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# *Equality and Empowerment by Gender and Intersecting Social Differentiation in Agri-food Systems: Setting the Stage*

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

This working paper, produced by the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform, is one in a [series of analytical working papers](#) by our researchers. They were produced to inform the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to write the 2023 report on the *Status of Rural Women in Agri-food Systems*.\*

These evidence-based papers address key themes important for gender and social equality, and women's empowerment in agriculture and food systems. They each discuss:

- current status and emerging thinking
- the theme's relevance for transformative change toward more inclusive food systems
- the evolution of equality in agriculture and food systems over the past 10 years in low- and middle-income countries
- what has proved effective to ease structural constraints, and promote equality and empowerment
- specific suggestions about interventions, programs and policies that can help make agriculture and food systems more inclusive.

**COVER PHOTO CREDIT:** CIMMYT/P Lowe. *Lead farmer Santa Bhandari harvests green maize for her buffaloes in Nepal.*

## ABOUT CGIAR GENDER IMPACT PLATFORM

Generating Evidence and New Directions for Equitable Results (GENDER) is CGIAR's impact platform designed to put equality and inclusion at the forefront of global agricultural research for development. The Platform is transforming the way gender research is done, both within and beyond CGIAR, to kick-start a process of genuine change toward greater gender equality and better lives for smallholder farmers everywhere. [gender.cgiar.org](http://gender.cgiar.org).

## DISCLAIMER

This working paper has gone through a process of nonblinded peer review by two reviewers external to the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform, and has also been reviewed by the FAO team working on the 2023 FAO report on the *Status of Rural Women in Agri-food Systems*. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations nor of the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform.

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\* FAO. 2023. *The Status of Women in Agri-food Systems*. Rome.

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# Abstract

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Achieving gender and social equality in agri-food systems can result in greater food security and better nutrition for all—and transform food systems to be more just, resilient and sustainable. Equitable food systems are essential to achieving SDG 5, whose gender equality goal is intrinsically valuable and whose achievement supports progress across all other SDGs.

Current thinking has evolved from focusing on gender gaps to enabling gender-transformative change in agri-food systems, fostering gender and social equality and women’s empowerment.

A global snapshot of gender and social equality and of women’s empowerment in agriculture and food systems shows that persistent structural barriers in different domains and at multiple scales are the root causes of gaps by gender and intersecting differentiation. Gender-transformative change in agri-food systems hence necessitates a holistic and inclusive approach to dismantle those barriers.

Six working papers for a report on the *Status of Rural Women in Agri-food Systems*<sup>1</sup>, 10 years after the *State of Food and Agriculture 2010–11* (SOFA), developed by the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform address six key themes important for transformative change by gender and intersecting social differentiation, and for women’s empowerment in agriculture and food systems. They are:

- a. **fostering an enabling environment** for equality and empowerment in agri-food systems
- b. making **complementary agricultural resources, technologies, and services** more gender responsive
- c. **measuring women’s empowerment** in agriculture: innovations and evidence
- d. beyond crops: toward gender equality in **forestry, fisheries, aquaculture and livestock development**
- e. addressing gender inequalities and strengthening women’s agency for **climate-resilient and sustainable food systems**
- f. closing **gender gaps in productivity** to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment

Key concepts and definitions can be found in the [companion annex/glossary](#).

*Keywords: gender equality, social equality, women’s empowerment, intersectionality, food systems, transformation*

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1. FAO. 2023. *The Status of Women in Agri-food Systems*. Rome.



# 1. Why achieving equality and empowerment by gender and intersecting social differentiation in agri-food systems is important

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It is widely recognized and emphasized in various global initiatives and dialogues—including the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit—that the world faces a critical need for transformation toward healthier, more sustainable, equitable and resilient food systems and that transforming our food systems is essential to make progress toward all 17 SDGs (von Braun et al. 2021).

Achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment (GEWE) in agriculture and food systems can result in greater food security and better nutrition for all; and can transform food systems to be more just, resilient and sustainable (Njuki et al. 2021). Advancing GEWE in agriculture and food systems is key to achieving SDG 5 (“Gender equality”), which aims to achieve gender equality by ending all forms of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against women and girls in the public and private spheres. It also calls for the full participation of women, and equal opportunities for leadership, at all levels of political and economic decision-making (Eurostat 2022). Achieving equality in agri-food systems across other sources of social differentiation is important for reducing inequalities within countries as set by SDG 10 (“Reduced inequalities”).

Achieving SDG 5 is not only intrinsically important and essential from a human rights perspective—realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will also make a crucial contribution to progress across all the SDGs and targets (United Nations 2015)—as will achieving equality as set by SDG 10 (particularly equality within countries across other sources of social differentiation). Advancing GEWE in the context of agri-food systems will enable, possibly accelerate (a) agricultural productivity (SDG 2), (b) climate action (SDG 13), (c) sustainable use and management of ocean (SDG 14) and terrestrial (SDG 15) resources, (d) full and productive employment and decent work (SDG 8 and 9), (e) equal access to quality and affordable education (SDG 4), (f) strengthened women’s voices in decisions about their health and rights (SDG 3 and SDG 5), (g) reduced inequality and social, economic and political inclusion (SDG 10); (h) poverty eradication (SDG 1); and (i) peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16) (IISD 2017; UN Women 2018).

## 2. Framing the papers: gender and other intersectional social inequalities are inextricably embedded within food systems

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The six working papers by the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform each include a discussion of more immediate projected or estimated societal benefits of closing the gap and/or advancing equality by gender and intersecting sources of social differentiation. In this overarching section to the working papers, we discuss projected longer term societal benefits on the pathways to change, including livelihood outcomes and economic development, social development, reduced hunger and malnutrition, as well as gender equality and women's empowerment beyond agriculture and food systems.

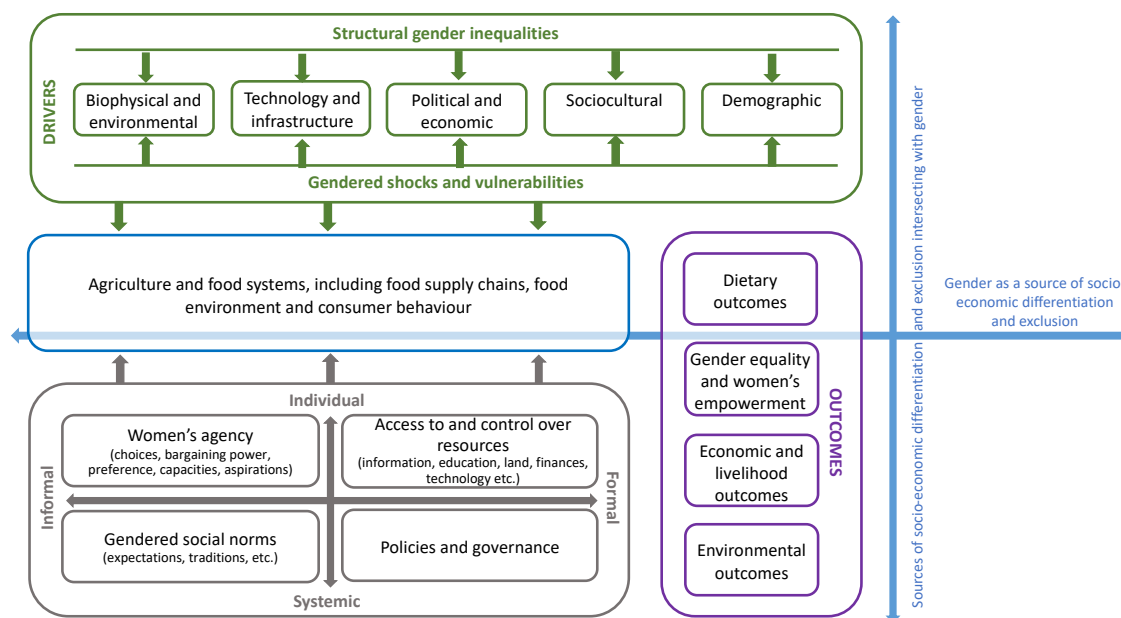
Current thinking around gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) in agriculture and food systems has evolved from focusing on gender gaps to promoting gender-transformative change. Gender gaps in access to resources and services, in agricultural productivity, and in benefits derived from engaging with agriculture and food systems, are visible manifestations or symptoms of structural constraints to equality. Promoting gender-transformative change also encourages flipping the question and considering how agricultural and food systems development can contribute to GEWE, instead of only considering how GEWE can contribute to transforming agri-food systems for food and nutrition security and resilient livelihoods (Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021).

Gender-transformative change hinges on challenging those structural (institutionalized, formal and informal, immaterial) constraints to equality and power relations that maintain and exacerbate inequalities and hinder empowerment (Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021; Njuki et al. 2021). Addressing these structural constraints requires enabling individual and systemic change across the formal and informal spheres of life at multiple interrelated scales (society, state, markets, community, groups, household, individual) and across three domains of agency, relations and structures (Cole et al. 2014; Hillenbrand et al. 2015; Njuki et al. 2021). At the same time, it remains important to redress existing inequalities in access to and control over productive resources, services and technology, strengthen resilience, and invest in women's leadership (Quisumbing et al. 2019).

This implies moving beyond approaches that reach and benefit women to approaches that enable women's empowerment and promote gender equality at multiple scales. It additionally entails moving beyond stand-alone interventions targeting single areas of constraint—such as women's access to resources and services—toward designing and implementing solutions that could change the system in a lasting manner by removing the structural constraints and promoting positive and equal gender norms (Quisumbing et al. 2019; Njuki et al. 2021).

Furthermore, it is increasingly recognized that women and men are socially heterogeneous groups, and that “intersecting inequalities mean that different women may face different constraints and have different opportunities” (Pyburn and van Eerdewijk 2021, 25). As well, “empowerment and gender equality are entwined with other intersecting axes of social power relations” (Colfer et al. 2018). Reducing inequalities and enabling empowerment for various subgroups might therefore require tailored interventions that consider these intersections.

The conceptual framework that defines and connects the themes in the FAO report on the *Status of Rural Women in Agri-food Systems*—which was also used to develop these working papers—draws on the Gendered Food Systems framework in Njuki et al. (2021) (figure 1). This framework lays out how agricultural production and other elements of food systems—including food supply chains, food environment and consumer behavior<sup>2</sup>—are marked by constraints and inequalities related to gender and intersecting axes of social differentiation and exclusion (such as age, marital status, religion, ethnicity, location, belonging to a commonly marginalized group, or type of livelihood system).



**Figure 1. Gendered Food Systems. Source: adapted from Njuki et al. (2021) and de Brauw et al. (2019).**

On one hand, agricultural production and other elements of food systems are subject to biophysical, environmental, technological, infrastructure, political, economic, sociocultural and demographic drivers (green box in figure 1).<sup>3</sup> These are marked by structural inequalities linked to gender and/or intersecting social differentiation. These are also influenced by shocks and vulnerabilities that, in many cases, affect women and men (or specific groups of people) differently—in part due to gendered and social group-specific differences in access to tools and resources that can mitigate the negative impacts of shocks.

On the other hand, agricultural production and other elements of food systems interact with structural inequalities linked to gender and/or intersecting social differentiation at the individual or systemic (structural) level that are rooted in formal or informal institutions and practices (gray box in figure 1) (Rao and Kelleher 2010).

The interaction of the various elements of agri-food systems with these gendered levers—that is, the drivers of agri-food systems, as well as the formal and informal structural and individual inequalities—influences the outcomes in terms of GEWE. It influences dietary, economic, livelihood and environment outcomes as well. Similarly, the interaction of the different elements of food systems with levers that play out differently for socially differentiated groups influence the outcomes of agri-food systems and the equality of these outcomes.

2. The three core constituent elements of food systems are defined as follows: “The food supply chain consists of the activities and actors that take food from production to consumption and to the disposal of its waste” (HLPE 2017, 24). Food environment refers to “the physical, economic, political and socio-cultural surroundings, opportunities and conditions that create everyday prompts, shaping people’s dietary preferences and choices as well as nutritional status” (HLPE 2017, 28). Consumer behavior “reflects all the choices and decisions made by consumers, at the household or individual level, on what food to acquire, store, prepare, cook and eat, and on the allocation of food within the household (including gender repartition and feeding of children)” (HLPE 2017, 31).

3. Drivers are variables that drive changes to one or more of the constituent elements of food systems (agriculture and food supply chains, food environment or consumer behavior) from a dietary perspective (de Brauw et al. 2019).



There are multiple entry points for gender-transformative change in agri-food systems. The various elements of agri-food systems, the gendered drivers, and formal and informal gender inequalities at the individual and systemic levels are dynamic but interdependent. Progress in one domain, therefore, may be necessary for progress in other domains, and progress toward greater gender equality may not always be linear (Eastin and Prakash 2013). Periods of backlash and resistance to gender-transformative change can occur as efforts to promote gender equality and progressive social change are made (Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease 2021). Hence, critically, transformative change in the context of in agri-food systems necessitates a holistic, persistent approach.

More evidence that helps identify the entry points and pathways to strengthen gender and social equality in agri-food systems is needed (Moore et al. 2021). Such evidence is still limited as women, even if they play an important role in food systems as paid and unpaid laborers, resource managers, value-chain actors and food consumers, are often undervalued by and overlooked in agri-food systems research, policy and interventions (Njuki et al. 2021), as are the groups at intersecting axes of social differentiation and exclusion.

### 3. Gender and intersectional differences both expose and create inequalities in agri-food systems

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We now discuss the global situation regarding equality by gender and intersecting social differentiation, and women's empowerment in agriculture and food systems.

Tracking progress toward achieving the SDGs can provide insight into how women are faring on multiple dimensions that factor into their potential empowerment. On SDG 1 ("No Poverty") in 2018 we see that, globally, more women than men live in poverty. This gap is especially acute during women's peak childbearing years. Women and girls around the world are four percent more likely than men and boys to live in extreme poverty, and this risk is at 25 percent for women aged 25 to 34 (UN Women 2019). Tracking the status of SDG 1 in 2021 reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic is causing a resurgence in extreme poverty, and affecting women more strongly than men. It was estimated that, by 2021, 47 million women and girls will have been pushed into poverty as a result of COVID-19 and, in total, around 435 million women and girls will be living on less than US\$1.90 a day (UN Women 2021).

Tracking progress toward achieving SDG 2 ("Zero Hunger") reveals that in 2018, globally, women had a 10 percent higher risk of experiencing food insecurity than men due to unequal power relations in households (UN Women 2019). Globally, "the gender gap in the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity has grown even larger in the years of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity being 10 percent higher among women than men in 2020, compared to six percent in 2019" (FAO et al. 2021). A 2020 assessment reported that, globally, women had a 27 percent higher risk than men of facing severe food insecurity, another gender gap that is expected to rise in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (UN Women 2021).

In relation to the gender–environment nexus which encompasses SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15, increasing temperatures, rising sea levels, melting glaciers and declining biodiversity have had devastating effects on livelihoods and (general) security, with differential effects on men and women in low-income countries. These effects are shaped by structural inequalities that limit women’s resilience and agency at multiple scales, from the household to the policy sphere. Moreover, climate interventions are not usually gender-neutral, and may contribute to widening gender inequality if not carefully designed and implemented using a gender lens.

To date, there are few successful examples of gender integration in climate policies and programs (Acosta et al. 2019, 2020; Ampaire et al. 2020; Huyer et al. 2020; Mersha and van Laerhoven 2019)—and when gender-related actions are mentioned, the focus is on facilitating women’s access to resources, capacity building and increasing productivity, rather than on addressing structural inequalities (Huyer et al. 2020). It is therefore likely that climate change will exacerbate gender inequalities unless actions are taken to implement gender-responsive climate policies, investments and interventions that build women’s capacity for resilience while also removing structural barriers that limit women’s contribution to climate action (Eastin 2018; Schipper et al. 2022).

The constraints that women face within agriculture and food systems are well documented in the literature. These include women’s (a) more limited access to resources, services and technologies; (b) limited agency in household, community, research and policy spaces; and (c) the unpaid-labor burden that women shoulder in many contexts—all of which are shaped by structural barriers in society (formal and informal social institutions, including discriminatory norms) that limit women’s contributions within and benefits from food systems (Njuki et al. 2021).

As a result of these structural constraints to equality, the impacts of shocks and stressors play out differently for women and men within agri-food systems. Women have more limited income-earning opportunities within agri-food systems because they are often excluded from high-value agri-food value chains, the most profitable activities within those value chains, or other opportunities for entrepreneurship (Doss et al. 2021).

Women also have more difficulty navigating the food environments in which they live. They have greater difficulty accessing and affording nutritious foods that they desire in convenient ways and their more limited mobility and opportunities for market engagement. Despite women’s crucial role in ensuring food security and nutrition for their families, all of these factors limit the potential of agri-food systems to provide adequate diets and nutrition, particularly for vulnerable groups.

The prevalence of malnutrition (underweight, overweight and obesity) in adults, children and adolescents as measured outcomes of agri-food systems differ not only by gender, but also by countries’ gross national income per capita. Prevalence of malnutrition in children under five, and infant and young child feeding indicators (which are better documented), differ by gender, urban–rural location, wealth, maternal education and countries’ income per capita (Global Nutrition Report 2020).

Some empirical studies related to agri-food systems demonstrate the importance of considering intersectional axes of differentiation rather than gender alone (Tavener and Crane 2019; Kawarazuka et al. 2019; Leder and Sachs 2019; Munro et al. 2014; Ravera et al. 2016). For example, there is evidence that in low- and middle-income countries, where still large proportions of the population are employed in the agricultural sector, some youth are seizing opportunities for income generation in farm sectors, as well as in nonfarm sectors, yet this tends to be limited to countries that do not face land scarcity or which have land rental markets (Fox and Gandhi 2021). Youth as a source of social differentiation is also addressed in Glover and Sumberg (2020). They provide empirical evidence, chiefly from sub-Saharan Africa, that—while generally young people’s engagement with agri-food systems is not highly distinctive from others’—youth are likely to have less experience, knowledge and skill related to agriculture and food systems, limited access to productive resources such as land and capital, and limited voice in political arenas. Youth, notably school-aged children, adolescent girls, women of reproductive age and pregnant and lactating women, also have particular nutritional needs (Glover and Sumberg 2020).

Shocks and longer term stressors expose and amplify inequalities, not only by gender, but also along axes of social differentiation, such as age, race and ethnicity. Recent shocks and long-term stressors such as malnutrition, COVID-19, political-system fragility, conflict and climate change are fuelled by such inequalities, argues Gillespie (2020). For example, the World Economic Forum (2021) estimates that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the time needed from 99.5 years to 135.6 years to close gender gaps in economic opportunity, education, health, and political participation. The gendered impacts of multiple, recurring shocks and stressors are also compounding (Bryan, Ringler and Meinzen-Dick 2022; Theis et al. 2019). Currently, the world is facing several simultaneous crises including the ongoing and worsening climate crisis, lingering global health and economic crises due to COVID-19, and most recently the global food crisis from the war in Ukraine. Evidence suggests that women’s resilience capacities, such as their savings and assets, are being depleted—which will make it more difficult for them to cope with this confluence of challenges (Alvi et al. 2022).

## 4. Working papers address various entry points for transformative change in the context of agri-food systems

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The working papers developed by the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform teams for the FAO report on the *Status of Rural Women in Agri-food Systems* address six themes that are relevant for advancing GEWE and transformative change in the context of agri-food systems. Additional themes, equally important for transformative change in the context of agri-food systems (see below), are treated in working papers produced by other authors—although not all relevant themes could be addressed within the scope of a single report. The selection of themes covered by the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform teams align closely with the expertise within CGIAR.

- A. Lecoutere, Achandi, et al. (2023) write about fostering an enabling environment for equality and empowerment in agri-food systems. Governance (i.e., institutional, policy and political factors) influences how agri-food systems work and for whom, and defines social and political processes that create (in-)equalities. While evidence is limited, governance issues have been found to affect agri-food systems outcomes differently for groups differentiated not only by gender (Kosec et al. 2021), but also by (asset) poverty, social capital, age, urban–rural location, race and ethnicity (Harris 2020). An enabling environment is an environment that facilitates people equally accessing resources, exercising agency and achieving desirable outcomes. An enabling environment thereby relaxes structural constraints linked to gender and intersecting sources of social differentiation. Fostering an enabling environment is essential for lasting transformative change (McDougall et al. Forthcoming), and requires engaging with the ‘deeper’ underlying structural barriers rooted in discriminatory policy or (formal and informal) social and economic institutions—including social norms, lack of role models and dampened aspirations. This theme addresses the structural inequalities linked to gender and/or intersecting social differentiation at the individual or systemic (structural) level in the Gendered Food Systems framework, illustrated in the gray box in figure 1.
- B. Kosec et al. (2023) deal with access to and elimination of structural constraints around essential and gender-responsive complementary resources, technology and services. It deals with structural gender inequalities in technology and infrastructure as drivers of

food systems and the structural constraints to accessing such resources in the gender food systems framework (green and gray boxes in figure 1). Closing the gender gap in tenure security over productive resources such as land, natural resources and assets may not be sufficient to close the gender gap in agriculture. Gender-equal access to and ability to benefit from complementary (rural) services, technology and resources is essential as well. However, their accessibility and benefits may be constrained by structural characteristics, and the influence these structural constraints have over individual women's and men's choices. It is critical to understand not only how to bridge gaps in access to complementary resources, technology and services but also address structural constraints to women accessing them.

- C. Quisumbing et al. (2023) address women's empowerment in agriculture which, together with gender equality, are the core goals of gender-transformative change in agriculture. The chapter discusses the evolution of how we conceptualize and measure women's empowerment, how these innovations have enabled us to better understand what empowers women, and how to design interventions to achieve that goal. Based on a review that links a standardized measure of women's empowerment in agriculture to various development outcomes, it provides evidence of the social gains of empowering women in agriculture. Situated in the Gendered Food Systems framework, the focus of this theme is on how women's empowerment, including women's agency and access to and control over resources, interacts with other development and agri-food systems outcomes (purple boxes in figure 1).
- D. Elias et al. (2023) address inequalities based on gender and other sources of social differentiation in forestry, fisheries, aquaculture and livestock. These inequalities are evidenced in: (a) norms and roles in these livelihood systems; (b) (formal and informal) access rights, use of, decision-making and control over, and effective participation in the governance of these resources; and (c) access and availability of complementary resources, technology and (rural) services for forestry, fishery, aquaculture and livestock keeping. Women, Indigenous Peoples, forest-dependent people, and other commonly marginalized groups are typically disadvantaged regarding (a) the benefits they receive from these sectors, and (b) their capacity to participate as legitimate actors in decision-making in matters of resource use, processing and trade, management and governance at multiple scales. On the flip side: their full, effective and equitable participation in these sectors can lead not only to greater equality but also to improved resource management, economic and livelihood opportunities, and improved dietary outcomes. The theme draws on the Gendered Food Systems framework (figure 1) to examine gender issues in relation to each sector, the issues' implications for achieving multiple food-system outcomes, and the potential these sectors hold for advancing gender equality as an outcome in itself.
- E. Bryan et al. (2023) write about addressing gender gaps and strengthening women's agency for more climate-resilient food systems. As climate change accelerates, our ability to produce and sustain healthy diets and nutrition from our food systems becomes more difficult. This challenge requires greater investments in food-system resilience and gender equality, both of which can be mutually reinforcing. There is a risk that women and other vulnerable groups may be 'left behind' if efforts to increase the climate resilience of agriculture and food systems are not gender-responsive. At the same time, women have important contributions to make to climate-smart/ climate-resilient agriculture, given their specialized knowledge and roles within food systems. Thus, if we go beyond addressing gendered vulnerabilities to climate change to instead create an enabling environment for women's empowerment and remove structural barriers, we have the potential to strengthen food-system resilience, contribute to climate change mitigation and support gender equality. In the Gendered Food Systems framework, this theme focuses on structural inequalities and gendered shocks and vulnerabilities as factors in women's resilience to climate change in agri-food systems, as well deeper structural constraints to that resilience (green and gray boxes in figure 1).

F. Puskur et al. (2023) discuss gender gaps in agricultural productivity which continue to persist. Social stratification, political, economic and market forces on one hand, and environmental and climatic conditions on the other shape agriculture and food systems, and the participation and outcomes for different socioeconomic groups. Structural inequalities and related advantages and disadvantages differently influence access to resources and technologies, risks and different production outcomes. The focus of the theme is on delineating patterns in gender productivity gaps, the conceptual and methodological challenges and advances in estimating productivity, and understanding the effectiveness of interventions to address these gaps and their causes. Closing gender productivity gaps will advance gender equality and women's empowerment; and can contribute to gains in prosperity, social welfare and overall economic growth. This theme focuses on the structural gender inequalities—including access to and control of resources, agency and norms (green and gray boxes in figure 1)—that influence the gender productivity gap and consequently the GEWE, economic and livelihood outcomes in the Gendered Food Systems framework (purple box in figure 1).

We also note that, beyond the themes and domains addressed in the working papers by the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform, other important domains that the report on the *Status of Rural Women in Agri-food Systems* will address include:

- tenure security over land and other productive natural resources
- agricultural labor and unpaid care and domestic work
- agri-food value chains and market opportunities
- migration and feminization of agriculture
- resilience to global shocks and stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict



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# ANNEX AND GLOSSARY

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## GENDER Impact Platform

*Generating Evidence and New Directions for Equitable Results (GENDER) is CGIAR's impact platform designed to put equality and inclusion at the forefront of global agricultural research for development. The Platform is transforming the way gender research is done, both within and beyond CGIAR, to kick-start a process of genuine change toward greater gender equality and better lives for smallholder farmers everywhere.*

[gender.cgiar.org](http://gender.cgiar.org)



*CGIAR is a global research partnership for a food-secure future dedicated to reducing poverty, enhancing food and nutrition security, and improving natural resources.*

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