



Food in the market: A Kyrgyz woman sells her farm produce by the roadside
(© HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation)

This guidance sheet is one of a series written to support SDC staff in ensuring that gender issues are taken into account transversally in different thematic domains – in this case, food security. It outlines key gender issues regarding food security, and how these can be integrated into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of cooperation strategies and project interventions.

Key issues

- A. Labour: who does what in the food system?** Whether a project addresses food production, processing, storage, marketing, preparation or consumption, it is essential to analyse the division of tasks between women and men and take this into account when designing interventions. What is the project's theory of change in terms of how women's and men's activities will be altered? How will this impact on the time used by women and men in other tasks – particularly women's unpaid care work?
- B. Assets: who has decision-making control over the key assets in the food system?** In many parts of the

world, men own assets such as land and equipment, and have primary decision-making power over them. Nevertheless, local norms always need to be investigated, and project activities framed according to the intended change.

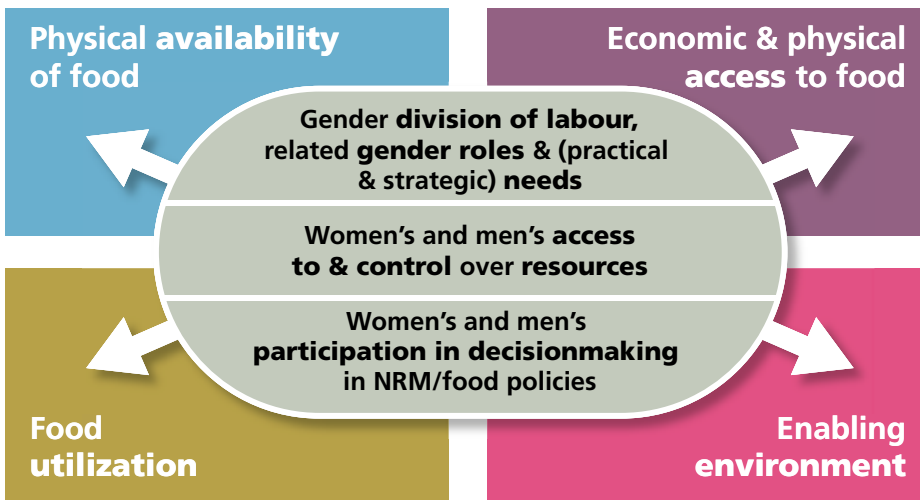
- C. External factors: How are women's and men's roles in the food system influenced by factors beyond their control?** The impacts of external factors ranging from climate change, international commodity prices to government policies are rarely gender neutral, and their impact on project activities needs to be analysed.

1. Definitions: food systems and food security

“Gender equality...is the single most important determinant of food security” Dr. Olivier de Schutter, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (2013)

An understanding of the **food system** is necessary when working on food secu-

urity – that is, all the factors that go into shaping the way that food is produced, processed, traded, distributed, consumed and potentially wasted in a given context. Food systems are heavily shaped by culture and traditions, politics, the environmental context, and national and international market systems.



Food security is a “Situation in which all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO).

Food security rests upon four building blocks, all of which are highly gender sensitive.



Better nutrition: Home gardening by ethnic minority women in the highlands of Northern Laos (© Helvetas/Patrick Rohr)

2. Gender analysis related to food systems and food security

2.1. Division of labour, gender roles and needs in food systems

Any project seeking to intervene in food chains needs to analyse and understand the different roles of women and men. Often these are very clearly drawn in all the four

areas of production, postharvest management, distribution and management, and processing and consumption.

Gendered tasks

Clear gender divisions in tasks tends to result in different spheres of knowledge and practical needs. For example, men may be responsible for ploughing, have detailed knowledge

on the shape of ploughs, and be interested in mechanised soil rotators; women may be responsible for weeding, have detailed knowledge of different weed species, and be

interested in mulches to reduce weed infestation. Both interventions will reduce physical labour, but one will be more beneficial to men, and the other, to women.

Production: Often women are responsible for subsistence crops, and men for commercial crops, although local norms should always be checked. Where women or men household members are absent on

labour migration, the division of tasks may forcibly change, and place particular strain on those left behind. The “feminisation of agriculture” is a common trend.

Gender preferences for crops

The separate roles of women and men are often reflected in differing responsibilities for, and ownership of, different crops. In West Africa, for instance, cowpeas are

mainly a women’s crop – produced, stored and also sold with only minor involvement of men. In Benin, women often go to local markets to sell crops; however, the decision

of what to sell is generally taken by both men and women, depending on the crop.

Postharvest management: Although often considered mainly the preserve of women, men may also have roles in post-harvest management, especially more technical aspects. Specific taboos or beliefs (for example concerning food handling by women during their menstruation) can also influence who undertakes what task.

ties in which men (through better access to education) are more numerate and literate than women. Nevertheless, in many parts of the world, norms are changing.

Distribution and marketing: Most small farm households sell a certain part/number of their crops and animals to buyers on local or national markets. Often men are particularly active in marketing, especially in socie-

Preparation and consumption: Whilst this is mainly done by women, in different communities men may also be involved to a greater or lesser extent in preparing food. Access to clean drinking water and sanitation is of course a pre-requisite for healthy food preparation and consumption – but this topic is beyond the scope of this note.

Unpaid care and domestic work: An important aspect regarding the division of labour cutting across the four areas of production, postharvest management, distribution and consumption is the division of unpaid care and domestic work, which lies largely in the hands of women. Rural women of all ages spend much of their day engaged in domestic chores, including col-

lecting water and firewood, processing and preparing food, travelling and transporting, and caregiving. These tasks are unpaid, restrict a woman's time and mobility and are a major constraint to the ability of smallholder farmers to increase agricultural productivity and achieve food and nutrition security.

Reducing the burden of unpaid domestic chores

Labour-saving technologies and practices promote inclusive development by reducing the domestic workload and freeing up time to perform productive tasks, to participate

in decision-making processes and development opportunities, and to enjoy more leisure time. When the domestic workload is reduced, women are the principal ben-

eficiaries but men also benefit, depending on the extent to which they perform these tasks. Source: IFAD toolkit 2016

2.2. Access to and control over resources related to food

It is also important to analyse women's and men's access to and control over resources related to food – here divided into physical, financial and knowledge assets.

Physical assets – land and water: Access to land and water is fundamental for food production, hence it is crucial to understand who controls these resources, and decides upon their use.

Care and ownership of livestock

Animals are an important asset of rural households in terms of food security. They are a source of food (milk, meat), a capital asset which can be sold in periods of shortage, as well as an essential means

of production (e.g. manure, cattle for ploughing). Often, large livestock such as cattle are considered a family asset, but are effectively owned (bought and sold) by men, whilst women undertake most

of the animal care. Small ruminants and backyard poultry are very often owned by as well as cared for by women – but men may become more involved in large scale commercial production.

In most parts of the world, more land is owned by men than by women (the exception being in matrilineal societies), and in many countries women are legally discriminated regarding land rights. Furthermore, where "joint" ownership is the norm, this does not necessarily equate joint

decision-making. More often than not, men control land use, deciding what crops should be grown, where. Nevertheless, the facts on land ownership vary by country and should always be carefully investigated, not assumed.

Land ownership and control

In Niger and Mali, most agricultural land is controlled by men, and it is common for men to lend fields to women family members, but to claim it back whenever they wish. As a consequence, women have neither incentive nor much opportunity to

improve the land (they cannot raise any loan, due to a lack of collateral). Productivity is thus low – to the detriment of the food security of the entire family. An innovative strategy initiated by some programs to gain better access and control over land was

that women formed saving groups. With the benefits they rented or bought the land from their husbands or other community members and thus became autonomous land owners.

Financial assets – capital and access to credit: Who controls the household finances and essential capital goods such as the house, machinery or animals has important implications on access to other food relevant resources. Often women are unable to access credit as they have no capital assets to serve as collateral – although in some countries, micro-credit schemes recognising this difficulty are available. Remittances from family members working as migrant labourers may be channelled to women, but are often sent to male relatives. Women and men tend to have different priorities; for example, women may favour organic food production, whilst men are more likely to use chemical inputs. Studies in countries such as India and Bangladesh show that

given the opportunity, women spend more of the household budget on children's food than men.

Knowledge assets – access to information: Women and men in rural communities often have differing knowledge bases as a result of differing experience, levels of education (higher illiteracy in women), mobility, and time (to listen to the radio, attend meetings, etc). Most rural advisory services in developing countries are oriented towards men's needs, with the advice being provided mostly by men to men. Reaching women often requires special thought and tailoring, taking into account local gender norms – included those related to mobility, and interaction in public.

2.3. Participation in decision-making in natural resource management and food regulation policies

Tackling strategic needs in food security interventions requires a long-term horizon, since this means questioning and re-negotiating existing labour divisions, decision-making patterns and power relations that may be deeply rooted in culture and history.

Access and control over resources related to food: One important strategic intervention is to promoting more equitable decision-making over resources closely tied to food production. For instance, promoting secure access to land for women can be

a very effective means to improve household food security.

Food policies and regulatory frameworks: It is particularly important that women's opinions and needs as well as those of men are taken into account in making political decisions over food production systems and food chains. Examples of such decisions include introducing new quality standards for staple crops on national markets, policies related to improved seed production and distribution, or campaigns fostering nutrition sensitive agriculture.



New eating patterns: Women in Ethiopia prepare prickly pear cactus as a vegetable (@Helvetas/Annette Boutellier)

3. External factors and policy environment on gender and food security

Gender roles and relationships are constantly changing. Some changes are small and local, such as women representatives voted into local government offices; others are more fundamental and may concern an entire region or country – such as a policy to allocate food tokens or cash to women members of poor households. To understand the dynamics of gender aspects in food security, it is important to be aware of the impact of wider trends such as climate change or the price of commodities on the international market.

Climate change: Changes in the ecosystem such as global warming or the extension of dry or rainy periods often have an impact on the type of locally produced food, the production systems, and food conservation practices. This may in turn influence gendered divisions of labour and decision making.

Deterioration of natural resources and natural disasters: Soil degradation, deforestation, and the pollution or shortage of water sources due to unsustainable use can have a massive impact on local or regional food production. The same is true of natural disasters such as earthquakes. The

impacts on women and men are nevertheless often different.

Migration and remittances: Seasonal or permanent migration of family members can have a major impact on the division of labour and decision making in the households and communities. Remittances may also influence the distribution of, access to, and control over resources related to the local food economy and food security.

Commodity prices: Falling or rising prices of major commodities such as wheat, sugar, coffee and cocoa, and how these are communicated to small-holder farmers, inevitably influence their production choices. International food companies play a significant role in this respect.

Food culture: The consumption pattern of food may alter considerably due to economic development, wealth, or imported “foreign” food culture. Much potential lies in rendering traditional, nutritious foods more convenient (less laborious) to prepare; women are usually particularly targeted in this respect.

Food culture

In the Andean highlands, the traditional high protein crops of quinoa and cañahua had until recently largely given way to the potato – or even reliance on imported food-stuffs paid with remittances from (mainly

male) migrant labour. With the “discovery” of quinoa as a health food, and a growing export demand for the crop, there has been a revival of its cultivation. Varieties better adapted to changing weather patterns (due

to climate change) are being investigated, as are labour-saving methods of preparation – working particularly with indigenous women’s groups.



Traditional food crop: A man harvests quinoa in the Bolivian highlands
(© Helvetas/Simon B. Opladen)

Summary of key considerations in a gendered analysis of food systems

Division of labour, gender roles and needs in food systems	
Production	Who does the clearing and ploughing of the field, the preparing or buying of the seeds, manures, other inputs? Who does the sowing, manuring, weeding, protecting, irrigating and harvesting? Who organises helpers or hires external workers? Who looks after live-stock feeding, stalling, fodder production, manure management, and health care (e.g. vaccination)?
Postharvest management	Who does the drying, threshing, winnowing, sorting, storage and conservation of crops? For each of these steps: how much time is invested by women and men? What are the specific needs of women and men in postharvest management?
Distribution & marketing	Who goes to the market or negotiates with local traders to sell grains, vegetables or animals? Who collects relevant information on market prices and selling opportunities? Who selects and controls the quality of marketed products? How far are women and men involved in running local stalls, shops or businesses for food trade? Who manages the money earned from food sales? Especially in sparsely populated, remote areas, how are women and men organised in transporting food products?
Preparation & consumption	Who is in charge of fetching or buying the required food items and preparing the meals? Who carries out milking or slaughtering of animals? Who allocates the food to the different family members including children, elderly and disabled, making sure the diet is balanced and nutritious? Are certain food items reserved for men, women, elderly, or children?
Access & control over resources	
Physical assets	Who owns and controls the land and decides on its allocation to family members or third parties? Who decides what crop is produced when, how, and on which land? Do women and men have access to equally productive land? Do men and women have equal access to water for agriculture, or to land that is close to water resources? What access do men and women have to drinking water, and who controls its use? Who owns, as opposed to who cares for, animals? Who decides where animals are allowed to graze and from where fodder can be cut?
Financial assets	Who manages the overall household budget? Who buys seeds, manure, fertilizers, pesticides, fodder and medication for animals, and equipment? Who employs labourers? Who owns grain granaries, and who controls the stored produce? Who owns the food as such (this can sometimes be used as collateral for bank loans)? Who decides upon the buying of food?
Knowledge assets	How is information related to agricultural innovations, postharvest management, marketing and healthy preparation of food provided? How can it be specifically orientated to women's and men's needs?
Participation in decision-making	
Strategic access to resources	What is the impact on small holder farmers of external factors beyond their control – climate change, environmental disasters, migration, changing consumer preferences? Does this result in any change in the roles and decision making processes of women and men in the production system?
Policies, regulatory frameworks	What national policies are in place regarding food – especially subsidies for particular foodstuffs? Do these have an impact on the project interventions, and are there different implications for women and men?

4. Gender-responsive interventions in food security

4.1. Gender-sensitive (mainstreamed) and gender-specific (targeted) interventions

It is common for those planning food security projects to focus on a particular part of the food system, and to identify activities that will improve the efficiency of this system. As long as a thorough analysis is made of who undertakes which activities, and interventions then targeted in a gender-responsive manner, the result is gender mainstreaming. However, there may also be situations in which there is a clear need for a gender-targeted intervention – for example, to reduce women’s labour burden

(often especially in food processing) or improve their knowledge on nutrition (when it is primarily they who are responsible for preparing meals). Gender-targeted interventions should not only focus on women, but also promote understanding and agreement amongst men. This may be particularly necessary if the intervention requires a financial outlay by the household. Gender mainstreaming and gender-targeting are not mutually exclusive; both approaches can be incorporated in a single project.

Enhancing the nutrition of upland farming families in Laos

The incidence of stunting amongst children of ethnic communities in the uplands of Northern Laos is amongst the highest in the world, being estimated to affect over 60% of all children under the age of five in such communities. An SDC-supported project addressing this

issue has a number of components, focused at household, regional and national policy level. Two interventions are specifically targeted towards women. One is the promotion of home gardens in which a variety of nutritious vegetables are cultivated (thus diversifying the

available food from the monoculture of maize). The second is an educational programme raising awareness about balanced diets and how to prepare nutritional meals.

Labour-saving devices and changes to the division of labour

In many countries, women thresh maize cobs by hand, one by one, prior to each meal. A mechanical thresher can reduce this labour burden – but may

not automatically mean that work time is reduced for both sexes. In Northern Benin, women and men are both involved in threshing, but once threshing

machines are introduced, unless they can be driven manually, they are usually only used by men.

4.2. Considering the gender-responsiveness of partners

Projects usually work with a variety of implementing partners – government, non-government, and the private sector. The gender awareness of such partners can vary considerably, and should be assessed at the time of project design. Whilst there may be good reason to work with certain partners that are not particularly gender sensitive, ways to raise such

sensitivity during project implementation should be built into the project design. There may also be some flexibility to select partners that demonstrate knowledge of, and commitment to, gender equality. For example, food processing companies are increasingly conscious of demonstrating “corporate responsibility”, including gendered aspects.

4.3. Gender-responsiveness of staff

Project partners cannot be expected to be gender-sensitive if project staff fail to demonstrate such awareness themselves. Ensuring that gender-responsiveness is written into

staff job descriptions and taken seriously in performance assessments is an important part of any project intervention.

4.4. The potential for “up-scaling”

Often promising gender-responsive opportunities with regard to food security lie in improving women’s access to and control over resources; however, many other interventions can also have wide-ranging

applications. These should be assessed, included in the project theory of change, and specific steps for replication built into the project design.

Riverbed farming: making land available to the landless, especially women

In the Tarai region of Nepal, the seasonal cultivation of vegetables on riverbeds is being promoted as a means to improve the food security and income of landless and land-poor households. Such riverbeds are mainly owned by the district authorities, and were previously uncultivated. They are generally very fertile although at risk

to flash flooding; when well managed in small plots, they can be highly productive. Plots are leased to target individuals for a maximum three year period. Those targeted are particularly women; men in these households are often absent on labour migration. Lessees have not only been able to improve their family’s nutrition, but also

to save and invest in future livelihood opportunities. Since first trials in 2006, the Riverbed Farming Project has expanded to reach well over 6,000 lease holders, and an alliance of government and non-government actors working on the issue has been established to exchange experiences and contribute to national policy.



Land for the landless: Women prepare a riverbed for vegetable cultivation in lowland Nepal (© Helvetas/Simon B. Opladen)

5. Important aspects for monitoring & evaluation

The following points should be given particular consideration.

- Develop a theory of change that explicitly mentions how the role of women and men in the part of the food system addressed will change as a result of project interventions.
- Ensure that a sex-disaggregated baseline is established, along with gender-specific indicators and targets of numbers of women and men engaged in activities. Key indicators may include the amount of time used in food production, storage or preparation activities; the degree of access to and control over resources; and the extent of participation in decisions related to food security.
- Allow for the monitoring of not only intended results, but also possible unintended results – for example, that women’s work burden will be increased as a result of a particular intervention.
- Ensure that findings – both positive and negative – are fed back into intervention design through gender-sensitive processes.

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