



COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

Twenty-ninth Session

30 September – 4 October 2024

Emerging issues from FAO's report on the Status of Women in Agrifood Systems (SWAF)

Executive Summary

Agrifood systems are a major employer of women globally and constitute a more important source of livelihood for women than for men in many countries. Empowering women and closing gender gaps in agrifood systems thus enhances the well-being of women and their households, reducing hunger, boosting incomes and strengthening resilience. FAO's 2023 report *The status of women in agrifood systems* (SWAF) provides a comprehensive overview of the status of women in agrifood systems. It analyses the multiple sources of inequality that constrain their participation, well-being and empowerment; describes policies and approaches that have supported gender equality and women's empowerment; and details how women's equal participation in agrifood systems can transform individual and global outcomes. This note outlines emerging issues from the report and highlights specific actions which can help to increase gender equality and women's empowerment in agrifood systems.

Suggested action by the Committee:

The Committee is invited to:

- a) *take note* of the findings and emerging issues presented in this document and in the SWAF report.
- b) *encourage* FAO Members to close gender gaps and address gender inequalities in agrifood systems using the policy recommendations included in this document.
- c) *encourage* FAO Members to invest in more sex-disaggregated data as well as in policies, programmes and projects which significantly scale up proven approaches to increasing gender equality and women's empowerment in agrifood systems.
- d) *encourage* FAO Members to take note of the resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to declare 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer, and use it as an opportunity to raise awareness, increase funding and programming for gender-responsive agrifood systems.

Queries on the substantive content of the document may be addressed to:

Benjamin Davis
Director, Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division (ESP)
ESP-Director@fao.org

I. Introduction

1. This document provides an overview of FAO's report on *The status of women in agrifood systems (SWAF)*, highlighting its main findings, emerging issues and policy recommendations.¹

2. The report underscores the critical importance of achieving gender equality and empowering women as a goal in itself as well as a critical contribution to the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. More than a decade after *The State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA) 2010–2011: Women in Agriculture – Closing the gender gap for development*,² the SWAF report highlights the need to move beyond a focus on gender gaps and primary agricultural production to one that considers how different segments of agrifood systems are conditioned by structural inequalities linked to gender and/or intersecting factors of social and economic differentiation. Women play critical roles in agrifood systems, as producers, processors, traders, and service providers. Despite the importance of agrifood systems for women's livelihoods and the welfare of their families, women's roles tend to be marginalized and their working conditions are likely to be worse than men's – irregular, informal, part-time, low-skilled, labour-intensive and thus vulnerable.

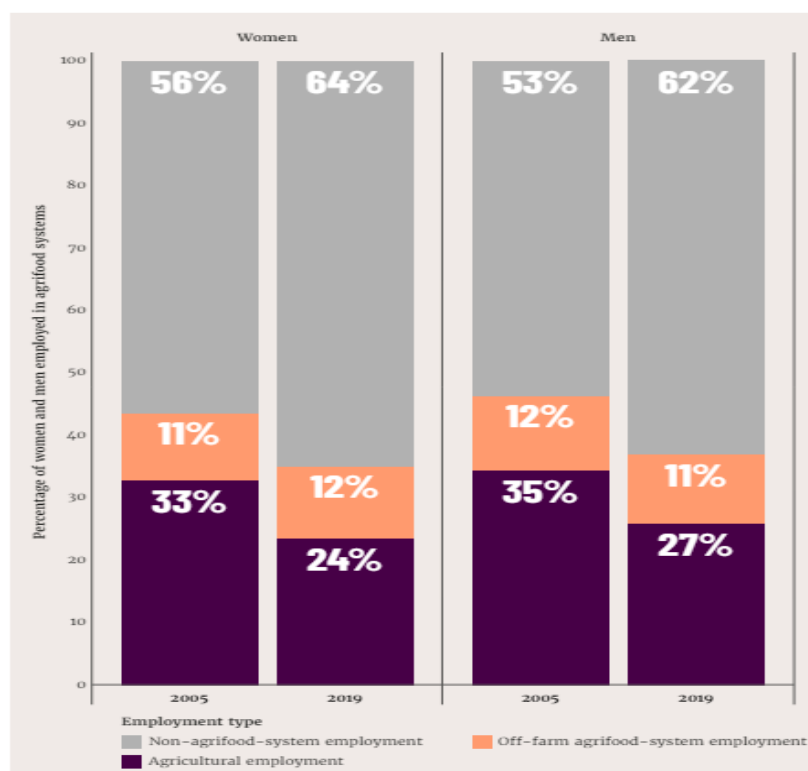
II. Main Findings

3. Agrifood systems are a greater source of livelihoods for women than for men in low- and middle-income countries. In 2019, 36 percent of working women globally were employed in agrifood systems, reflecting a decrease from 44 percent in 2005, while 38 percent of working men were employed in agrifood systems, down from 47 percent (see Figure 1). The declining figures are steered by a reduction of employment in primary agricultural production, while the share of those working in off-farm segments of agrifood systems remained the same. When comparing gender-based outcomes for employment by region, agrifood systems remain the main employer for women and men in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, but they are a far more important source of livelihood for women than for men. In sub-Saharan Africa, 66 percent of women's employment is in agrifood systems, compared with 60 percent of men's employment. In South Asia, 71 percent of women workers are engaged in agrifood systems, compared with 47 percent of men workers. It is clear that the global figures mask a more heterogeneous picture where regional differences in women's employment in agrifood systems vary across time and space.

¹ FAO. 2023. *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc5343en>

² FAO. 2011. *The state of food and agriculture, 2010-2011 - Women in Agriculture: closing the gender gap for development*. Rome. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/i2050e>

Figure 1: The share of agrifood-system employment in total employment in 2005 and 2019, by sex.



Costa, V., Piedrahita, N., Mane, E., Davis, B., Slavchevska, V. & Gurbuzer, Y. 2023. *Women's employment in agrifood systems* – Background paper for *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome, FAO. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9040en>

4. Across the agrifood value chain, women face systemic disparities in accessing activities that engage in higher-profit cash- and export-commodity chains as entrepreneurs and independent farmers. This gender-based exclusion is driven by limited access to productive assets, such as land, water, credit, agricultural extension services and other supporting resources. Our research finds that these inequalities manifest across three main intersections of the value chain. Firstly, women are more likely to engage in processing activities with half of all workers in food processing and services and 40 percent of all workers in manufacturing of non-food agricultural products (such as tobacco, paper and textiles) being women. Secondly, fewer women are engaged in the more profitable wholesale trade while more men are involved in transport and wholesale, partly because this requires greater capital, higher mobility and interactions with outsiders. Thirdly, within retail, women are more likely to trade in less lucrative agrifood products and achieve lower profits. Globally, retailing represents an important source of independent self-starting employment for women with an estimated 53 percent of all retail trade workers in agrifood systems being women. Despite their overrepresentation in this node of the value chain, women trade in less profitable commodities than men.

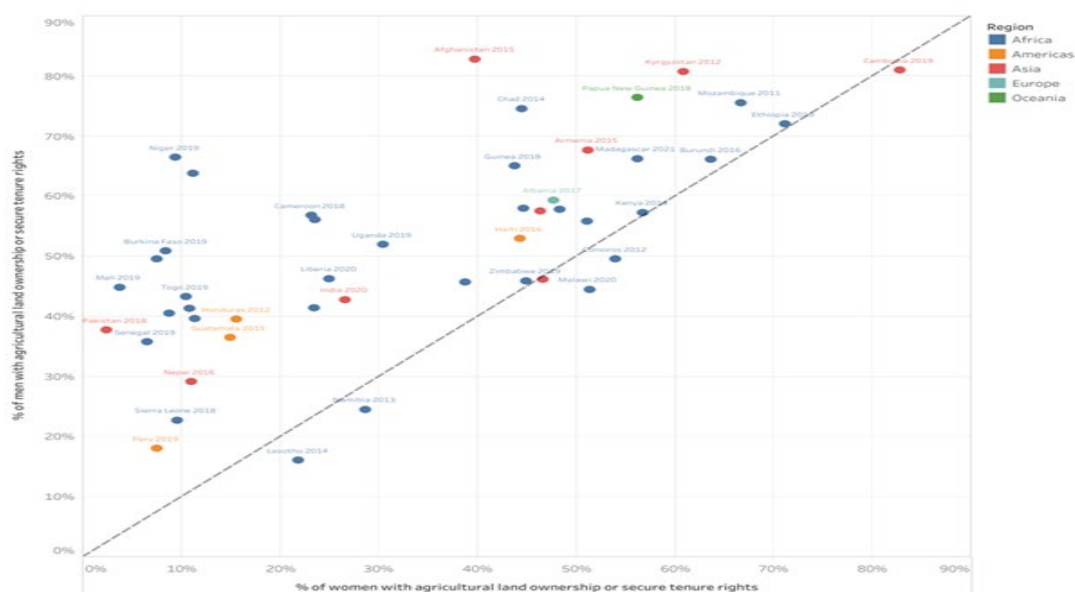
5. Despite the importance of agrifood systems for women's livelihoods and welfare of their families, women's roles tend to be marginalized and their working conditions are worse than men's. Beyond aspects of participation within the agrifood workforce, the focus on the quality of women's jobs is crucial in fostering full and productive employment and decent work for all. Work within agrifood systems tends to consist of forms of vulnerable self-employment which is more likely to be carried out by women, as own-account or contributing family workers. The report points out that 9 percent of women workers in the off-farm segment of agrifood systems engage as contributing family workers and 28 percent engage as own-account workers. Thus, the share of women in vulnerable self-employment (own-account and contributing family workers) improves substantially as the role of off-farm segments of agrifood systems increases. However, the gender pay gap persists in

agrifood systems. Women engaged in wage employment in agriculture earn 82 cents for every dollar that men earn.³

6. Women's access to assets and resources that are key to agrifood systems – such as land, inputs, services, finance and digital technology – continues to lag behind men's. The gaps in women's access to extension, irrigation and ownership of livestock have closed very little in the past decade, suggesting that countries still have much to do to address these disparities in access to resources. As a result of these inequalities, the gender gap in land productivity between female and male-managed farms of the same size is 24 percent.⁴ The gender gap in labour productivity amounts instead to 35 percent, on average, with the largest portion (27 percent) attributed to gender inequalities in endowments.⁵

7. Women in agricultural households remain significantly disadvantaged in secure access to land. Men have greater ownership or secure tenure rights over agricultural land than women in 40 of 46 countries with available data (Figure 2). In 50 percent of the countries reporting on Sustainable Development Goal Indicator (SDG) 5.a.2, *Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control*, legal protection of women's land rights is low. While every region has good examples of legal and policy reforms for advancing women's land rights, much greater political will is required to drive additional legislative and policy efforts to improve the status of women's land rights. Additionally, there is a dearth of harmonized, sex-disaggregated statistics on land rights at the global level with few countries collecting data on SDG Indicator 5.a.1, *(a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure* and even fewer following the conventional methodologies required for harmonization.

Figure 2: Rates of agricultural land ownership or secure tenure rights by country.



FAO data for SDG Indicator 5.a.1(a) for 46 countries, February 2023.

³ Benali, M., Slavchevska, V., Piedrahita, N., Davis, B., Sitko, N., Nico, G. & Azzari, C. 2024. *Gender pay gaps among agricultural and non-agricultural wage workers: a cross-country examination* –Background paper for *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome, FAO. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9143en>

⁴ Anriquez, G., Foster, W. & Quiñonez, F. 2024. *Levelling the farm fields: A cross-country study of the determinants of gender-based yield gaps* – Background paper for *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome, FAO. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9163en>

⁵ Piedrahita, N., Costa, V. and Mane, E. 2024. *Gender gap in agricultural labour productivity: A cross-country comparison* – Background paper for *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome, FAO. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9118en>

8. Access to agricultural and agrifood-system technologies has seen some modest improvements over time. These technologies are vital in modernising women's engagement with agrifood systems by enhancing productivity through mechanization, adaptation to the effects of climate change and the ability to access and share knowledge on improved agricultural techniques. Internet use, in particular, has grown tremendously in recent years. In 2022, 63 percent of women globally were using the internet, compared with 69 percent of men. Moreover, the gender gap in women's access to mobile internet in low- and middle-income countries has narrowed from 25 to 16 percent.

9. Discriminatory social norms and rules affecting women and girls are at the heart of gender inequality. These affect the level and quality of women's participation in agrifood systems by limiting the type of employment they engage in, restricting their access to vital productive resources and exposing them to harmful attitudes and gender-based violence (GBV). For example, in more than 50 percent of countries globally, people believe young children suffer when mothers work, limiting women's ability to engage outside the domestic sphere for fear of social or economic repercussions for violating these gender norms. In this light, programmes and policies that support rural women's empowerment and agency have emerged as important instruments for engendering gender-transformative change within agrifood systems.

10. The extent to which policy frameworks address gender issues has improved in the last decade. An index measuring legal differences between men's and women's access to economic opportunities in 190 economies shows some improvement across all low- and middle-income countries. However, while 75 percent of policy documents analysed in agrifood systems recognize women's challenges, only 19 percent include policy goals related to gender. Agricultural policies and programmes need to further address how gender-transformative their outcomes are with strong gender mainstreaming exercises from the onset of said policies and interventions.

11. Advancing gender equality and women's empowerment is critical to women's well-being and to society at large and thus has intrinsic value. The existing evidence shows that increasing gender equality and women's empowerment is essential for women's well-being and has a positive impact on diets, children's nutrition, agricultural production and food security.

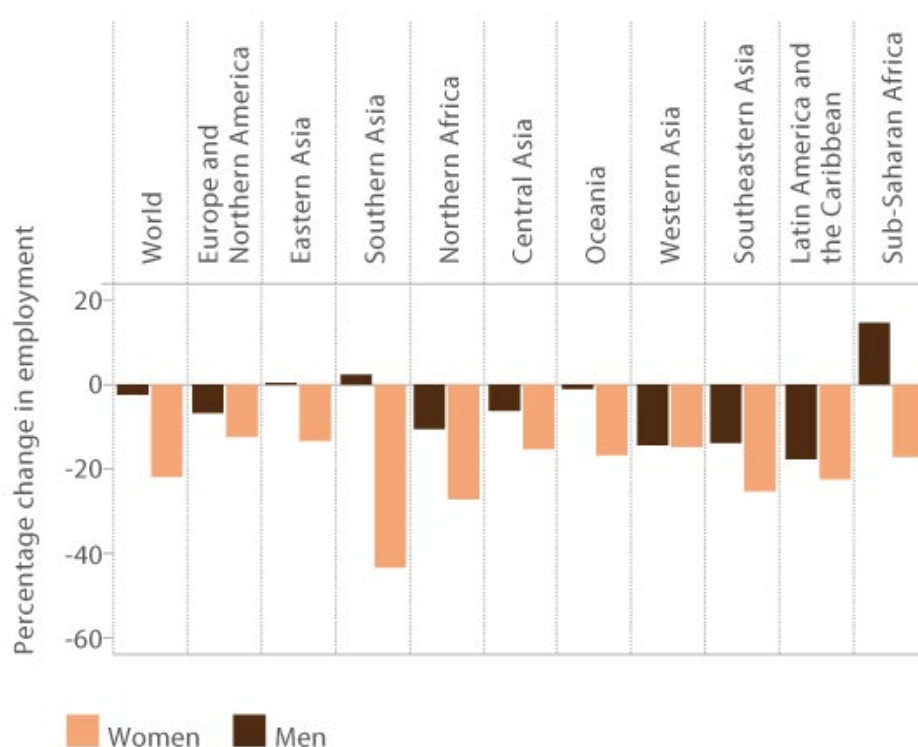
12. Sensitivity, coping mechanisms and resilience to shocks and stressors are shaped by gender inequalities. The effects of crises, including economic downturns, climate change, conflict and natural disasters, disproportionately harm women's livelihoods within agrifood systems due to existing gender inequalities and roles. For example, during climate shocks like heat stress, women reduce their working hours in agriculture less than men. In conflict settings, both men and women greatly reduce the total number of hours worked and increase engagement in the agricultural sector. However, the reduction in hours worked is significantly greater among men, while the increase in agricultural activity is significantly greater among women.⁶

13. The COVID-19 pandemic and related economic crises have been intensified and shaped by gender inequalities in agrifood-system livelihoods. Women and youth were heavily impacted by the pandemic because they represent a large share of informal, low-skilled and poorly educated workers and are therefore more likely to be self-employed or casual workers and thus more likely to lose their jobs. Globally, 22 percent of women lost their jobs in off-farm agrifood systems work in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, compared with 2 percent of men (see Figure 3). As a consequence, the gap between women and men's moderate or severe food insecurity widened from 1.6 to 3.8 percentage points between 2019 and 2021. In 2022, the gender gap declined instead to

⁶ Ronzani, P., Stojetz, W., Azzarri, C., Nico, G. Mane, E. and Brück, T. 2024. *Armed conflict and gendered participation in agrifood systems: Survey evidence from 29 African countries* – Background paper for *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome, FAO. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9077en>

2.4 percentage points, with 27.8 percent of women facing moderate or severe food insecurity, compared to 25.4 percent of men.⁷

Figure 3: Off-farm agrifood-system employment



Costa, V., Piedrahita, N., Mane, E., Davis, B., Slavchevska, V. & Gurbuzer, Y. 2023. *Women's employment in agrifood systems* – Background paper for *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome, FAO.
<https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9040en>

III. Policy highlights

14. The SWAF report critically analysed programmes, policies and approaches that have successfully contributed to reducing gender inequalities in agrifood systems and that can be considered for accelerating progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment. The main findings are highlighted below.

15. Gender-transformative approaches are cost-effective and can change discriminatory norms at local level. These approaches have shown positive results across different domains in agrifood systems including shifting norms relating to women's empowerment in agriculture, increasing women's decision-making in households and access to cash-crop income, more equitable sharing of resources, and enhanced young women's ability to own a business and decide on use of income. Involving men and boys in initiatives that engender normative change is important to engage them as allies for women's empowerment and create more equitable gender relations. However, more work is needed on developing theoretical and evidence-based pathways to implement gender-transformative approaches at scale.

⁷ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2023. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural-urban continuum*. Rome, FAO.
<https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc3017en>

16. Closing gaps in land tenure has benefits on employment, investment, natural resource management, access to services, resilience, food security and GBV. Interventions in this area can include a combination of promoting individual and joint land registration, raising awareness of land rights and access to community-based legal aid, and promoting women's participation in local land institutions. Supporting women's improved access to digital tools, information and communications technology can also facilitate closing multiple land-related gaps.
17. Access to formal childcare has a large positive impact on mothers' employment and returns in agrifood systems. The provision of formal childcare addresses the (unpaid) unequal care burden on women, reducing their workload and freeing them up for paid work outside the home and self-care. Efforts in Colombia, Congo and Kenya are showing promising results, where participating women enjoy more leisure time and are better able to participate in social and economic organisations.
18. Group-based approaches are important for increasing women's economic empowerment and resilience to shocks and climate change. Membership in farmers' organizations, savings groups, cooperatives, self-help and women's groups improves women's collective action and increases their resilience to shocks and stressors.
19. Social protection can increase women's employment and enhance resilience. Social protection has shown positive impacts on promoting women's economic empowerment and reducing gender inequalities, including those in human capital development and access to and control over income and assets. Applying a gender-sensitive approach to linking social protection to other services has the potential to improve gender equality. For example, 'cash-plus' programmes are showing promise in addressing multiple deprivations while tackling the underlying gender norms that hinder women from fully participating in agrifood systems.
20. Despite progress, major gaps remain in the availability of gender and sex-disaggregated data on access to productive assets and services, climate-change adaptation and resilience, and nutrition. More investments are needed to improve the limited data and research on women and men who face additional inequalities due to age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, Indigenous identity and remoteness.

IV. Calls to Action

21. The SWAF report finds that by closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agrifood systems could result in a substantial 3.2 percent increase in global agriculture value added, equating to a rise of USD 133.5 billion (based on the 2021 agriculture value added of USD 4.15 trillion). Consequently, the global gross domestic product would increase by about 1 percent (or nearly USD 1 trillion). This would reduce global food insecurity by about 2 percentage points, reducing the number of food-insecure people by 45 million. Additionally, closing the gender gap in education, income and labour-force participation could reduce by 57 percent the existing gap in food insecurity between women and men, indicating that other unobserved factors, including gender norms and discrimination, continue to hinder women's food security, particularly in rural areas.⁸
22. The report finds also that if half of small-scale producers benefited from development interventions which focused on empowering women, it would significantly raise the incomes of an additional 58 million people and increase the resilience of an additional 235 million people. This finding suggests that investing in empowering approaches could yield significant gains both for women and their households.

⁸ Mane, E., Giaquinto, A.M., Cafiero, C., Viviani, S. & Anríquez, G. 2024. *Why are women more food insecure than men? Exploring socioeconomic drivers and the role of COVID-19 in widening the global gender gap* – Background paper for *The status of women in agrifood systems*. Rome, FAO. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cc9160en>

23. Moreover, the analysis and review of evidence carried out by the SWAF report are directly relevant to the resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to declare 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer, in order to increase public awareness of women's roles in farming and support the development of policies, programmes and investments conducive to the socio-economic empowerment of women farmers.

24. Specifically, the SWAF report demonstrates that progress in gender equality and women's empowerment in agrifood systems is possible if policies, programmes and investments are intentionally designed to tackle the multidimensional and interrelated challenges that women farmers face in the following key areas:

- Land tenure - the SWAF report advocates for women's improved access to land through the implementation of land registration reforms, increasing land-rights awareness and access to community-based legal aid, and fostering women's participation in local land institutions.
- Training - the SWAF report advocates for the empowerment of women farmers through training and skills acquisition, to enable them to adapt to shocks and stressors induced by economic downturns, climate change and conflicts. The SWAF report also calls for enhancing women's access to and use of extension services by increasing the number of female extension agents, by including women role models in extension messages, and by integrating gender and women's empowerment components in the curricula of rural advisory services.
- Credit –the SWAF report advocates for making credit more accessible for women farmers. It recognizes that women who fail to access adequate credit are less able to afford key inputs, such as fertilizers, livestock breeds and farm equipment, with negative implications for their productivity and economic well-being.
- Technology - the SWAF report notes the technological gap between men and women farmers, and advocates for policy changes to facilitate equitable adoption of innovative technologies and climate-smart solutions. This can be achieved by encouraging investment in labour-saving and productivity-enhancing technologies adapted to the needs of women farmers, thereby improving their resilience and reducing food insecurity of their families and communities.