

# Policy Brief: Overcoming Gender Barriers to Food System Transformations

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## **Introduction**

Food systems in Africa face many challenges from resource scarcity and trade dynamics to governance and inequity among others. Key among these urgent issues is the role of women in the food systems. The ability to build healthy, sustainable food systems is constrained by gender related barriers imposed within the household and the community, and in the micro and macroeconomic environments. Traditional gender roles in the household and throughout the value chain detrimentally affect which crops are grown, what food is eaten by the household members, and what livelihood options are open to women. Thus, addressing gender related barriers and challenges in food systems can contribute both to the transition toward a more healthy and sustainable food system, and toward gender equity.

## **Barriers to women's participation throughout the value-chain**

Women are restricted by limited access to income and productive assets including technology, ICT, mobile phones and internet, limited access to decision-making at all levels and limited access to learning and networking opportunities. Gender is an underlying determinant of roles at all stages of the food system, pushing out women from central economic drivers and decision-making positions at home and throughout the food system.

### **Production**

*Cash crops tend to be grown by men while women tend to produce for subsistence purpose.* In addition, women produce at a smaller scale and large-scale production is mostly done by men. *It is often the man that owns the productive assets needed such as equipment, tools and farmland. Certain farming activities are dominated by men, pushing women to less profitable and less central roles in production.* For example, women are more engaged in vegetable production while men are more engaged in other businesses such as fish production.

### **Transport**

Men dominate the transport sector for food. They work as motorcycle riders, truck drivers and operators of handcarts. They have access and control of productive assets such as transport means to transport food and input. *Women are not expected or not allowed to take part in transportation due to the perception that it requires more physical strength.*

### **Processing**

At processing and value addition stage, women are mostly involved in primary processing using rudimentary technologies such as grinding of cereals, while men are involved in higher value secondary processing such as milling, threshing and shelling. *Distribution of these processing activities is therefore determined by availability of capital: Men have more access to the capital required to purchase the equipment for large scale processing.*

### **Retail**

Retailing and vending of farm products is an activity dominated by women, and so is collection and aggregation of produce. However, participation in wholesale or retail business depends on the type of crop: *High value crops are marketed by men while low value food crops such as beans and vegetables are marketed mostly by women.* This undermines economic potential, as even men participating in the food system labs attested that the trade environment favors women since women seem to have better marketing skills.

### **Consumption**

As expected, consumption takes place at household level, so both men and women are consumers. However, consumption decisions at household level are mostly carried out by women. This is largely dictated by culture. Women cook the meals at home and also do a majority of the household chores, hence *limiting their involvement in more enterprising activities*. Moreover, men often control a greater share of income, *limiting the choice of food women can purchase* for the household as a result.

## **Recommendations for policy support**

Policies need to live up to challenges previously identified to create both gender equality and more sustainable food systems. Following are several preliminary policy recommendations that came up in local discussions, relating to each stage of the value chain:

### **Production**

*Ensure equal land tenure rights for men and women and provide incentives for women to obtain tenure rights.* In many countries equal gender rights are in place on paper but not enacted in practice due to traditions and dominant social norms.

*Encourage women to take part in decision-making* in for example farmers' associations, community assemblies, government bodies in charge of agriculture extension services etc.

*Provide capital for higher income production processes by women.* Agriculture production is one of the most expensive activities in the value chain. Production resources are mostly owned by men. Thus, *policy interventions aimed at increasing access to agricultural funds and resources should explicitly target women and aim to change the balance of ownership in farms and other production arenas.*

*Create new and low threshold opportunities for women to access information, knowledge and skills.* Generally, men were reported to have more opportunities to attend trainings and agriculture extension sessions that give knowledge and skills about farming. In addition, where the training was to be paid for, it was reported that men

have more income to pay for the training, so as a result men attend more trainings than women. The specific areas outlined where women lack knowledge and skills include modern farming techniques such as use of greenhouses, growing vegetables, marketing procedures, and value addition. It was also mentioned that women have got little time to attend trainings. This lack of access is further exacerbated in remote rural settings, where access to training is diminished. Furthermore, even if these trainings were given, women would not exploit them fully because of the workload they have in households as well as other time they have to allocate to businesses. Thus, *agricultural training policy should be designed in a way that allows women to participate, is designated as activity for women, and closes the knowledge gaps most affecting women farmers.*

### **Transport and Processing**

*Close the wage gap and support women's participation in male dominated positions within transportation and processing. Policies should be put in place to support women in entering positions in the transport and processing parts of the value chain, encourage women to do so, and close the wage gap once they do.*

*Increase women's access to technology.* Being able to own and operate different technologies, from phones to processing equipment, is crucial for this part of the value chain. However, currently, men have more access to technology than women. Respondents reported that men own better phones, televisions and radios on which knowledge and information is disseminated. Despite the fact that these days phones can be obtained at a very low cost and in some places, women indeed were perceived to have similar access to them. Thus, *there is a need to support through subsidy and training women's access to the different types of technologies required to sustain transport and processing businesses – from ICT to processing machinery and transport vehicles.*

### **Retail**

*Support the seed stages in establishing women owned food retail businesses.* There is a lack of support for ideas generated by women at household level. According to women interviewed, ideas generated by them do not get support until they have reached the point where they look like viable businesses. In some cases, businesses are taken over when they become promising in terms of income generation. In some cases, this income is not given back to the woman after selling. Thus, *there is a need to design programs that encourage and support women specific food businesses and ensure that these businesses stay under women ownership over time.*

*Increase women's awareness to regulation and policy.* Both men and women felt that people do not know the policies that are supposed to guide their work in the food business. In some cases, they are caught unawares by the law enforcement teams without knowledge of what might be wrong with their way of conducting businesses. This knowledge gap could be worse for women, whose access to information and training is often impeded to begin with. This can be improved by *putting in place programs that close this knowledge gap in regulations governing food businesses, and in changing inspection policy so it supports women's businesses through knowledge provision before applying sanctions.*

*Co-create policies with retailers.* Policies that are made using top-down approach were said not to work, as they do not reflect the situation of the people for whom they are made, such as vendors on the streets. We suggest creating engagement platform as a crucial part of policy design, where women vendors can share their experience, needs, and understanding to improve new policy instruments and proposals.

### **Consumption**

*Increase involvement of women in more enterprising activities.* There is need to ensure women can get income in their hands that they can control hence, enabling them improve the *choice of food they can purchase* for the household.

## **Conclusions**

Tradition plays a big role in what activities women engage in and what knowledge and skills they have access to. Gender roles limit how much time women have on their hands and dictates how the community thinks about what women can and can't do throughout the food value-chain. Even in policy instruments such as training programs, women feel that men do not allow them to take part and benefit from the knowledge and skills they aim to improve. While future briefs could focus on specific locations, stages of the food value chain, and cross-system recommendations, this policy gave a bird's eye view of the challenges women face in participating in every stage of the food system and gave preliminary recommendations for creating transformation in the role of women, and their own ability to transform the food system.