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United Nations



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THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

OVERVIEW





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EQUALITY

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

OVERVIEW

Published by
the **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**
and
African Women in Agricultural Research and Development
and
the **Natural Resources Institute of University of Greenwich**
Rome, 2025

Required citation:

FAO, NRI, AWARD. 2025. *The status of women in agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd6631en>

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KENYA - Highlighting the impacts of Sorghum breeding.

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OVERVIEW

ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERING WOMEN IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS IS BOTH A MORAL IMPERATIVE AND AN EFFECTIVE POLICY CHOICE



Achieving gender equality and empowering women in agrifood systems is both a moral imperative and an effective policy choice.

In sub-Saharan Africa's agrifood systems, where women make up just under half (49 percent) of the workforce, women's empowerment is key to social justice as well as to unlocking inclusive growth, food security and climate resilience. This is because women in the region are deeply engaged with agrifood systems, providing essential labour, knowledge and care that sustains households, communities and markets. **Women are recognized as carriers of culture, traditional knowledge and social cohesion in the region, with traditional African food often serving as powerful expressions of meaning, identity and purpose, as well as good health and well-being.** From seed preservation to meal preparation and trade,

women's practices are embedded in and foster collective memory, emotion, identity and community life, all of which form the fabric of life. Women's experiences are intersectional, and shaped not only by gender, but by age, class, ethnicity, location, disability and other overlapping factors.

Women's essential and diverse roles in agrifood systems are increasingly recognized in global and regional frameworks and commitments, and there is a strong track record of gender-responsive policies in sub-Saharan Africa. This signifies a growing consensus and political will across the continent towards the advancement of women's rights and gender justice, not only as a matter of principle but as a practical necessity for sustainable development. It also presents ample opportunity for decision



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makers and other actors in all agrifood system sectors to make bold changes that ensure the interests and priorities of diverse women are at the centre of agrifood systems transformation.

This report builds on the momentum generated by FAO's 2023 *The status of women in agrifood systems* global report. It presents a regionally grounded analysis centred on the evidence of the status of women in agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa and amplifies the diverse lived experiences of women in the region. Drawing on robust, context-specific data and research, it maps progress, identifies persistent barriers faced by women and highlights transformative opportunities for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment across agrifood

systems. The report explores key themes such as women's work in agrifood systems, food security and nutrition, relationships to nature and natural resource rights, climate impacts, innovation, and women's agency and collective action. Adopting a critical feminist perspective, the report underscores how structural inequalities and intersecting forms of discrimination – exacerbated by climate change, environmental degradation and conflict – sustain gender-based inequalities and persistently high levels of gender-based violence. At the same time, it showcases examples of women-led change and calls for greater recognition, representation and investment in women's leadership in Africa to foster more just and sustainable agrifood systems.

↑ GHANA – Augustina Tufuor, founder of Tropical Snacks, and smallholder farmer Duodu Boateng harvest plantains.

Several significant trends are shaping the dynamics and resilience of agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa and the nature of gender and intersectional inequalities. The region has a young and growing population,¹ which intensifies pressure on agrifood systems but also provides opportunities for innovation and growth. The climate and environmental crisis also disproportionately impacts the region,² bearing substantial consequences for food security³ and agrifood systems, while driving high levels of rural to urban migration and urban growth.^{4, 5} As well as influencing the state of agrifood systems, these trends also have profound implications for gender equality and women's empowerment: they increase the risk and prevalence of gender-based violence, increase women's care and agricultural workloads while limiting their opportunities for decent work, and constrain sources of food and nutrition – all of which have pronounced effects on women and girls. The impacts of these drivers are not isolated; rooted in colonial history and the dynamics of global capitalism, they have profoundly shaped African food systems, eroding the autonomy of food producers, displacing indigenous and women's knowledge, and entrenching gender and racial inequalities.^{6, 7, 8}

This challenging context of agrifood systems in the region is significant because these systems are also the region's largest employer, employing 76 percent of working women and 68 percent of working men.⁹

Women's work in agrifood systems is often poorly paid or unpaid and remains largely undervalued, overlooked in economic policy and invisible in data, especially across livestock, forestry and fisheries, and the post-harvest sector.⁹

Importantly, more than 90 percent of employed women in the region work in the informal sector¹⁰ – often the only option that allows them to balance paid work with caregiving – despite its insecurity, low wages and lack of social protection.¹¹ Women are more likely than men to be in vulnerable forms of self-employment working as contributing family workers or own-account workers.⁹

At the same time, women's work in agrifood systems is essential for food security in a region that faces the highest and most persistent levels of food insecurity globally. While food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa rose significantly for both men and women over the last decade (by about 16 percentage points), women were disproportionately affected – 11.2 million more women than men in the region faced food insecurity in 2024 despite a seemingly small gender gap of 1.5 percentage points.¹² Women also face distinct and widespread nutritional deficiencies that change throughout their life cycle.

Securing African women's rights to access and control natural resources is essential for achieving gender equality, enhancing their agency and

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economic opportunities, and increasing their resilience to climate, environmental, health and economic shocks. Women in sub-Saharan Africa continue to have fewer secure rights than men to land, water and forests.⁹ Complex tenure systems involving overlapping customary and statutory systems often limit women's resource rights while also contributing to increasing land degradation. These rights are further shaped by marital status and age. Women's under-representation in governance leads to policies that overlook their needs. In many countries, limited government capacity combined with challenges in implementing existing laws, policies and programmes and low levels of legal literacy and awareness of rights among women are additional challenges to the realization of women's rights to natural resources both in law and in practice.

The promotion of women's rights to natural resources must occur within a broader context of transformation in natural resource governance that fosters equity in access but also recognizes the need for ecological repair. Natural resources in sub-Saharan Africa are increasingly degraded due to competing demands within and between communities, private sector

encroachment and extractive industries such as mining, commercial fishing and logging – often led by foreign companies.¹³ Climate change intensifies these pressures, deepening inequalities and driving conflict, displacement, migration, food insecurity, poverty and gender-based violence across the region.² These dynamics impact everyone in agrifood systems, but the discrimination and inequality faced by women is exacerbated.

The under-representation of women in agrifood systems leadership and governance means that their needs and priorities are not represented. Smallholder female farmers, processors, traders and their organizations are often excluded from decision-making and leadership roles in the design and implementation of agrifood systems interventions. However, having women in such roles is crucial to ensure that women's priorities are considered and shape development efforts, policies and programmes. Similarly, although there have been great strides over recent decades in promoting women's participation and leadership in agrifood systems institutions, women are still seriously under-represented in such roles in many sub-Saharan countries, particularly in research, management and decision-making positions.^{9, 14, 15}

↑ UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA, ZANZIBAR – A woman processes tree seedlings.

Women face persistent challenges in accessing professional opportunities in the agricultural sector, often as a result of discriminatory practices and structural barriers within institutional frameworks. These barriers have hindered women from advancing in agrifood careers and acting on their leadership potential.

Gender-based violence is another pervasive challenge that cuts across all segments of agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa, extending beyond the domestic sphere into farms, markets and public spaces. It is fuelled by harmful gender norms and intersecting vulnerabilities such as precarious employment, unpaid care burdens and inadequate access to resources, which particularly affect rural women and informal workers. These issues are compounded by human-made and natural disasters, pandemics, and climate and environmental changes that increase pressure on scarce resources. All of these have the potential to lead to increases in practices that harm women, such as child marriage, forced prostitution and more. The systemic disadvantages faced by women not only expose women to exploitation, abuse and harassment, but they also undermine the resilience and equity of agrifood systems overall.⁹

Addressing these challenges faced by women and the agrifood system sector requires integrated, gender-responsive and transformative approaches that rely on adopting critical feminist perspectives. Transformative changes in how food is produced, distributed and consumed can advance both environmental sustainability and social justice. This report highlights alternative approaches – such as agroecology, food sovereignty, gender-transformative and

territorial markets – not as simple technical solutions, but as movements rooted in care, cooperation and resistance to exploitation and colonial legacies. By identifying the root causes of inequality in relation to work, food and nutrition, climate resilience and empowerment, this approach ensures that the solutions include and extend beyond inequalities in access to resources to also address other important areas of inequality such as time poverty, limited mobility, disproportionate unpaid care and reproductive work, erasure of women's indigenous knowledge and harmful gender norms.

While progress has been made in addressing gender inequality, there are intersectional and other factors such as age, ethnicity, disability and location that overlap and make the experience of inequalities more complex for certain groups of people.

↓ SENEGAL – Yacine picks branches of moringa.



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This complexity is often overlooked in national statistics and high-level reporting, making it difficult to track progress accurately. Gathering and using more nuanced, context-specific data – including both quantitative and qualitative insights – can strengthen the implementation of gender-equitable policies and enhance our ability to track and evaluate progress effectively.

The report aims to ground the evidence in African-led research, practice and perspectives within a broad and diverse scoping review of grey and peer-reviewed literature. The review included research reported in multiple languages and that employed diverse methodologies. Public calls were issued to civil society organizations and researchers to request case studies. A regional survey was conducted to assess and prioritize key themes for the report and to identify any other relevant material to include in the review. Finally, a two-day online stakeholder consultation was held with researchers, practitioners and civil

society representatives from across the region to present the preliminary findings and receive feedback to inform the drafting of the report. These engagement processes were critical in ensuring that the report reflects diverse regional voices and supports the development of contextually relevant, evidence-based policies and actions.

This overview presents findings based on key thematic areas identified through stakeholder consultations. The primary focus of the report is on women, given their central yet often undervalued roles in agrifood systems, the lack of intersectional data and the disproportionate impacts of structural inequalities women face across the region. The concepts of gender and intersectionality are important lenses through which evidence related to women in agrifood systems is studied; however, more research is needed to deepen understanding of how different and multiple forms of inequality interact and affect different groups of women and to inform more inclusive policies and practices.

↓ UNITED REPUBLIC
OF TANZANIA,
ZANZIBAR - Women
harvest seaweed.



THE MULTIFACETED NATURE OF WOMEN'S WORK IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

**WOMEN'S
UNPAID CARE,
REPRODUCTIVE AND
SUBSISTENCE WORK
POWERS AGRIFOOD
SYSTEMS IN
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA
AND ENABLES
AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS
TO FUNCTION.**

Women in sub-Saharan Africa comprise nearly half (49 percent) of the total agrifood systems workforce, the largest proportion of any region in the world. Agrifood systems employ more than three out of four working women. Women also make up 43 percent of those working in agriculture and 63 percent of off-farm agrifood systems workers.⁹ The latter roles span production, processing, distribution, consumption and packaging of food and cash crops. Women's labour is essential to food production at every stage. However, their work is shaped by historical barriers, sociocultural norms and economic policies that often disadvantage them. Importantly, women's agrifood system employment is commonly undertaken while performing unpaid care and reproductive work – often simultaneously.

Nearly 90 percent of employed women in the region work in the informal sector despite its low wages, insecurity, lack of social protection and health and safety risks.¹⁰ This is often the only option that allows them to balance paid work with their caregiving roles. **Women are also more likely than men to be in vulnerable forms of self-employment,** such as working as contributing family

workers or own-account workers. While off-farm agrifood system segments such as food transportation, wholesaling and factory work may offer greater opportunity for wage-employment, men are more likely to access these segments than women. Only a small percentage of men or women operate businesses that employ other people, with no clear gender pattern.⁹

Importantly, women's employment in off-farm agrifood systems is increasing across the region, rising from 21 percent in 2005 to 29 percent in 2022, despite the decline in on-farm agrifood systems employment for both women and men in the same period.⁹ This growth was largely driven by West Africa,^a where women's off-farm agrifood systems employment surged from 29 percent in 2005 to 47 percent in 2022. The growth in off-farm agrifood employment across sub-Saharan Africa is part of a broader transformation in the agricultural and rural sectors, whereby employment is decreasing in agriculture but expanding

Unless otherwise indicated, the statistics and information presented in this chapter are sourced from FAO, AWARD, and NRI (forthcoming).

a The report focuses on sub-Saharan Africa and presents data disaggregated by subregions: Middle Africa, Eastern Africa, Southern Africa and Western Africa. This disaggregation is based on the United Nations M49 "Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistical Use" (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49>).



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in agro-industrial areas and production of ready-to-eat foods. This can create a favourable market environment for women; however, the off-farm agrifood systems sector remains characterized by significant disparities between women and men in earnings and working conditions.

Women's unpaid care, reproductive and subsistence work powers agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa and enables agrifood systems to function. This is true not only because of the care work that supports labourers and their families, but also because of the significant share of unpaid labour women provide on farms, processing sites and in markets. Women face multiple responsibilities, balancing unpaid care and reproductive work with productive roles in agrifood systems. This affects when, where and how they can participate in economic and other activities. For example, in Senegal, the unpaid labour of women and extended families contributes significantly to export horticulture;¹⁶ in Mozambique, rural women leave formal jobs (and girls

often leave school) during peak agricultural seasons to meet family farm needs;¹⁷ and in South Africa, women are confined to low-value subsistence roles.¹⁸ This unpaid work remains wholly undervalued, exploited and ignored, with the consequence of enabling gender inequality to become further entrenched over time – despite decades of evidence highlighting its essential role in sustaining households, communities and economies.

Moreover, **limited availability of nationally representative sex-disaggregated statistics** that track women's informal work contributes to their invisibility in sub-Saharan Africa's agrifood systems, particularly in the forestry, livestock, fisheries and aquaculture sectors. For example, in forestry, women are heavily engaged in activities such as collecting fuelwood and gathering non-timber forest products but these are often not included in formal data and sectoral policies.¹⁹ Women also make critical contributions to fisheries and aquaculture in the region, particularly in post-harvest roles.²⁰

↑ SOUTH AFRICA – Workers at a packing house sort oranges for external defects.

However, their work remains largely informal, under-recognized and undervalued, limiting their visibility and influence in the sector. In sub-Saharan Africa's livestock sector, women are more likely to own small livestock and poultry, while men tend to own larger, more profitable animals like cattle.^{21, 22} Case studies have also found that as livestock and their products became more profitable, women's control over the income from those activities declines, highlighting that increased commercialization of agricultural production can deepen, not alleviate, existing gender inequalities.²³

Gender-based violence is pervasive in agrifood systems and affects particularly rural women and informal workers. For example, declining fish stocks and increasing droughts in Zambia have led to increases in sex-for-fish practices because women cannot afford to buy the fish they need to sell and earn income, or there is such significant competition for these resources that men, including those in positions of authority, use this as leverage to pressure women to give them what they want.^{24, 25}



In addition, women in sub-Saharan Africa face **serious occupational health risks in agrifood systems**, especially from pesticide exposure, lack of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and unsafe working conditions, yet these experiences remain largely invisible in mainstream research and policy.^{26, 27, 28} Strengthening collection of sex-disaggregated data is essential not only to capture information on women's roles and monitor shifts in gender dynamics but also to monitor and address the health impacts women disproportionately face. This is essential if adequate prevention actions are to be taken and reparations are to be made.

↑ CÔTE D'IVOIRE –
Woman smokes fish on
an oven in the suburban
area of Port-Bouet.

WOMEN IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA FACE SERIOUS OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RISKS IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

FOOD SECURITY, NUTRITION AND GENDER IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Sub-Saharan Africa continues to face the highest levels of food insecurity of any region, leading to hunger, undernutrition and famine. Food insecurity also has significant social and economic consequences. In 2024, 64.2 percent of women and 62.7 percent of men in sub-Saharan Africa experienced moderate or severe food insecurity. This is a sharp increase from 2014, when the rates stood at 46.2 percent for men and 48.4 percent for women.²⁹ Several drivers impact food insecurity and undernutrition and take context-specific forms. These include rising food and fuel prices, climate and environmental change, and armed conflicts.³⁰

Without measures to address the drivers of food insecurity it is likely that agricultural productivity and food availability will continue to decline, leading to poor outcomes for the whole population, but especially for women and girls. Within sub-Saharan Africa, **Central Africa has the worst levels of food insecurity and the largest gender gap**, with food insecurity affecting 78.9 percent of women and 75.4 percent of men.²⁹ The prevalence of severe food insecurity is also highest in this subregion, impacting around 38.6 percent of females and 35.1 of males.²⁹ These alarming levels of food insecurity reflect the impact of protracted food crises.³⁰

↓ ETHIOPIA – Women inspect fetien breed of barley.





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Southern Africa has the lowest prevalence of food insecurity in the region, with 26.2 percent of women and 25.8 percent of men experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2024.²⁹

Many areas with the highest levels of food insecurity are affected by prolonged conflict, with women experiencing distinct and often severe impacts. During conflict, women's participation in agriculture increases, indicating their critical role in maintaining agricultural production in times of crisis.³¹ Conflicts often escalate gender-based violence and limit women's mobility,^{32, 33} impacting women's well-being as well as their ability to access food and social support networks.

Food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa remains high across rural, urban and peri-urban areas. The rate is highest in rural spaces at 65.3 percent of the population in 2024, compared with 64.2 and 62.9 percent in peri-urban and urban areas, respectively.²⁹ The types of challenge and women's needs and interests vary significantly along the rural-urban continuum; therefore, addressing food insecurity in these different contexts requires tailored, location-specific solutions. In rural regions, women's

limited mobility and market access and their increasingly limited access to land as a result of climate change, environmental degradation, land dispossession and conflict are key drivers. Urban food insecurity is shaped by high living costs, increasing dependence on expensive ready-to-eat foods. For women, this is often related to their time poverty and inadequate social protection, exacerbated by inadequate access to decent work. Peri-urban areas have been studied less than rural and urban areas but face food insecurity linked to poor

↑ **SENEGAL – Man and woman weigh cattle feed.**

IN 2024, 64.2 PERCENT OF WOMEN AND 62.7 PERCENT OF MEN IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA EXPERIENCED MODERATE OR SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA IS INCREASINGLY EXHIBITING THE TRIPLE BURDEN OF MALNUTRITION: UNDERNUTRITION, OVERNUTRITION AND MICRONUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES.

infrastructure, loss of agricultural land and the expansion of informal settlements, which often house marginalized populations with limited access to food and essential resources. Similar to urban areas, gender inequalities in income, employment and education are likely to impact the largely income-based entitlements to food in these areas.

Sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly exhibiting the triple burden of malnutrition.^{34, 35} The triple burden is when undernutrition (including stunting, wasting and underweight), overnutrition (overweight and obesity) and micronutrient deficiencies coexist in a population. This poses a significant public health challenge for the region, including increased risks of diet-related non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension and liver cancer.³⁶ Importantly, these trends are occurring in contexts where traditional diets have been healthy and nutritious.

Diet-related risk factors for overweight and obesity are now common in sub-Saharan Africa, affecting 11.4 percent of the population aged 18 years and older.²⁹ Consumption of ultraprocessed foods is increasing as a consequence of time poverty where women's roles in paid employment have not led to corresponding increases in men's roles in care work. This results in poor diets for women and children, leading to nutrition-related non-communicable

diseases. This shift is not only among wealthy women: an analysis of demographic and health survey data from 36 sub-Saharan African countries covering the period 1990 to 2019 found a shift in high female body mass index distribution from the most educated and wealthy women to women with intermediate education and wealth.³⁴

With the exception of Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence of anaemia among women aged 15 to 49 years – 36.8 percent in 2023 – with virtually no progress made over the past decade.²⁹ Key factors associated with women's anaemia are education, economic empowerment of women, family planning services and perceptions and religious beliefs related to food restrictions.^{37, 38}

↓ CABO VERDE
– Woman buys
vegetables
at market.



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High levels of food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa drive correspondingly high levels of gender-based violence and maladaptive or survival strategies for women. Food insecurity exacerbates tensions within households, leading to increased intimate partner violence. It also can lead women and girls to engage in transactional sex or other risky behaviours to obtain food, exposing them to violence and exploitation.³⁹ Furthermore, in food insecurity contexts, women and girls are more likely than men to reduce food consumption, be taken out of school and need to draw down assets,⁴⁰ all of which have long-term consequences for health, well-being and economic prospects. Climate change is also having an impact on food insecurity. In Kenya, for example, a study found that climate change increased food insecurity risk for pregnant women and pre- and neonatal exposure to nutritional deficiencies.⁴¹ This can have lasting intergenerational impacts affecting the physical and cognitive development of children and the health and well-being of mothers.

Intersectional inequalities such as by age, socioeconomic status, marital status, (dis)ability, race, ethnicity and displacement status may exacerbate food insecurity and malnutrition.^{42, 43} Poor women and adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by undernutrition and anaemia.

Discriminatory gender norms – such as those that delegate most unpaid work to women, restrict women's mobility and dictate food choices and the intrahousehold distribution of food, often contribute to gender inequalities in productivity, access to



© FAO/Gavin Gosbert and Jerry Mshala

income-generating opportunities and food security and nutrition.⁹

It is thus critical to ensure that **women's empowerment** is a key element of food security and nutrition interventions. Women's agency and decision making (such as what produce is sold or kept for the home) and their improved access to resources, including land and credit, have all been linked to improved outcomes for women and their families.⁹ Empowering women leaders and collectives can also improve the representation of the priorities of women related to food security and nutrition in policies and initiatives. Working with women's collectives in food production and processing and enhancing social protection are key to supporting women's empowerment.

↑ UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA, ZANZIBAR – Fatuma Kinwary, a local entrepreneur, fetches water.

WOMEN'S AGENCY AND DECISION MAKING AND THEIR IMPROVED ACCESS TO RESOURCES ARE LINKED TO POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO NATURAL RESOURCES AMID CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES

The pervasiveness of both environmental degradation and gender and intersectional inequalities in the use of natural resources is not viable for the realization of human rights, economic growth and the environment in sub-Saharan Africa in either the short or the long term. Several factors intersect to create a complex web of environmental degradation, inequality and political tension in the region. These include aggressive resource extraction; escalating climate change experienced disproportionately compared with other regions; contested natural resource rights due to overlapping customary and state governance systems; competing uses within households and communities and between communities; private sector encroachment and extractive practices; and poorly aligned government policies and priorities.^{13, 44} The cumulative impacts disproportionately affect women, compounding existing gender inequalities and threatening their livelihoods, health and social autonomy. However, rights to land, water and forests are vital for women's productive, care and reproductive work in agrifood systems, their health and well-being.^{45, 46} Women have deep historical and cultural relationships and knowledge about the benefit, sustainable use and regeneration of these resources.

The context of multiple tenure systems in sub-Saharan Africa mean that women's rights to access to land and other natural resources and ecological governance cannot



**WOMEN ARE
SIGNIFICANTLY
LESS LIKELY THAN
MEN TO OWN OR
CONTROL LAND.**

be obtained through one pathway alone.

Customary tenure systems developed over time to govern access to common resources, resolve conflicts and promote sustainable use of natural resources within and between communities.⁴⁷ Private property and national legal regulation systems based on materialistic and capitalist understanding of natural resources were introduced during the colonialist period. In some countries, such as Mali, sharia law also operates in addition to customary and statutory law. These overlapping systems of law and power can often leave women with fewer rights to common resources and less say in governance processes, despite bearing the brunt of environmental degradation. It also enables exploitation of these resources by elite interests, large-scale extractive industries and industrial agriculture.

This context, combined with gender norms and discrimination that exist in customary, state and religious tenure systems, results in poor outcomes for women in many

sub-Saharan African contexts. For example, **women are significantly less likely than men to own or control land.** In 28 of the 33 sub-Saharan African countries for which data are available on agricultural land ownership (Sustainable Development Goal [SDG] Indicator 5.a.1: Women's ownership of agricultural land), men are more likely than women to own or hold secure rights to land. In over 40 percent of these countries, the gender gap exceeds 20 percentage points.⁴⁸

Land access for youth, especially young women, is an increasing challenge in sub-Saharan Africa due to land scarcity and increasing demand. Older generations find it difficult to allocate substantial sections of their land to youth when they marry while still supporting the rest of the family. Further, as found in the United Republic of Tanzania, youth rights are typically not included in either customary or statutory tenure systems.⁴⁹ Although inheritance remains a primary means by which young people obtain land, particularly in the absence of land markets, patriarchal customs and laws favour men and disadvantage young women.⁵⁰



↑ KENYA – Maasai women work in community tree nursery.

Legal protections for women's land rights remain weak in 13 of the 28 sub-Saharan African countries for which data are available (SDG Indicator 5.a.2: Women's equal rights to land ownership). However, the region also includes countries with relatively strong legal safeguards for women's land rights, such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania, though this does not automatically result in better secure access to land for women.⁹

LAND ACCESS FOR YOUTH, ESPECIALLY YOUNG WOMEN, IS AN INCREASING CHALLENGE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA DUE TO LAND SCARCITY AND INCREASING DEMAND



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One in four women and men in sub-Saharan Africa fear they may lose their main property – often their home – against their will within the next five years, according to the Prindex initiative.⁵¹ Women and men have different reasons underlying their fear. Women are significantly more likely than men to cite marital and intrahousehold changes (divorce, death of spouse) as reasons for being tenure insecure.⁵¹ This is supported by considerable evidence of women losing land rights through a change in marital status and male inheritance. For example, in northern Ghana, women’s “stranger status” – the fact they marry into families – means that they are not allocated land rights in the same way as men.⁵² In contrast, men are more likely than women to believe that the government or companies will seize their land or property. However, women are also not immune to these fears or the reality of land seizures. For example, a study in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe found that rent-seeking, misuse of power, corruption and deprivation of information about land rights disadvantage women more than men. Women were more likely to be prevented from inheriting land, and multinational investors repeatedly appropriated tracts of land traditionally accessed and used by women.⁵³

Various challenges other than legal frameworks exist to improving women’s rights to land. Limited enforcement and awareness of laws and rights may still hinder the realization of women’s land rights in practice. Multiple tenure systems (customary, statutory, religious) create overlapping and often conflicting rules that frequently disadvantage women. Additionally, women’s land rights and tenure security are mediated by their relations with male relatives and influenced by marital status, age and social norms. Economic inequalities – such as women’s lower wages and limited access to credit – pose significant barriers to the ability of women to acquire land,⁵⁴ particularly as commercialization and urbanization drive up land values.⁵⁵ Even where women have land rights, the quality of the land to which they have access is often poorer and less productive than that accessed by men.⁵⁶

↑ KENYA – Farmers harvest crop.

**ONE IN FOUR
WOMEN AND MEN IN
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA
FEAR THEY MAY LOSE
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– OFTEN THEIR HOME.**

FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO INCOME LOSS FROM CLIMATE SHOCKS

Similarly to land, women often encounter systemic barriers in access to water and forests that are necessary for their own and their family's well-being and livelihoods. Women's access to water for productive use, such as irrigation, is increasingly critical in the context of changing weather patterns and more frequent occurrence of drought in the region. At the same time, water for drinking, sanitation and cooking is essential for everyday life everywhere. However, women are often excluded from water-related decision-making processes from local to subregional levels.⁵⁷ As a result, their specific needs, interests and lived experiences are often overlooked. Similarly, exclusion from forest governance and management initiatives, including REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), and increasing deforestation limit women's access to fuel, food and income.^{58, 59, 60}

Women's weak tenure rights and strong dependency on land, water and forest and the control of resources by patriarchal authorities and elite interests means that **women are more at risk of gender-based violence and extortion than men when access to these resources is needed.** Although an understudied area, available evidence shows that gender-based violence



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is used against women when they assert their land rights. Women are exposed to bribery and sexual extortion to access land or resolve land issues, often by community chiefs and land officials.⁵³

Climate change is also exerting pressures on access to land and other natural resources, exacerbating existing gender inequalities and environmental degradation. Female-headed households are more vulnerable to income loss from climate shocks.⁶¹ There is also a risk that progress in women's natural resources rights will be lost and barriers increased due to increasing pressure on landscapes, driven by factors including competing land use and short-sighted and unsustainable agricultural

↑ SENEGAL – Mboya Ka fetches water from a cistern.



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and extractive practices. While men and boys are also impacted, particularly by the pressure to conform to masculine ideals during climate crises, women's structural disadvantage and reliance on natural resources for their distinct roles within agrifood systems result in women being more acutely and distinctly disadvantaged compared with men.⁶² For example, climate change impacts often increase women's unpaid care and domestic workloads.^{62, 63} Further, despite women's role in ecological knowledge and care in many cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, women often lack the voice to provide solutions in decision making around resource scarcity. This lack of participation can compound gender inequalities in the allocation of scarce resources.⁶⁴

Climate change, resource scarcity and related displacement increase the risk of gender-based violence, including child marriage, trafficking and survival sex.^{6, 65} Increasing drought and corresponding increases in child marriage are also associated with an increase in practices such as female genital mutilation, which, for example, is meant to make brides more "acceptable" among pastoral communities in Kenya.⁶⁶ Despite systemic barriers to accessing essential resources,

women demonstrate resilience through adaptive strategies. Collective action, such as through women's cooperatives and advocacy groups, can enhance resilience and access to resources.²¹ There is also abundant evidence of targeted initiatives that have been effective in improving both women's agency and environmental outcomes. Gender-transformative adaptation approaches – such as engaging with men, opinion leaders and local chiefs – can be effective in tackling the root causes of inequality and integrating women's knowledge and leadership into climate and environmental governance. For example, the United Nations Women AgriFeD project in Mali used a farmer field school model to

↑ GHANA – Women inspect fonio processing machine.

**WOMEN DEMONSTRATE
RESILIENCE THROUGH
ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES
DESPITE SYSTEMIC
BARRIERS TO ACCESSING
ESSENTIAL RESOURCES.**

strengthen women's capacity and agency on sustainable farming, leveraging their existing knowledge and improving their access to resources, credit and markets. It also undertook community dialogue and awareness-raising to challenge gender norms. By engaging with nearly 4000 women, securing 208 hectares of land, establishing seed nurseries and promoting agroforestry and agroecology techniques, the project increased women's productivity sustainably.⁶⁷

Women's land, water and forest rights have a profound impact across multiple dimensions, contributing to improved food security, employment opportunities and health outcomes, and enhancing the sustainability of soil and ecological systems. More concerted efforts are required across the region to ensure women's equal access to natural resources and leadership in natural resources governance. They are also required to move beyond minimizing harm to the environment (environmental sustainability) and to foster a thriving natural environment (healthy ecosystems, ecological resilience). Promoting environmental stewardship

**MORE CONCERTED
EFFORTS ARE
REQUIRED TO ENSURE
WOMEN'S EQUAL
ACCESS TO NATURAL
RESOURCES AND
LEADERSHIP IN
NATURAL RESOURCES
GOVERNANCE.**



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↑ NIGER – Villagers harvest water from a well to water crops.

requires recognizing the shared responsibilities of all, increasing accountability for environmental actions and facilitating reparations when agreements are broken. Such efforts are essential for cultivating resilient ecosystems and advancing gender equality, both of which are critical to the long-term well-being of the region. Importantly, alternative approaches to achieving equitable access to land, gender equality and environmental justice already exist within sub-Saharan Africa, offering valuable insights and locally grounded solutions to these interconnected challenges.⁹

GENDER-JUST INNOVATION: ENHANCING EQUITABLE OUTCOMES IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

Gender-just innovation is key to developing technologies and social processes that integrate gender perspectives throughout the entire innovation process and ensure that new technologies, products and services benefit men and women equally. Social processes can promote inclusion and equity in agrifood systems by actively involving women in innovation and ensuring that solutions are designed to meet the specific needs of diverse populations. Innovation includes the creation of technology and also economic, institutional and social innovation. It can thus involve new ideas, strategies or models applied to complex problems. This means that innovations can be based on improvements to technology, such as a labour-saving maize thresher in the United Republic of Tanzania, but also social innovations such as the formation of Community-led Women's Watch Groups in Zambia to address gender-based violence in small-scale fisheries. There have been numerous women-focused innovation initiatives implemented successfully in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, covering policy, services and technology, and this offers a promising outlook for making agrifood system transformation in the region more gender-responsive.^{68, 69}

Gender-just innovation highlights the importance of innovation processes and outcomes that recognize the different intersectional needs, interests and structural barriers faced by women. It ensures the meaningful representation and participation of women and the mobilization of resources



← ESWATINI –
Nkosephayo Manyatsi
drives tractor.

and actions towards gender equality and women's empowerment. It also involves innovation outcomes that improve the realities of women's daily lives in agrifood systems. Gender-just innovation requires the engagement of a wide range of innovation actors in agrifood systems, including knowledge brokers, technical experts and those in the policy environment. It also involves supporting women's own capacity to innovate in their daily lives in relation to agrifood systems, which is essential to help them deal with current and future challenges.

Despite recent progress, innovations in agrifood systems across sub-Saharan Africa remain insufficiently responsive to diverse needs and priorities of women, often excluding women from the design of, access to and benefits from new tools, practices and strategies. Gender gaps in access to technologies such as mechanized equipment, improved seed, fertilizers, irrigation technologies and digital tools are

driven by discriminatory social norms and perceptions and women's poor access to finance, limited mobility and unequal access to extension services. Social perceptions of women farmers as unable to operate complex machines or manage farms and business can limit their access to equipment, decision-making positions and more formal and secure forms of work.

The persisting gender gaps in access to resources and technologies has a profound impact on women's ability to innovate and deal with complex and changing contexts of agrifood systems. The innovation and agrifood system sectors are failing to address well-documented and persistent gender gaps in agricultural extension and advisory services, finance, digital access and leadership in knowledge institutions. Innovation-system actors are not recognizing the multiple roles of women in agrifood systems and the lack of representation of women in positions of influence in agrifood systems, while actions to redistribute resources and improve women's access to services are limited. These limitations are underpinned by deeply embedded institutional norms derived from within and outside the region.⁹

For example, **agricultural extension and advisory services that facilitate access to innovations through promoting technology uptake often fail to effectively engage women farmers.**²¹ This leads to women having significantly less access to innovations compared with men. By receiving direct training from extension staff, men are more likely to become early adopters of innovations, while women often face delayed access because they rely on second-hand information from male relatives.

THE PERSISTING GENDER GAPS IN ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND TECHNOLOGIES HAS A PROFOUND IMPACT ON WOMEN'S ABILITY TO INNOVATE.

Finance is a key requisite for adoption of innovation. However, **while financial inclusion has grown for both men and women in low- and middle-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade, the gender gap has widened, revealing that progress has not been equally shared.** In 2024, 64 percent of men had a financial account compared with just 52 percent of women, a 12-percentage-point gap. This gap has grown from 5 percentage points in 2011, when 26 percent of men and 21 percent of women had access to a financial account.⁷⁰ Mobile money has played a pivotal role in driving financial inclusion across the region; however, disparities are evident there as well, with only 34 percent of women

↓ KENYA – Farmer uses fertilizer machine.



IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, WOMEN ARE 13 PERCENT LESS LIKELY THAN MEN TO OWN A MOBILE PHONE AND 29 PERCENT LESS LIKELY TO USE MOBILE INTERNET.

owning a mobile money account in 2024, compared with 46 percent of men.⁷⁰

The gender gap in digital financial inclusion is closely linked to disparities in digital access generally. In sub-Saharan Africa, women are 13 percent less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 29 percent less likely to use mobile internet. The latter gap, while still substantial, has narrowed from 36 percent in 2022.⁷¹ It is notable, however, that these gaps (in both access to digital and mobile money) are less pronounced between young men and young women than between older men and older women.⁵⁰

Everyone has a role to play in supporting gender-just innovation, and sub-Saharan Africa has a rich network of innovative actors and institutions that are already progressing towards mainstreaming gender in agrifood innovation goals. The recognition

of the importance of gender in agrifood systems for transformative change in the sector is strongly evident. However, the realization of goals of gender equity and application of policies to ensure that women are represented and their different needs and realities in innovation processes are addressed are limited and inconsistent. Despite policies and statements from innovation stakeholders, the development of technologies, interventions, services and institutional innovation often fail to reflect the needs, preferences and evolving roles of diverse groups of women.⁹

↓ SOMALIA – Farmers use mobile phones.





Women's leadership is important for the effectiveness and viability of innovation, is an important expression of women's empowerment and is a potential catalyst for gender-just innovation in agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa. Agrifood innovation in sub-Saharan Africa requires women's knowledge and experience; however, the extent to which innovation actors value and promote women's leadership is limited.

When women are actively involved in the design and implementation of innovations, outcomes improve, including productivity and empowerment – as is well illustrated by the agroecological farming systems designed by women in the *Nous sommes la* solution movement in West Africa.⁷² However, existing data reveal that women's representation in agrifood system leadership roles remains minimal. The challenge begins with gender gaps in education, with fewer young women than men choosing to pursue and remain in agriculture-related fields.

Consequently, although there has been improvement over the past decade, the proportion of women agricultural researchers remains low, averaging 22.9 percent.⁷³ This percentage varies widely across countries,

**THE PROPORTION OF
WOMEN AGRICULTURAL
RESEARCHERS
REMAINS LOW,
AVERAGING
22.9 PERCENT.**

↑ MOZAMBIQUE –
Researcher examines
water samples.

from less than 10 percent in Chad to nearly 40 percent in Cabo Verde and Liberia.⁷³ This lack of women among agricultural scientists reduces the likelihood that the needs of women in agrifood systems will be addressed unless specific incentives and research programmes encourage men to engage in gender-responsive research. In response, several organizations and initiatives have emerged in sub-Saharan Africa that focus on enhancing the leadership potential of women farmers and scientists.⁹

Strengthening women's agency, collective action and social movements should be at the forefront of advancing gender equality and empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa's agrifood systems.

WOMEN'S AGENCY, EMPOWERMENT AND COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR NEW DIRECTIONS IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

Women's empowerment in agrifood systems is important to ensure that women can make choices and act on those choices.^{74, 75} This would allow for more context-specific solutions and change that reflects women's interests and priorities related to farming,^{76, 77} household food security and nutrition,⁷⁷⁻⁸⁰ and community development. Evidence demonstrates that a multidimensional approach and working at different scales – from local to policymaking levels – can support women's empowerment.⁸¹ Addressing structural barriers and supporting collective action, in addition to improving resource access and capacity strengthening are also key.

Addressing discriminatory gender norms through approaches that seek to transform attitudes, behaviours and power dynamics can help to remove the constraints that hinder women's agency.^{82,}

⁸³ Engaging with men and households in community-based interventions have also proved effective in changing restrictive gender norms and encouraging women's empowerment.^{84, 85} Without meaningful interventions that intentionally address women's empowerment, agrifood system interventions are missing opportunities to improve effectiveness and create greater impact. For example, in Ghana, while the provision of loans for the purchase of irrigation pumps increased profits and income for women, it did not alter women's control over decisions on use of the income or on production, control over assets or their

work burden, limiting the effectiveness of the approach.⁸⁶ Food and nutrition programmes are more effective when there is equal participation of men and women.

Robust and user-friendly measures of agency and empowerment have developed over the past decade to enable more effective assessment of policies and interventions for women's empowerment. Indices such as Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI),⁸⁷ the Women's Empowerment in Livelihood Index (WELI)⁸⁸ and others have been important in generating insights into how agrifood systems interventions influence women's empowerment. The long history of research in this area has consistently shown that women's empowerment is positively correlated with a range of welfare outcomes for African women and their families, including improved health, nutrition and

↓ DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC OF
THE CONGO –
Farmers attend
Dimitra Clubs
meeting.



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agricultural productivity.^{79, 89-91} In Ethiopia and Ghana for example, a project-level WEAI analysis led to the development of new strategies and government targets to address women's empowerment in agriculture.⁹² In addition, identifying interventions that are less effective and recognizing the role of other mediating factors – such as social norms – has been crucial to understanding how agrifood systems projects affect women's empowerment and broader welfare outcomes. Further, a new instrument, the Women's Empowerment Metric for National Statistical Systems (WEMNS)⁹³ has been developed for use in nationally representative, multitopic surveys to facilitate widespread adoption of measures of women's empowerment in national surveys and track progress on SDG 5 (Gender equality). WEMNS has already been implemented in Liberia, Sierra Leone and the United Republic of Tanzania.

Collective action is another key component for enhancing gender equality and women's empowerment as well as agrifood



systems transformation. When women act collectively, whether through grassroots initiatives or broader social movements, they not only assert their agency but can also catalyse systemic change that can benefit entire communities. Women's cooperatives, credit and savings groups and producer-to-marketing associations play important roles in helping women overcome barriers such as limited market access, lack of bargaining power and exclusion from policy spaces. These groups also provide platforms for sharing knowledge, pooling resources

↑ GHANA – Woman harvests rice.

VILLAGE SAVINGS AND LOAN ASSOCIATIONS, ROOTED IN INDIGENOUS SAVINGS PRACTICES, HAVE REACHED MILLIONS OF WOMEN IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, WHERE AROUND 70 PERCENT OF MEMBERS ARE WOMEN

WOMEN'S SOCIAL MOVEMENTS PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN ADVANCING WOMEN'S AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT.

and advocating for rights. There is no single, up-to-date figure for the number of women in agricultural cooperatives or credit and saving groups across sub-Saharan Africa, but available evidence suggests their growing presence and impact.

Village Savings and Loan Associations, rooted in indigenous savings practices, have reached millions of women in sub-Saharan Africa, where around 70 percent of members are women.⁹⁴ These groups have significantly improved women's productivity,^{95, 96, 97} income, food security and household well-being. Studies from countries like Ghana,^{95, 96} Rwanda and Zimbabwe⁹⁸ show that members of such associations achieve higher agricultural yields, better nutrition and

greater access to health care. Similarly, women's cooperatives across the region enable bulk crop sales, higher earnings and investments. Beyond economic gains, these initiatives have also supported environmental stewardship and women's empowerment.⁹⁹ However, where such collective action efforts are not deliberately designed as women-led, women's leadership is still limited in cooperatives due to material, institutional and social factors – such as limited access to inputs and finance and power dynamics in farmers' organizations – and discriminatory social norms. Tackling these barriers to promote women's leadership within these collectives would have huge effects.

Women's social movements – including environmental and agrarian movements – have played and continue to play a vital role in advancing women's agency and empowerment through collective action and rights-based claims-making and can drive effective social, economic and policy shifts. Furthermore, where such movements are driven by women themselves, they are more likely to create sustainable change. Grassroots and national movements have historically been powerful drivers of legal

↓ ZIMBABWE – Women raise fists at an event.



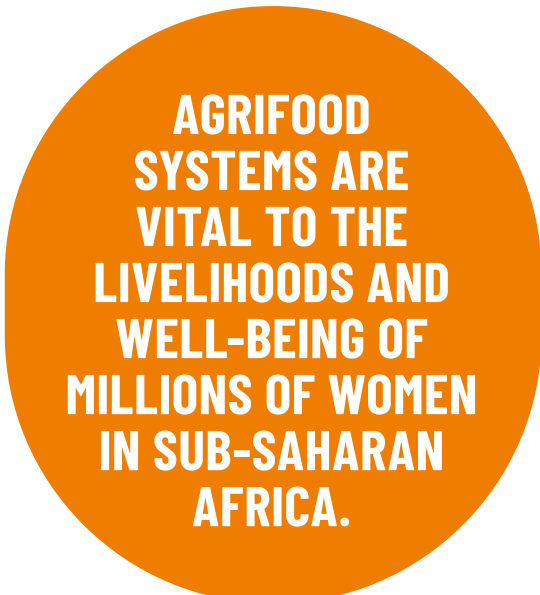
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reforms, such as land rights, inheritance laws and gender-sensitive agricultural and food systems policies, and offer inspiration for today. In Nigeria, women's protests against colonial taxes levied on the food staple cassava was an early example of influencing change, while in 2012, women's environmental activism in the Niger Delta led to improvements in resource governance processes.¹⁰⁰ In Kenya, Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement, founded in 1977, mobilized rural women to plant over 45 million trees,¹⁰¹ transforming landscapes and gender norms across the region as well as working to combat deforestation, soil erosion and food insecurity.¹⁰²

Since 2000, women-led movements across Africa's agrifood systems have advanced food sovereignty, agroecology and gender justice. Movements like *Nous sommes la solution* have empowered over 500 rural women's associations in West Africa to use their indigenous knowledge and practices.^{72, 103, 104} In Mozambique, women's voices and the leadership of women's organizations such as *Fórum Mulher* were central to the success of the No to ProSavana campaign, which halted a massive land acquisition project through grassroots mobilization and international alliances.¹⁰⁵ The African Rural Women's Assembly is an active member of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa and works with women's organizations to reflect and act on gender inequalities in agriculture and agroecological practices, as well as promoting seed sovereignty and healthy, culturally appropriate food.¹⁰⁶ These movements demonstrate how women can be key actors in driving and leading transformative change in agriculture, environmental governance and food systems across the continent.

The Stand for Her Land campaign¹⁰⁷ has also made substantial inroads towards the implementation of equitable land law for women in Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. For example, in the United Republic of Tanzania, the campaign launched a gender-transformative training initiative in six villages involving 320 traditional leaders, women, youth and local officials to raise awareness of legal land rights, gender equality and inclusive land governance. This led to the development of community-led action plans to tackle barriers to women's land access and establish a network of local women's land rights champions.

Gender-transformative approaches have also emerged as a strategy to tackle structural barriers and shift discriminatory social and gender norms and unequal power dynamics in relation to agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender-transformative approaches at the household, community and organizational levels in sub-Saharan Africa have yielded outcomes such as increased decision-making power for women, shifting perceptions of gender-based violence and caregiving roles, and improvements in livelihoods and women's nutritional status.^{85, 108}



**AGRIFOOD
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PROMOTING GENDER-, CLIMATE- AND ENVIRONMENTALLY-JUST AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

Agrifood systems are vital to the livelihoods and well-being of millions of women in sub-Saharan Africa. While significant gaps remain, including in access to essential resources, decent employment, technologies and leadership roles, there are also many promising examples of policies, strategies and programmes in Africa that have strengthened women's agency, fostered collective action and challenged entrenched social norms. The findings of this report on gender inequalities, along with lessons learned, offer clear, actionable recommendations to close gender gaps and dismantle structural barriers. In doing so, it paves the way for gender-, climate- and environmentally-just agrifood systems across the region.

Achieving gender equality in agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa requires tackling the root causes of discrimination and inequality through gender-transformative policies and interventions. Achieving this in turn requires an understanding of how deep-rooted gender and intersecting inequalities contribute to harmful environmental and agricultural practices, which is vital for guiding the reform of institutions to address power imbalances and exclusion, and build resilience. Key to driving systemic change in agrifood governance is strengthening accountability among state, customary and private actors through gender indicators in national plans to measure women's leadership and participation in

multistakeholder platforms. There is a need to integrate gender-transformative approaches more effectively, not only within gender-focused initiatives but also across broader multidisciplinary and multiscale programmes and initiatives that integrate gender-responsive monitoring and capacity-building. Finally, adopting feminist data-collection and social-learning approaches will prioritize the needs of women and support impactful, gender-transformative change.

↓ GHANA – Ramatu Awudu holds a small ruminant.



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POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

THESE POLICY HIGHLIGHTS ADDRESS
SELECTED THEMATIC PRIORITIES
THAT EMERGE FROM THE
FINDINGS OF THE REPORT.



ENHANCE WOMEN'S ACCESS TO SECURE AND DECENT EMPLOYMENT

Investments and enabling policies are needed to create more formal wage-paying jobs for women. These can boost income diversification for women and reduce their reliance on vulnerable and informal employment, while at the same time improving the conditions of informal agrifood systems employment and infrastructure. Improved access to finance and natural resources can foster a supporting environment for women-led enterprises

and entrepreneurship. At the same time, social protection needs to be expanded and tailored to women's needs to safeguard their livelihoods, including those working in informal agrifood systems. These measures must be inclusive and adaptable, taking into account the realities of agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa, where a large share of workers – especially women – operate in the informal sector without access to formal employment benefits.



↑ UNITED REPUBLIC OF
TANZANIA, ZANZIBAR
– Fatma Kinwary holds
fresh cabbages.

STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S LAND, WATER AND FOREST RIGHTS AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Strengthening legal and customary frameworks, improving implementation mechanisms and enhancing women's participation and leadership in natural resource governance can improve women's access to, ownership of and control over land, forests and water. Policies must integrate women's knowledge and leadership in climate adaptation strategies and sustainable natural resource management from local to regional levels. It is also essential to strengthen capacity and investment in gender, climate and environmental justice

in land, water and forests governance, including increased representation of women and recognition of their diverse priorities. Supporting environmental movements and investments in policies and initiatives that uphold human rights, natural resource rights and redistribution of rights can effectively improve governance from national to local levels. Recognition of the historical context of harmful environmental practices that affect African food systems is important in these endeavours.

RECOGNIZE AND ALLEVIATE WOMEN'S UNPAID CARE WORK

Promoting flexible work arrangements and addressing gender norms to encourage greater involvement of men in unpaid care work can increase women's ability to participate in off-farm employment within agrifood systems, whether as entrepreneurs or wage workers in agribusinesses, as well as other activities. Investments in infrastructure, both physical, such as rural electrification, improved water and energy sources, and social, such as child-care services, can reduce drudgery and free women's time for better-remunerated activities and self-care.^{109–111}

PREVENT AND ADDRESS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Establish and enforce comprehensive measures to protect women from violence in homes, on farms and in markets and public spaces, supported by survivor-centred services. Successful strategies emphasize multisectoral strategies, engaging men and boys as allies and ensuring women's representation in leadership roles. Men often act as gatekeepers of resources and decision-making power in households and communities, perpetuating gender-based violence and unequal norms; involving them in the solution is crucial for transformational change.¹¹²

↓ SOUTH SUDAN –
Josephine Garebere
sieves rice before
cooking it in her home.



MAKE GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT A MANDATORY PART OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION POLICIES AND COUNTRY ACTION PLANS

Food security and nutrition interventions must strive to reflect women's diverse roles in the agrifood system. This will address gender inequalities in relation to food security and nutrition as well as improving outcomes for all – enhancing women's empowerment in nutrition programmes has been shown to effectively improve food security and nutrition of their households.^{21, 113}

PROMOTE RECOGNITION, REPRESENTATION AND REDISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES TOWARDS WOMEN FOR GENDER-JUST AGRIFOOD INNOVATION

Advancing gender-just innovation demands multilevel, multistakeholder partnerships with strong representation of women, driven by political will, technical expertise, accountability and inclusive organizational cultures. A key part of this is strengthening women's capacity for innovation by addressing the structural inequalities and restrictive social norms that underpin them, which limit their access to critical agrifood system resources, including inputs, finance, information, extension services and digital technologies. Enhancing women's access to these resources can empower women in sub-Saharan Africa to increase productivity, diversify livelihoods and participate more fully in decision making in communities and households. This also involves promoting youngwomen's engagement with agricultural science and supporting women's inclusion and leadership in agricultural research and technology development. Beyond technical skills, this requires supportive policies, finance, entrepreneurship development and support for women and their organizations.⁹

ENHANCE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND DECISION MAKING AT ALL LEVELS – IN THEIR HOMES, COMMUNITIES AND AT POLICY LEVELS

If innovation processes and technologies are to meet women's specific needs and address their challenges, women must participate in their design, development and implementation. Similarly, the recognition and representation of women within the agrifood systems institutions that promote innovation processes is also crucial. Enhancing women's leadership, education and voice in science and policy can strengthen their engagement in agrifood innovation.

STRENGTHEN WOMEN'S GROUPS AND FOSTER COLLECTIVE ACTION IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

Efforts to enhance the status of women in agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa must include investing in capacity-building and support for women's groups and leadership initiatives that drive systemic change and challenge discriminatory gender norms. Moreover, investing in women's collectives and women's empowerment is essential for improved resilience and governance and women's adaptive capacity and collective action to advance gender, climate and environmental justice, particularly around women's land rights and rights to common resources. Women's cooperatives, credit and savings groups and producer-to-marketing associations play important roles in helping women overcome the key barriers that they face, promoting access to markets, increasing bargaining power and their participation in shaping policies. These groups also provide platforms for sharing knowledge, pooling resources and advocating for rights.^{19, 21, 114, 115}

→ KENYA – A woman member of Samburu pastoral community stands next to goats.



NUMERICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Agrifood systems are the largest source of employment in sub-Saharan Africa, especially for women, employing **76 percent** of working women and 68 percent of men in 2022.

Women are **29 percent** less likely than men to use the mobile internet. While the gender gap in mobile internet use has narrowed for the second year in a row from **36 percent** in 2022 to **29 percent** in 2024, an estimated 205 million women in sub-Saharan Africa still remain without access to mobile internet.

The prevalence of food insecurity in the region has sharply risen in the last decade: around **64 percent** of the population experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2024, with **11.2 million** more women than men being affected.

Legal protections for women's land rights are low or none in **13 of the 28** sub-Saharan African countries for which data are available on SDG 5.a.2.

In sub-Saharan Africa's agrifood systems, women make up an estimated **73 percent** of the workforce in food processing and services, but only **3 percent** in transport, reflecting their concentration in roles closely aligned with domestic and reproductive work.

In 28 out of 33 sub-Saharan African countries for which national data on ownership or secure rights over agricultural land (SDG Indicator 5.a.1) are available, a larger proportion of men than women own land. In over **40 percent** of countries, the gender gap exceeds **20 percentage points**.

Between 2005 and 2022, women's off-farm employment in agrifood systems in sub-Saharan Africa grew by **8 percentage points**, from **21 percent** to **29 percent**, despite a decline in overall agrifood systems employment.

In sub-Saharan Africa, just **49 percent** of women had a financial account in 2021, compared with **61 percent** of men, revealing a **12-percentage-point** gender gap that has nearly doubled since 2011.

Almost **40 percent** of women aged 15–49 in sub-Saharan Africa are anaemic – the highest prevalence of any region worldwide.



NOTES

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This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.