CHAPTER 4

Women

Transforming Food Systems for Empowerment and Equity

HAZEL MALAPIT, RUTH MEINZEN-DICK, AGNES QUISUMBING, AND LAURA ZSELECZKY

Hazel Malapit is a senior research coordinator and **Agnes Quisumbing** is a senior research fellow in the Poverty, Health, and Nutrition Division, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington, DC, USA. **Ruth Meinzen-Dick** is a senior research fellow in the Environment and Production Technology Division, IFPRI. **Laura Zselezky** is a program manager in the Director General's Office, IFPRI.

KEY FINDINGS

- Women are actively involved in food systems in many roles, but their contributions are often not formally recognized, and they face obstacles to engaging on equitable and fair terms.
- Together with changing diets, transformation of food systems toward more efficient and sustainable production processes and longer value chains offers new opportunities and challenges for women's participation.
- Transforming food systems for inclusion means not just ensuring women's participation and access to benefits but also their empowerment to make strategic life choices.
- Entrepreneurship is often touted as a key to empowering women, but evidence indicates that it may not empower women if limited to small, household-based enterprises.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase women's decision-making power and control over resources and assets (such as credit, land, training, transport, and technology) within households and communities.
- Raise women's voices in key processes such as negotiations with market actors, research decisions, and political processes.
- Include women and consider women's needs and preferences in the design of institutions, including property rights, financial institutions, and access to information and education.
- Collect and evaluate more data relevant to women's empowerment within food systems, including on capacities, motivations, and roles in value chains.
- Encourage private sector initiatives to foster women's empowerment, including adoption of standards for gender equity, women's empowerment, and women's leadership.
- Ensure that food system transformations do not disempower women by increasing workloads or reducing decision-making power, but rather create a virtuous cycle of inclusion and empowerment to benefit women and men.

Women are actively involved in food systems in a range of roles from production and processing to retailing and consumption. Women grow and manage crops, tend livestock, work in agribusinesses and food retailing, prepare food for their families, and much more.¹ But women's contributions to food systems are often not formally recognized, and women often face constraints that prevent them from engaging on terms that are equitable and fair. In many countries, women have less schooling than men, control fewer resources, have less decision-making power over household income, and face time constraints because of their triple burden of productive, domestic, and community responsibilities.²

Gender also intersects with other spheres of vulnerability and identity—including ethnicity, age, and poverty—to further impact how women engage in food systems. For instance, across the food system, young women seeking to become entrepreneurs can face multiple constraints based on gender, age, and the nature of work in the informal sector. If they are married, they may face additional challenges, falling through programming cracks if they are no longer in school, have to care for young children or other family members, or lack the resources required to do

business in the food system.³ The transformation of food systems toward more efficient and sustainable production processes and longer value chains, in combination with shifts in diets toward greater consumption of prepared foods, offers a range of new opportunities for women, but may also create new barriers to participation.

Transforming food systems to be more inclusive will require approaches that not only enable women to participate and benefit equally but also empower women. In this context, “empowerment” is understood as a process by which people expand their ability to make strategic life choices where they were previously denied that ability.⁴ The reach-benefit-empower framework⁵—developed to distinguish between agricultural development project approaches that *reach* women as participants, those that *benefit* women, and those that contribute to *empowering* women—can be a useful lens to explore how food systems can be transformed to be more inclusive and gender-equitable. Reaching women as participants does not ensure that they will benefit from a project, and if they do accrue benefits such as increased income or better nutrition, that does not ensure that they will be empowered to

BOX 1 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT ACROSS VALUE CHAINS IN BANGLADESH AND THE PHILIPPINES

IFPRI piloted the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index for Value Chains (WEAI4VC) in Bangladesh and the Philippines, two Asian countries with very different sociocultural contexts. The Philippine study looked at empowerment across different value chains, whereas the Bangladesh study examined whether empowerment differs depending on the role that women play in the value chain. Figure B1 compares the extent of disempowerment for men and women (longer bars indicate greater disempowerment) and the relative contributions of different indicators to disempowerment. The WEAI4VC pilot studies show how researchers and practitioners can measure, compare, and identify sources of disempowerment for women and men across value chains and find ways to address them that are targeted specifically to each value chain or role within a value chain.

DOES PARTICIPATION IN VALUE CHAINS EMPOWER WOMEN?

Investigation across four Philippine value chains indicates that participation alone cannot ensure increased empowerment. Gendered stereotypes contribute to disparate workloads and inhibit women from seeking jobs in other parts of the chain. For example, women are often engaged in tying, planting, and drying seaweed and earn lower incomes based on piece rates, while men do the more strenuous work of diving to attach seaweed lines to stakes and earn a higher daily rate. Gender norms related to mobility and heavy labor also intersect with women's more limited access to capital and knowledge of specialized markets, making it more difficult for individual women than men to expand a trading business in the coconut and seaweed chains.

In Bangladesh, women participate in value chains by providing household labor, for which they are not individually compensated. In contrast to the Philippines, Bangladeshi women do not typically maintain control over the income generated by their work, and their heavy workload is a major contributor to making them less empowered. Overall levels of empowerment were found to be lower for both men and women in Bangladesh compared with the Philippines. Women in Bangladesh are less empowered than men, and women's empowerment varies greatly with livelihood activity, while men's empowerment is relatively similar across livelihood activities.

ARE SOME VALUE CHAIN ROLES—PRODUCERS, ENTREPRENEURS, OR WAGE WORKERS—MORE EMPOWERING THAN OTHERS?

In the Bangladesh study, women in producer households were found to be more empowered than those in entrepreneur or wage-work households. Because working away from home is less socially desirable, women entrepreneurs and wage workers may be more susceptible to losing the respect of community members. Compared to women in producer households, women in entrepreneur and wage-work households have little say in productive decisions.

DO VALUE CHAINS FOR PARTICULAR COMMODITIES OFFER BETTER OPPORTUNITIES TO EMPOWER WOMEN?

In the Philippines study, women in the abaca and coconut value chains are less empowered relative to those working in swine and seaweed, but the specific areas of disempowerment vary from chain to chain (Figure B1). However, some of the same gender issues exist across value chains, highlighting the need for transformative approaches that can address structural social and gender norms, such as promoting gender awareness in communities and schools, targeting not only women and girls but also men and boys.

Source: A. Ahmed et al., *Tracking Empowerment along the Value Chain: Testing a Modified WEAI in the Feed the Future Zone of Influence in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Washington, DC: IFPRI, 2018); H. Malapit et al., "Empowerment in Agricultural Value Chains: Mixed Methods Evidence from the Philippines," IFPRI Discussion Paper 1881 (IFPRI, Washington, DC, 2019).

FIGURE B1 Women's and men's disempowerment along value chains in the Philippines and Bangladesh

Source: Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index for Value Chains quantitative surveys, IFPRI.

Note: Autonomy in production and rights over assets were included only in the Philippines study.

control that income or choose foods for their households.⁶ Measuring the effect of a program's ability to reach, benefit, or empower women will require indicators specific to each approach. For example, reach can be measured by tracking the number of women who participated in a food system project, and benefit can be measured by assessing women's nutritional outcomes. Women's empowerment encompasses many dimensions that can be measured by indicators such as sole or joint decision-making over productive activities like farming or fishing; ownership, access, and decision-making power over productive resources such as land or credit; sole or joint control over income and expenditures; membership in economic or social groups; and allocation of time to productive and domestic tasks, and satisfaction with the time available for leisure activities.⁷

Studies examining gender dynamics and women's empowerment along value chains in food systems or within specific sectors illustrate that many interventions reach women and even benefit women, but there are still barriers to women's empowerment. A review of interventions promoting high-value agriculture in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, and Uganda found that involving women in the projects helped increase production, income, and household assets. Project benefits, however, were constrained by existing gender norms in asset use and control—in most cases men's incomes increased more than women's and the projects did not reduce the gender asset gap.⁸ Entrepreneurship is often suggested as a key to empowering poor rural women.⁹ However, evidence from Bangladesh and the Philippines indicates that entrepreneurship may not be empowering for women if limited to small, household-based enterprises, which typically are not very lucrative and can add to women's workload. The benefits of entrepreneurship may only materialize as businesses grow and owners can start hiring other workers and retain more of the profits (Box 1).¹⁰

Ensuring that women's contributions to food systems are recognized—by their families, communities, policymakers, and society more broadly—and that women can make strategic choices about their involvement in food systems has benefits for all of society. Women's empowerment can improve agricultural productivity, household food security and dietary quality, and maternal and child nutrition.¹¹ Women's activities

throughout food systems range from growing food and generating income through agricultural production, marketing, and retailing to helping ensure adequate nutrition through decisions about food purchases and preparation to demanding better food environments through political participation. Given the vital role that women play in food systems for themselves and their families, it is imperative that they can engage equitably and that constraints on their empowerment be addressed through changes to policy, programming, and norms.

CREATING INCLUSIVE AND EMPOWERING FOOD SYSTEMS FOR WOMEN

What would a food system that includes and empowers women look like? Among other things, women's roles and contributions would be recognized and valued, women would be able to exercise control over resources and assets, they would have a voice in key processes, and institutions would be supportive of women. Work is underway in many countries and communities to transform food systems toward this vision, but there is still a long way to go.

INCREASE WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING POWER AND CONTROL OVER RESOURCES AND ASSETS

Increasing women's decision-making power and control over assets within their households and communities is a key step toward inclusive food systems. A recent systematic review finds that their access to assets like credit, land, training, and transportation is limited, which reduces women's choices and influences their ability to engage in more lucrative, larger-scale activities. Beyond production, higher-paying jobs that require specialized training tend to favor men, while women are constrained by lack of time (due to their domestic responsibilities), limited transportation options (for example, due to taboos around riding bicycles and motorcycles), and lack of sanitation facilities in markets and other public spaces.¹² In some areas, men have moved out of agriculture or migrated away from rural areas, leading to a "feminization" of agriculture (Box 2). This can present opportunities for women to gain greater decision-making power and higher earnings in key parts of food systems, but it can also increase women's workload and financial burdens.¹³

BOX 2 FEMINIZATION OF AGRICULTURE

Many rural landscapes are rapidly transforming, driven by a wide range of factors that are shifting labor patterns and decision-making in agriculture. Some of these key drivers include commercialization of value chains, climate change, technology, and migration.

HOW ARE THESE CHANGES AFFECTING WOMEN, PARTICULARLY IN PLACES WHERE MEN ARE MOVING OUT OF AGRICULTURE?

The extensive literature on “feminization of agriculture” describes two distinct views of how these transformations are affecting women’s workloads and agency, including decision-making authority and control over resources. On the one hand, these changes can create new opportunities for women to engage in paid employment and commercial agriculture. These opportunities can increase women’s incomes and their visibility and voice in their households and communities, stimulating a virtuous cycle of economic empowerment. On the other hand, women may carry additional burdens of labor and responsibility without the agency and resources to take full advantage of new opportunities. While both views acknowledge that these processes affect women and men differently, it remains unclear how gendered patterns of agricultural labor are changing and what the net impacts of these changes are on women and men in terms of work and agency.

While the global evidence confirms that in many places women’s labor force participation in the agriculture sector is increasing, it is often concentrated in seasonal, casual, or unpaid work. Women are often paid less and face poorer working conditions compared with men doing similar jobs. Women’s overall work burdens increase substantially as they avail of new opportunities because they often remain responsible for productive and domestic work in the home. However, women’s increased involvement in paid work and engagement in agricultural decision-making have the potential to close gender gaps, particularly when women take on management or supervisory roles, access labor-saving technologies and training, and gain greater access to and control over resources and incomes.

HOW CAN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH AND POLICIES ENSURE THAT WOMEN AND MEN BENEFIT EQUALLY FROM THE INNOVATIONS AND TRENDS THAT ARE AFFECTING RURAL LABOR MARKETS?

Interventions and policies must be designed based on a clear understanding of the context and of how both labor patterns and gender relations are changing, often in response to new opportunities or setbacks. Changing labor patterns also have distinct impacts on different groups of women and men based on age, caste, ethnicity, or other socioeconomic characteristics. Understanding these complex trends can lead to more nuanced, and therefore more appropriate, policy prescriptions. Critical to this understanding are more detailed and high-quality quantitative and qualitative data, which we need in order to better understand the intrahousehold dynamics that underlie livelihood decisions—for example, the drivers or impediments to joint decision-making, the nature of asymmetric information between spouses, and women’s and men’s use of time. Finally, detailed data on the policies, institutions, and norms in a given setting can provide insights into the potential of agrarian change for bringing about gender equality.

Source: Adapted from C. Doss et al., “From Feminization of Agriculture to Gender Equality,” in *Agricultural Research Progress Towards Gender Equality: Taking Stock and Setting a Forward-Looking CGIAR Gender Research Agenda* (working title), ed. R. Pyburn et al., CGIAR Collaborative Platform for Gender Research (forthcoming, 2020).

Women's control over assets and decision-making power in food systems can be supported by enhancing their negotiating power vis-à-vis market actors through fair contracting or payment schemes. In Uganda, the Farm and Family Balance project is working with the country's largest sugarcane processing company, Kakira Sugar Limited, to increase women's involvement in sugarcane marketing and management activities by encouraging the transfer or registration of a contract for a sugarcane block—the parcel of land on which the sugarcane is grown—from husbands to their wives. The contract entitles the wife to receive inputs on credit, cash advances, and the final payment associated with the block. Initial findings indicate that overall acceptance of the intervention was high (70 percent), suggesting that simple encouragement can effectively nudge men to include their wives in household commercial activities.¹⁴ This also highlights the importance of working with men as well as women in programs that may shift or alter traditional gender roles and norms.

RAISE WOMEN'S VOICES IN KEY PROCESSES

In addition to ensuring that women's engagement in activities throughout the food system is equitable and fair, it is critical that women's voices be heard in processes related to food systems, such as research, and in the contexts in which food systems are embedded, such as political processes. For example, agricultural research for development is an essential pathway for food system transformation. It contributes to improved management practices, production, processing, transportation, and more, and women's priorities and preferences—such as for food crops with certain nutritional or taste qualities or that do not require excessive labor—must be part of the research process. In Kenya, GROOTS—a national movement of grassroots women-led community-based organizations—is working with the agricultural extension system to provide input on the types of climate-smart technologies preferred by the members.¹⁵ Recognizing women's needs and priorities in the early stages of research is an important step toward ensuring that women benefit from the results.

Political mobilization is also a central avenue through which women's voices can influence the policies that shape the food system. By voting or by

becoming policymakers themselves, voicing support or dissent for key policies, and participating in other civic processes, women can affect the way food systems operate. Evidence from India shows that women who belong to women's self-help groups are more politically engaged and make use of a greater number of public entitlement schemes.¹⁶ Membership organizations, such as the Self Employed Women's Association in India (Box 3), also offer opportunities for women to work together to address the specific challenges they face in particular segments of the food system.

ENHANCE INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR WOMEN

Ensuring that institutions are supportive of women is another critical factor for inclusive food systems. For example, formal laws and informal systems governing property rights impact women's abilities to invest in their land or businesses, access credit, and diversify their livelihoods. There is strong evidence that women's land rights affect the extent to which they make decisions about household consumption, human capital investment, and transferring resources to the next generation, though further research is needed to investigate these links more directly.¹⁷

Financial institutions also hold great potential for empowering women, but when financial systems are not designed with women's needs and preferences in mind, they risk exacerbating gender wealth gaps. Financial inclusion requires a gender-transformative approach that focuses explicitly on expanding women's opportunities and decision-making power; strengthening relationships and improving negotiation dynamics at multiple levels (home, workplace, market, and within financial institutions); and promoting broader enabling policies, regulatory frameworks, and sociocultural norms. In practice, this might mean including gender analysis in financial product design and service delivery, conducting "gender-smart" due diligence to better understand the contexts in which clients are operating, or evaluating performance against gender empowerment outcomes. For example, a partnership between CARE International, PostBank, and local partners in Uganda is introducing a mobile banking product specifically designed for women's priorities (such as saving for school fees or healthcare), providing financial counseling sessions,

BOX 3 THE SELF EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION: EMPOWERING WOMEN IN INDIAN FOOD SYSTEMS

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has members who work across the entire food system in India, from small-scale producers to processors, retailers, prepared food vendors, and consumers. As a membership organization, SEWA is aware of the challenges faced by each group and seeks to respond to its members' priorities and preferences to enable them to make strategic choices related to their livelihoods. There are some common issues, such as lack of credit or insurance, which SEWA addresses through financial services, as well as aspects unique to each group. For producers, information about technologies to adapt to climate change is a priority. For processors, training on food safety standards and changing consumer preferences is key.

When SEWA noted that many of its rural members did not have access to safe and affordable food supplies, it started its own brand of products, RUDI (Rural Distribution Network), that includes flour, spices, and other staples. RUDI is a for-profit agribusiness company that connects the farmer to end users. It is fully owned and operated by over 250,000 small-scale women farmers. The company has its own procurement channels, processing centers, packaging units, and distribution network. The smallholder farmers sell their produce to RUDI. The produce is graded, processed, and packaged into affordable small packages and redistributed in the villages by SEWA's salesforce—called Rudibens or Rudi Sisters. RUDI brings nutrition and food security to over a million households today. Women from various sectors of the food system are actively involved in, benefit from, and control this process—from the farmers who receive fair returns to the landless laborers who are employed as sales people.

Source: Adapted from N. Benni and R. Barkataky, "The Role of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Providing Financial Services to Rural Women" (FAO, Rome, 2018); and SEWA, "Rudi Products and Rudi Multi Trading Co Ltd," accessed December 4, 2019, www.sewa.org.

and integrating a research component to better understand factors affecting uptake of the program and users' experiences.¹⁸

Access to timely information is another critical factor to ensure women's equitable inclusion in food systems. Women's access to information can be facilitated or inhibited by technologies, programs, or institutions. For instance, in Tanzania, under a rice warehousing system that gave information only to the men who delivered the crop, women lost out on information about what rice stocks the household had for domestic use or sale to meet household expenses. As one woman explained, "as days go by, you can't go daily to check them [the sacks], since you aren't the one who signed for it inside there."¹⁹ Mobile phones can facilitate access to banking and government programs. They can also connect producers with information such as extension services or real-time updates on market prices and weather—information that is increasingly important in the context of climate

change.²⁰ Yet women own and use mobile phones at lower rates than men, and thus may have less access than men to services and information provided via mobile phones.

Ensuring that girls and women have equal access to educational and training opportunities and institutions is also essential for their inclusion and empowerment in food systems.²¹ Closing the gender gap in basic education can help the next generation of women break out of poverty and make informed and strategic choices about their livelihoods, the food they and their families consume, and the types of policies they demand from political leaders. Moreover, vocational training can ensure that women have the skills required for off-farm and entrepreneurial opportunities throughout the food system. In a virtuous cycle, inclusion in the food system through well-paying jobs can help women and their families make further gains, including investment in the next generation's education and skills.

TAKING ACTION AND MOVING FORWARD

Food systems are transforming in many ways, and as the world faces demographic shifts and global challenges such as climate change, it will be increasingly urgent to ensure that changes open opportunities within food systems without putting additional burdens on women.

MORE DATA. An essential first step toward more gender-equitable food systems is to better understand where there are opportunities for women's empowerment, particularly beyond the well-studied areas of production and processing. A strong body of research looks at women's roles in market-oriented agriculture and throughout value chains. However, significant data gaps remain around the capacities and characteristics of women working in agriculture and agribusiness; the motivations of women entering into business; systematic analyses of entire value chains; and comparative studies.²² Further research in these areas and tools such as the WEAI4VC can help clarify the gender dynamics of key sectors and products in a systematic way (Box 1).²³

PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVE. Private sector institutions must also play an important role in making food systems more inclusive, given that food production, processing, transportation, trade, and consumption are driven by small, medium, and large enterprises. For instance, trade associations and certification initiatives can incorporate standards related to gender equality and women's empowerment. ISEAL—the global membership organization for credible sustainability standards—facilitates a Gender Working Group for Sustainability Standards to provide evidence-based strategies, tools, and systems to help standards organizations and multi-stakeholder initiatives integrate gender considerations and tackle systemic gender inequalities.²⁴ The group is focusing primarily on the textile and apparel sector, but a similar approach would be valuable in the agri-food sector.

CREATE AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT. Incentives and regulations are needed to ensure that private sector investments benefit and empower women rather than exacerbate existing gender gaps in access to information, services, and other resources. Policymakers have

an important responsibility to create enabling environments for research and industry developments that contribute to inclusive food system transformation. Having more women in leadership roles in all sectors will help to ensure that women's perspectives are included at the highest levels of influence.

DON'T LOSE GROUND. While there are clear opportunities to make food systems more equitable for women, it will be equally important to ensure that women do not lose ground as food systems transform. For example, as crops associated with women, such as cassava, commercialize, careful attention must be given to ensuring that women have the resources and decision-making power to expand production and take advantage of market opportunities.²⁵ Moreover, as food systems transform, it is important to monitor unintended consequences, such as increased workloads for women. For example, evidence from Mexico finds that although women who joined coffee grower organizations enjoyed increased decision-making within the home, they had a heightened perception of "time poverty" as a result of their involvement in the coffee schemes.²⁶ Evidence also suggests that approaches to empowering women must include working with men, both to prevent backlash against women's gains (such as gender-based violence or other retaliation) and to make sure that newly transformed gender norms are sustained.²⁷ Finally, just as institutions and technologies have the potential to empower women when planned deliberately, they can also exacerbate existing gender gaps. For example, deliberate steps must be taken to expand women's access to mobile phones and digital literacy to ensure they benefit from the potential of these innovations.²⁸

Making food systems inclusive and gender-equitable requires recognizing women's roles and enhancing and ensuring opportunities for women to make strategic choices about their livelihoods, assets, relationships, and more. Transforming food systems to support and facilitate women's empowerment will benefit not only women but also their families and society.

A blue-tinted photograph of a woman and a child in a rural setting. The woman is in the foreground, looking down at her hands, which are holding a piece of fabric. A child is standing behind her, looking on. In the foreground, a sewing machine is visible on the left side. The background shows some trees and a fence.

“Ensuring that women’s contributions to food systems are recognized—by their families, communities, policymakers, and society more broadly—and that women can make strategic choices about their involvement in food systems has benefits for all of society.”