

Strengthening women's position in the food system

Women play a critical role in agricultural production, food processing, and household nutrition in Africa. However, they continue to face systemic gender-based barriers that undermine their productivity, income, and overall contributions to food and nutrition security. The Program of Accompanying Research for Agricultural Innovation (PARI), implemented in over a dozen African countries and India, has explored these challenges through various interdisciplinary studies. Drawing on insights from PARI research, this thematic brief highlights key findings on the constraints women encounter in the food system. These barriers result in productivity gaps, which limit agricultural output and perpetuate poverty and hunger. Closing these gaps could boost agricultural production and lift millions of people out of hunger. This brief also proposes targeted innovations and policy recommendations to strengthen women's position in the food system.

Barriers to women's participation in the food system

African women in agriculture face systemic disadvantages stemming from gender-related constraints (Njiraini et al., 2018). Several factors contribute to the productivity gap between men and women in African agriculture, including unequal land rights, restrictions on mobility, traditional labour divisions, unequal educational attainment and literacy and financial exclusion. These disparities limit women's ability to fully participate in agricultural activities, negatively

impacting their income and productivity. As a result, these constraints undermine food security and contribute to diminished welfare outcomes across the continent.

Unequal access to land remains one of the most significant challenges for women in agriculture, as land is a fundamental agricultural input (Njiraini et al., 2018). Women are often perceived as less efficient farmers because the plots they own are typically smaller and less fertile than those owned by men. Furthermore, women's restricted access to land hinders their participation in decision-making processes. This limits their ability to assume leadership roles in their communities and denies them access to economic assets and services that often require land ownership as a prerequisite. These disparities directly harm women's income and agricultural productivity, emphasizing the urgent need to secure land rights for women.

Addressing the productivity gap between men and women also requires tackling unequal access to education and financial services (Njiraini et al., 2018). African women often have limited access to formal and informal educational programs. Women are usually excluded from essential training and extension services. This lack of educational opportunities means women are often unaware of or unable to adopt technological innovations which are critical to improving agricultural productivity. Similarly, women face significant barriers to accessing financial services and are less likely to use them. Consequently, they often resort to low-cost and labour-intensive technologies that are less



efficient and insufficient for scaling up along the value chain. As such, investments in agricultural innovations and technologies tailored to women's needs are essential (PARI, 2020).

Traditional gender roles further limit women's ability to participate fully in paid work, which affects their income, wealth, access to resources and bargaining power within households and society at large. Timeuse data from Ethiopia, Ghana and Uganda shows that women work more hours in total (up to two hours more) and spend significantly more time on unpaid domestic work (up to 6.5 hours more) compared to men (PARI, 2024a). Gendered patterns also extend to children's time use, with girls working up to 1.5 hours more than boys. Improved infrastructure, such as all-weather roads, electricity and piped water in homes, could reduce the domestic burdens on women. However, in the absence of alternative caregivers, reduced time spent by mothers on domestic and care work may negatively affect children's diets (PARI, 2024b; Saleemi et al., 2024). Therefore, it is critical to invest in affordable, high-quality childcare while promoting a more equitable distribution of care work between men and women in households.

Women working in agroprocessing and leather sectors also face significant disadvantages in income and job quality compared to their male counterparts. Evidence from Ethiopia shows that women earn 35% less from primary jobs and 40% less in total income than men (Getahun et al., 2024). This income disparity is partially explained by the "child penalty," where women with children experience greater income gaps due to their inability to engage in moonlighting and overtime work. Women are also less likely to receive job benefits such as housing, discounted or complementary meals, or on-the-job training. Despite these inequities, women report higher levels of job satisfaction and happiness and are

more likely than men to rate their working conditions positively. However, this contentment may limit women's aspirations for equal pay and non-monetary benefits. Addressing these gaps requires narrowing differences in human capital and fostering aspiration-building programs to empower women to demand fair pay and better job benefits.

Policy recommendations

To strengthen women's position in the food system, PARI research unveils the need for targeted policies and innovations that address systemic barriers while promoting gender-inclusive agricultural transformation as follows:

Secure land rights and promote equitable access to productive resources: Reform land tenure laws to ensure women's equal rights to ownership and inheritance, including joint titling for spouses and simplified registration processes for female-headed households. Implement community-level awareness campaigns to challenge customary practices that discriminate against women.

Enhance access to education, extension services, and financial inclusion: Develop gender-sensitive agricultural extension programs that prioritize women's participation, including mobile training units and digital platforms tailored to low-literacy users. Invest in women-focused financial products, such as microcredit schemes with low collateral requirements and group lending models, to support the adoption of efficient technologies.

Reduce time burdens through infrastructure and care support: Prioritize investments in rural infrastructure, including all-weather roads, reliable electricity, and piped water systems, to cut women's unpaid labour time. This should also be complemented with the promotion of policies



that encourage equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities, such as community sensitization programs on gender roles.

Address income inequality and improve job quality in value chains: Enforce labour laws mandating equal pay for equal work in agroprocessing and related sectors, with monitoring mechanisms aimed at closing the wage gap. Extend job benefits like discounted or complementary meals, housing allowances, and on-the-job training to women workers. Launch aspiration-building programs, including mentorship networks and skills certification, to empower women to negotiate better conditions and transition to higher-value roles.

KEY TAKE AWAYS

Systemic barriers: Women face unequal land rights, financial exclusion and traditional roles, limiting productivity and income. Access to land, education and financial services is critical.

Unequal time burden: Women perform more unpaid domestic work than men, restricting economic opportunities. Infrastructure and childcare support can help reduce this burden.

Income inequality: Women earn less and lack benefits in agroprocessing. Addressing wage gaps and providing support can improve their working conditions.

Gender-inclusive agricultural transformation: There is need for deliberate efforts in supporting women to secure land rights, access to education and financial services, and enforcing equal pay and job benefits in the value chains.

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All studies are available at www.r4ai.org.

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