advertising, and food and water safety. Food environments influence what is procured and consumed, making them a critical area for programming for safe and nutritious diets.

Safe and nutritious food **availability and affordability** may be out of reach for women who are not empowered to either earn enough or have control over money (Njuki et al. 2021). Robust evidence indicates that income under women's control is more likely to be directed to food purchases, whereas male control of production revenue has been negatively associated with dietary quality (Madzorera et al. 2021). Women are less likely than men to be able to afford a nutritious diet because women are often in lower-paying wage positions, earn and control smaller amounts of money, have less ability to make decisions around household finances, or have no income (Njuki et al. 2021). A woman's inability to purchase safe and nutritious foods

impacts the diets and health of the entire family, especially herself and young children.

Women may also have limited physical **market access** to purchase nutritious foods, such as fruit, milk, eggs, and vegetables. Women's mobility can be limited due to gendered social and religious norms that restrict women traveling far from their homes. In addition, gender norms that dictate how women can travel and who has control over finances to pay for transportation can further restrict physical access to markets. Market engagement may also be limited by gendered responsibilities for production and selling. In many settings, women play a larger role than men in the informal food retail market, where the percentage of women food vendors can range from 63 percent in Nairobi, Kenya to 76 percent in Maputo, Mozambique (GAIN 2020). Many commodities relegated to women, such as dairy and horticulture, are perishable; not having access to proper storage or reliable transportation and cold chain infrastructure limits their activities to informal transactions, denying them access to formal markets with higher earning potential. Moreover, the market environment for retail activities may not be conducive to women feeling safe or having their sanitation needs met (Njuki et al. 2021).

Consumer food preferences are influenced by **product promotion, advertising, and information**, through billboards, radio ads, packaging, or vendor pitches. When women and men do not have access to accurate information about healthy diets or the importance of **food and water quality and safety**, they are less likely to make informed choices, regardless of availability and affordability (Karanja et al. 2022). Having access to information, especially for women entrepreneurs, can educate them about the policy standards and regulations for the safety of food, which can inform both the purchase and sale of safe products (HLPE 2017).

To promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the food environment, development practitioners can take these evidence-based actions:

- **Facilitate increased women's control** over resources, especially decision-making power over income, to support access to and affordability of safe and nutritious foods.
- **Support local marketplace layout** and vendor engagement to ease barriers to women's participation, considering such factors as proximity, safety, and sanitation facilities.
- **Facilitate increased multi-media information access**—especially for women—that promotes accurate nutrition and food and water safety messages, targets factors driving behaviors, and inspires change.

Food and Water Utilization

Food and water utilization reflects individual and household behavior on acquiring, storing, and consuming food and its intra-household allocation, as well as the acquisition of clean water. Behavior is influenced by personal preferences and is shaped by the food environment. Changes in consumer behavior can influence sustainable food systems to improve food security, nutrition, and health.

Women's roles in food procurement, preparation, and care for infants and children puts them at a critical nexus in food security, resilience, and nutrition. Indeed, women and girls are responsible for more than 75 percent of the world's unpaid care work, including fuel and water provision and **food preparation and waste** management (IDS 2016). Activities that empower women while engaging men have been shown to improve diets, **hygiene behaviors**, and use of nutrition services (USAID 2021b). Activity approaches that aim for sustainable and nutritious diets are more effective when they include components **that influence behaviors and preferences** related to nutrition; health; water,

sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); and micronutrient-fortified products (Ruel, Quisumbing, and Balagamwala 2018).

Because women are the primary caregivers in the household, improving **intra-household dynamics and vulnerabilities**, including allocation of resources, responsibilities, assets, and decision- making power, directly benefits their nutrition and health, and directly and indirectly those of their children. Nutrition behavior change approaches should target and be adapted to both women and men, while recognizing the influencers in the household, including grandmothers and mothers-in-law (Aubel, Martin, and Cunningham 2021). In a systematic review of studies conducted in South Asia, Harris-Fry et al. (2017) concluded that women's nutrition outcomes could be improved through changes in intra-household food allocation patterns. This could be achieved by focusing on household food security, equitable decision-making, and gender-specific income opportunities.

Impactful programming considers both men and women's roles in nutrition outcomes (box 5). Approaches that target women for improving food security and nutrition without understanding the broader dynamics of the household and community will likely miss key constraints, opportunities, and impacts (Malapit 2019). Programs that aim to improve nutrition, particularly through the reduction of intra-household inequality, may have greater impacts when they intentionally include men and boys (Njuki et al. 2021).

Time spent cooking is often associated with more diverse diets for women and greater minimum acceptable diets for children, implying that when domestic activities are traded for agricultural or off-farm work, diet quality may suffer. However, the income generated by women's employment contributes to improved **purchasing power** and is associated with improved dietary quality for women and children (Malapit 2019). Women's income-generating activities can increase productivity and economic benefits, although the benefits may be diluted if household labor is not reallocated to other household members to compensate for the increase in workload (Anderson et al. 2021).

To promote gender equality and women's empowerment for the consumption of safe

BOX 5. WHY WE ENGAGE MEN AND BOYS

Engaging men and boys to address gender norms that are restrictive to women's and girls' participation in the food system benefits the diets, nutrition, and well-being of all.

Men and boys have needs and vulnerabilities that programmers should not ignore when designing, implementing, and evaluating food system investments. Men and boys face unique inequalities and challenges, such as adapting to shocks and stresses and navigating gender norms. The following evidence-based practices can support gender equality and the shifting of societal norms:

- Consider factors such as high rates of violence, depression, and substance abuse men experience, linked to harmful norms.
- Engage men as caregivers as an entry point for transforming gender relations and norms.
- Speak with men and boys when conducting gender analyses.
- Engage men and boys so that they understand how moving away from gender restrictive norms can benefit everyone.
- Build communication and shared decision-making skills among genders throughout program activities (Pulerwitz et al. 2019).

and nutritious foods, development practitioners can take these evidence-based actions:

- **Engage women, men, and other influencers** in community-based activities, such as support groups, to discuss improving intra-household and intergenerational dynamics and vulnerabilities to encourage equitable purchasing power and balanced household workloads.
- **Work through existing entities** (health care facilities, community groups, religious institutions, schools) to reach women and men with nutrition and WASH messaging to improve nutrition and hygienic behaviors and preferences.
- **Coordinate with health care facilities** to ensure that nutrition messaging is consistent across various platforms.

Food System Drivers

The RFS Conceptual Framework (figure 1) identifies drivers that affect the ability of the food system to sustainably deliver safe, nutritious diets. Drivers represent external forces that impact, and might be impacted by, the food system in positive and negative ways (box 6).

Food system drivers are embedded in gendered systems with structural gender inequalities that influence how men and women experience these drivers and engage with food supply, food environment, and food and water utilization within the food system (Njuki et al. 2021).

Considering **climate, environment, and environmental sustainability**, rural women are at higher risk of being negatively affected by climate change because their domestic and livelihood workloads, namely agriculture, are disproportionately linked to natural resources. Women's nutrition can be diminished when climate shocks limit food access, leading women to eat less to reserve food for the family. Gender inequalities in access to and control over resources, technology, and information, as well as land tenure insecurity, restrict women's ability to implement climate adaptation practices in production and business enterprises and removes incentives to do so (HLPE 2020; Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021). If designed with gender in mind, climate-smart agriculture technologies can reduce women's workloads. At the same time, they may increase inequality if there is no inquiry about whether and how women can access these technologies and benefit from them (Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021).

Demography, geography, and migration shifts, increasingly associated with climate shocks and stressors, lead youth and men to migrate to urban centers and across borders seeking diversified, climate-resilient livelihoods. This leaves women to manage farms, businesses, and households with less access to labor and other resources. However, women often develop coping strategies to mitigate risks and environmental consequences by using social networks for agricultural production, such as community seed bank repositories of local genetic diversity that can withstand climate stress (Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021). Forced migration due to environmental change or conflict can have particularly detrimental impacts on women's health and livelihoods due to factors such

BOX 6. FOOD SYSTEM DRIVERS

- Technology and infrastructure
- Globalization
- Politics and governance
- Conflicts, shocks, and stressors
- Institutions and social norms
- Finance and trade
- Demography, geography, and migration
- Income growth and distribution
- Climate, environment, and environmental sustainability
- Public health system and disease

as interpersonal violence, a lack of reproductive care, and a lack of economic opportunity in the areas where they relocate (Sorensen et al. 2018). In urban centers, women's labor market participation impacts all aspects of the food system from supply to utilization. Women are more likely to work in the informal food system creating social linkages between suppliers and sellers. Additionally, they may receive credit with vendors through these same social connections. Participation in the food system may lead to increased time poverty and the purchase of more convenient, processed foods. Living situations may preclude having a cooking facility, also contributing to consumption of pre-made foods, which may be calorie dense but lack nutrients (Riley and Dodson 2019).

Institutions and social norms also impact women, creating barriers to accessing and adopting agricultural and business technologies, information, and services. Professional, social, financial, and educational institutions can either facilitate or limit women's participation. For example, having greater access to financial services would support women's income-generating ability, increase decision-making in the household, decrease risk of theft, and allow them to save and invest in education and businesses (Kochhar, Jain-Chandra, and Newiak 2016). Women often have limited access to formal financial systems due to gender discrimination; they may be required to obtain the co-signature of a male relative, may lack collateral, may not meet minimum loan sizes, or may be considered high-risk. When microfinance institutions can adapt their services to create gender-sensitive products and services—such as smaller loan amounts, not requiring male co-signers, and accepting social guarantees over collateral—these institutions reduce barriers to women's access (USAID FinGAP 2018). Gender norms also contribute to overburdening women with unpaid domestic responsibilities, gender discrimination both at home and in public, and a higher risk of gender-based violence.

Public health systems and disease impact and are affected by the food system. Supporting the health of food system actors leads to more productivity, better well-being, and potential for increased income. A well-functioning health system provides appropriate, responsive services; imparts nutrition, hygiene, and health care counseling; and is affordable and accessible for even the most vulnerable (UNCDF 2021). Poor health care is one of the immediate causes of malnutrition, and women of reproductive age and children are especially at risk if the health system is weak (UNICEF 2021). Ensuring women remain healthy enables them to participate across the food system, benefiting their own diets and the diets of people in their households.

Women's access to and use and control of water, forest resources, and land tenure rights are limited or enabled by informal and formal **politics and governance**. These include legal regulations, safety standards, policies, customary law, local rules of resource user associations, and social relationships that dictate the use of resources by women and determine their ability to participate in the food system. These systemic institutional factors also limit women's decision-making power over these resources, with privatization and commercialization of production and value chains often contributing to their exclusion and marginalization (Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021).

For example, maternity protection policies can mitigate potential consequences on household nutrition, such as inability to breastfeed caused by women being away from home for work within the food system. Establishing policies for both formal and informal sectors around paid maternity leave and breaks and space for milk expression or breastfeeding, support positive breastfeeding practices, which are important for children's diets and nutrition (Oot, Mason, and Lapping 2021).

Women and men experience the effects of **technology and infrastructure** differently.

Women's uptake of financial technology, especially digital technology, is more constrained than for men. For example, women are often unable to access information, own assets to open a bank account, or own a cell phone to participate in mobile banking (Njuki et al. 2019). People disconnected from the internet are most often poor, less educated, older, rural, and women. In 2020, the gap in mobile internet use between men and women was 15 percent for all low- and middle-income countries, increasing to 36 percent for South Asia and 37 percent for sub-Saharan Africa (GSMA 2021). For example, access to technology such as mobile phones can enable food system actors to access banking and government programs, agriculture and livestock extension services, market prices, and weather information, all of which facilitate their engagement across the food system. When women have less access, it limits their productivity and income-earning potential (Malapit et al. 2020a).

To improve gender-related outcomes around food system drivers, development practitioners can take these evidence-based actions:

- **Advocate for or support advocacy groups** to encourage gender-responsive and -transformative policies and implementation in areas such as land rights, financial inclusion, agricultural research and development, national extension and advisory services, labor market policies, and social protection (including social insurance).
- **Provide technical assistance that advances** gender-sensitive regulatory and management systems for food safety of informal markets where small-scale women producers and retailers tend to concentrate.
- **Promote women's leadership** in decision-making, governance, research, and food systems organizations at all levels, and in managing and governing land, freshwater, marine, and other natural resources.

BOX 7. APPLYING A GENDER LENS TO PROGRAMMING

FinGAP employed a gender lens to improve overall program quality and integrate gender-specific entrepreneurial activities. To do this, they—

- **Targeted agribusinesses** for financing with a focus on the value chain where women most often participate.
- **Designed performance-based subawards** for financial institutions and service providers who finance women-led enterprises or employ or otherwise benefit women.
- **Supported female consulting firms** to join the service provider network to serve more female agribusinesses.
- **Aggregated women's financing applications** to ease collateral requirements, reduce transaction costs for banks, and increase the likelihood of loan approval (Stern and Matlock 2020).

Results: Over five years, women-led enterprises that accessed financing increased from 12 percent to 43 percent. Profits from women-led enterprises increased by 100 percent, and women maize farmers increased their crop sales by 48 percent (USAID FinGAP 2018).

Food System Investment Levers

Investment levers represent specific investment areas that affect both the food system and development outcomes. These levers describe where actions by USAID, other donors, and public and private actors can be taken to strengthen and influence the food system to enact sustainable progress.

Investment lever categories are research and technology development; infrastructure, policy, and

governance; social protection and human capital; risk mitigation and adaptation; capacity, education, and behavior change; and information access and connectivity. Programmatic investments can use multiple levers that will work in concert to achieve development outcomes. Programmers can select levers while exploring potential effects on gender equality and women's empowerment, supporting programs to achieve outcomes while mitigating potential negative effects (USAID 2021a).

An example from Feed the Future in Ghana demonstrates the potential for the **"infrastructure, policy, and governance"** and **"capacity, education, and behavior change"** investment levers to strengthen gender equality and women's empowerment outcomes. Feed the Future's Advancing Women's Empowerment (AWE) Program works to enhance women's empowerment and gender equality through technical assistance to USAID Missions and implementing partners. AWE explored the effect of practices to empower women in Feed the Future projects (Stern and Matlock 2020), highlighting the Financing Ghanaian Agriculture Project (FinGAP) (2013–2019). A gender assessment showed women's ability to access critical resources for engagement is constrained. Compared to male counterparts, these women face the highest risks in accessing credit, need the smallest loan sizes, and are charged the highest interest rates. This analysis prompted FinGAP to employ two categories of investment levers to facilitate financing for project participants, especially for women-led or women-serving enterprises (box 7). The project worked with financial institutions to create services to meet the needs of and address the barriers that women face and provide them with technical assistance to use these services. Because more than 1,200 women processors and traders benefited from receiving loans and services, the more than 72,000 women small-holder farmers who conducted business with them also indirectly experienced financial gains and agribusiness support (Palladium n.d.; USAID FinGAP 2018).

In Senegal, women's and girls' lack of autonomy and authority constrain their engagement with the food system, contributing to women's unequal access to production inputs and decision-making, and an unequal division of labor at both household and community levels, limiting improvements in economic and nutrition outcomes (USAID 2019). The Feed the Future Senegal Kawolor project (2017–2022) promoted innovative technology and supported the local private sector, local governance, and women's empowerment to increase production and consumption of diverse and nutritious foods. The project invested in the **"capacity, education, and behavior change"** lever to support women's empowerment through complementary approaches, such as identifying male champions to model the benefits of joint decision-making, sharing household workloads, and empowering women in the areas of household- and community-level nutrition and hygiene. The project also engaged men, women, and influencers through the Nurturing Connections curriculum, which uses facilitated discussions and exercises to help women and men understand women's rights and abilities to contribute on and off the farm. Annual survey results showed promising improvements across nutrition outcomes: the percentage of infants who achieved a minimum acceptable diet increased from 4 percent to 17 percent, and self-reported decision-making power for women—including power related to household food choices—increased from 43 percent to 83 percent. Qualitatively, women reported having more confidence, husbands sharing domestic tasks, and their relationships and communication with partners being strengthened (USAID 2021c).

To invest in the food system and promote gender equality and women's empowerment, development practitioners can take these evidence-based actions:

- **Support policies to improve women's access** to and control and ownership of resources across the food system, including

food production, technology, information, and capacity to ensure that they can benefit from these resources.

- **Facilitate access to financial service products** and technical assistance that meet the financial needs of women.
- **Support women's economic empowerment** in production and beyond to include involvement in off-farm food system enterprises and jobs, increased incomes, and more control over incomes.

THE WAY FORWARD

More equitable inclusion of women and girls in food systems has tremendous potential to improve food security, resilience, diets, and nutrition for women and girls, their households, and their communities precisely because of their multifaceted involvement in the food system; however, critical barriers must be removed if they are to participate with real agency.

Development practitioners should use the RFS Food Systems Conceptual Framework to understand how gender dynamics impact the food system and prioritize investments to loosen constraints on women and girls. They can begin this process with three simple questions:

- "Where am I working in the food system?"
- "What are the most important gender constraints in this space?"
- "How can I invest in ways that address those constraints?"

Practitioners can work with stakeholders across the food system, from community leaders to policymakers, to take evidence-based actions as they design, implement, and monitor activities and programs. Applying gender-sensitive and -transformational approaches to food systems programs can empower women and girls to achieve sustainable and robust local and global food systems.

KEY RESOURCES

- Feed the Future Advancing Women's Empowerment (AWE) Program
- RFS Food Systems Conceptual Framework
- U.S. Government Global Food Security Strategy 2022–2026
- International Food Policy Research Institute gender page
- USAID Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy 2014-2025
- USAID Advancing Nutrition—Resource Hub
- USAID 2020 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy
- Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) Resource Center

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This Technical Brief will be periodically updated. Comments from readers are welcome, especially comments to help clarify the information provided or where additional information may be useful.

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