



## TRADE POLICY TECHNICAL NOTES

### TRADE AND FOOD SECURITY

# AGRIFOOD TRADE AND GENDER EQUALITY: EXPLORING KEY LINKAGES

#### ABSTRACT

This note analyses key features of the interplay between trade and gender equality in agriculture, exploring gender dynamics in agrifood trade and their implications for developing countries, with a focus on employment, market participation, and entrepreneurship.

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## 1. Agricultural trade and gender inequalities in agrifood systems

Since 1995, agricultural trade has expanded globally, more than doubling in real terms to reach USD 1.5 trillion in 2018. This expansion has been spurred by productivity increases especially in emerging and developing countries (FAO, 2020a). At the same time, global value chains (GVCs) have emerged rapidly and it is estimated that about one-third of global agricultural and food exports are traded within GVCs (FAO, 2020a). Key drivers of agrifood trade growth, favoured by a rules-based trading system, policy reforms, and the proliferation of Regional Trade Agreements, are food demand increases, population growth, rising per capita income, urbanization, and technological improvements, among others (FAO, 2020a; OECD-FAO, 2021).

Well-functioning agrifood markets contribute to economic growth, poverty reduction and food security for millions of smallholders in developing countries. Trade can lead to economic and social outcomes potentially conducive to gender equality and women's empowerment – this is particularly important in the agriculture sector where women are globally largely employed. Women are key players in fostering agricultural development and economic growth. However, social and gender inequalities often constrain women's access and opportunities in domestic and international markets, preventing them from reaping the full benefits of trade (FAO, 2011; OECD, 2021).

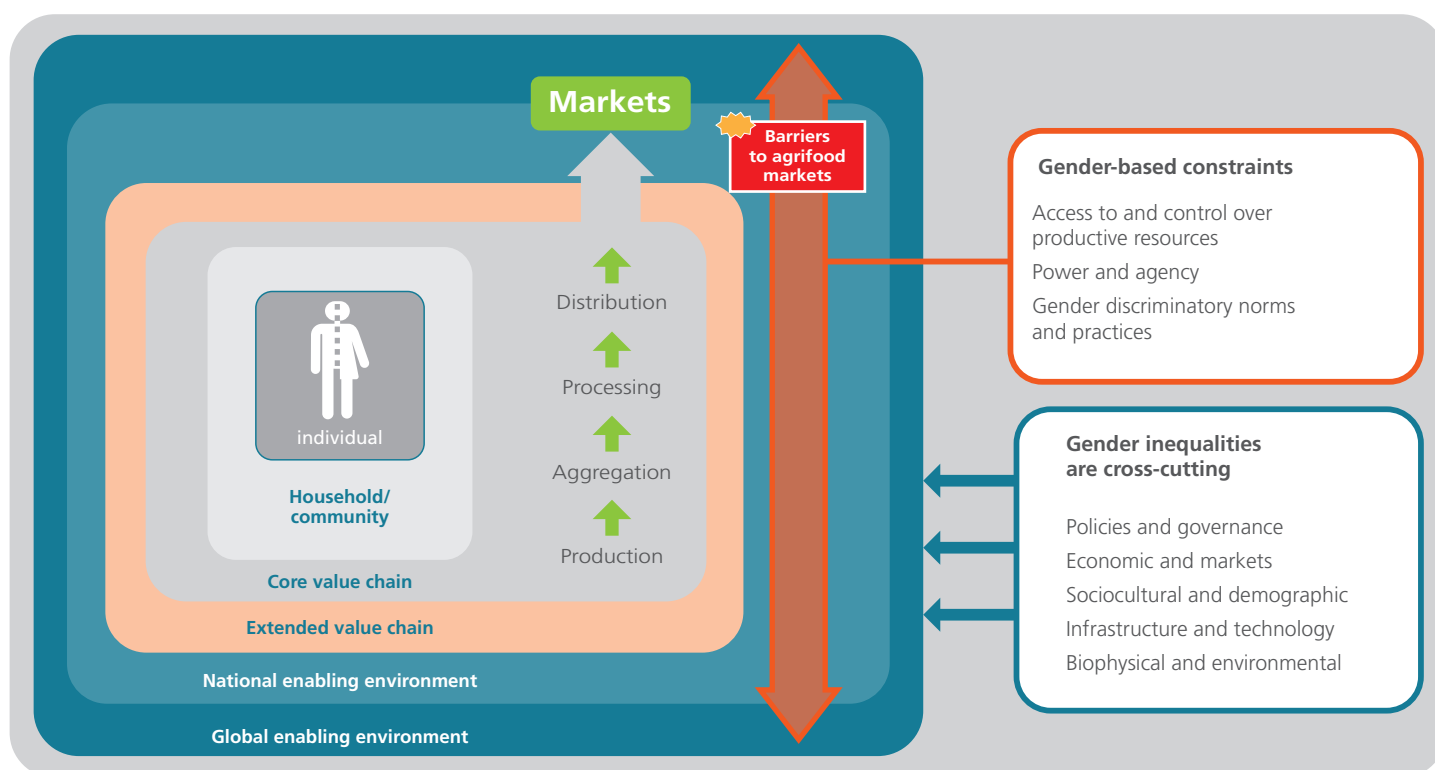
The linkages between trade and gender (in)equality stem from the fact that societies and economies are organized around gendered structures and processes; that is, they are biased by explicit or implicit gender norms which directly or indirectly affect the distribution of (and power over) resources among women and men (see the glossary for gender terminology). Gender-based power imbalances, embedded in sociocultural norms, practices and institutions, disproportionately affect women's capacity to take advantage of productive resources and opportunities (FAO, 2011; Korinek, Moisé and Tange, 2021).

Gender inequalities impact the livelihoods of millions of women, hindering their empowerment potential and detrimentally affecting their productive and reproductive life. Furthermore, gender inequalities may intersect with other sources of disadvantage and forms of discrimination, such as those based on social class, age, ethnicity, and migration, and others, which are mutually reinforcing (so-called "intersectional discrimination") (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; Fontana and Silberman, 2013). Gender inequality dynamics have also macro-economic implications, potentially hampering the positive impacts of trade and trade policies on economic growth, as well as on public policy goals. Growing evidence points to the biasing role of gendered dynamics in sectoral distribution patterns and employment trends – women's occupational segregation in low-skilled low-paid jobs can, for instance, affect output and value chain functioning. According to recent FAO estimates, closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agrifood-system employment would increase global gross domestic product by 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 (FAO, 2023).

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In the agriculture sector, gender inequalities can affect all activities along the supply chain, including in marketing and trade. In many countries, women are not able to engage in value chain operations productively and fully access agrifood markets, or enjoy trade-generated benefits, due to long-standing gender discriminatory practices. Such gender-based barriers to markets and trade are part of broader gender inequality dynamics at play in agrifood systems, which are shaped by both context-specific factors and complex systemic conditions encompassing the local, national and global levels (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Gender-based barriers to agrifood markets and trade



Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the FAO Gender-sensitive Value Chain Framework (GSVCF) (FAO, 2016. *Developing gender-sensitive value chains: a guiding framework*. Rome, FAO. <https://www.fao.org/3/i6462e/i6462e.pdf>).

Women's challenges in accessing domestic and international agrifood markets often derive from gender gaps and inequalities in land rights, education; finance; technology, including, in particular, digital technology; market information; business networks; extension services; training; social capital; voice, power and representation in decision-making processes and management positions. Access to credit that women entrepreneurs need for investing in agribusiness can be constrained by the lack of collateral required by formal financial institutions because of gender-discriminatory statutory and customary norms related to property and inheritance. Evidence shows that, compared to men, women have inadequate access to secure land rights, including land ownership, management, transfer, and economic rights (FAO, 2018a). The gender gap in land rights is one of the main issues affecting women's ability to make decisions over farming and commercial activities, since land is one of the most important assets for smallholders for both agricultural production and food security (FAO, 2018a). Gender-equitable governance of land tenure and participation in land policymaking are crucial to ensure that women and men equally participate in, and benefit from, land tenure governance processes. However, the lack of implementation and enforcement of legally-protected rights represents one of the major obstacle to gender equality in land rights, particularly among agricultural populations (FAO, 2023).

Other challenges constraining women's access to markets, among others, include low literacy levels; social norms and family obligations that discourage women from requesting loans for entrepreneurial activities; and abusive and corruptive practices from agents. When engaging in marketing activities, women generally operate in local informal markets and experience distinct constraints. For instance, in many countries cultural prescriptions prohibit women from driving cars or motorcycles, and from selling their products in profitable markets far from their villages (FAO, 2017). Women traders rely more than men on public transportation and are exposed to higher risks of robbery and gender-based violence in many contexts (USAID, 2016). Time poverty is another issue affecting women's participation in trade and markets, as women have less time compared to men to devote to their business, due to the excessive burden of domestic duties (UNCTAD, 2020).

## 2. The nexus between trade and gender

A growing body of studies is measuring progress towards gender equality in relation to trade, analysing their areas of interaction. The literature suggests a two-way interaction between trade and gender equality – trade leads to outcomes that vary by gender; in turn, gender inequalities can affect trade performance and market dynamics (Von Hagen, 2014; Women Watch, 2011).

Trade and trade policies have gender-differentiated redistributive effects within the economy, which can either magnify or reduce existing gender inequalities depending on underlying societal conditions (van Staveren, 2003). Trade openness may lead to positive gender impacts such as increasing women's welfare. Eliminating import tariffs could raise real income by 2.5 percent for women-headed households, compared to male-headed households, as found in a study covering 54 developing and emerging countries (World Bank and WTO, 2020). At the micro-level, the interplay between gender and trade occurs in all areas where women are involved as workers, producers, traders, entrepreneurs, and consumers, among others (World Bank and WTO, 2020).

However, there are a lot of trade-offs to be considered. Lower-priced agrifood imports can lead to reduced prices for consumers advantaging women consumers of cheap imported agricultural goods. However, competition with cheap imported agrifood products can put pressure on women-led agri-businesses facing competitive disadvantages, in comparison with men-led ones, due to major productivity gaps.

At the same time, women and vulnerable people tend to face heightened socioeconomic risks in the face of economic shocks, market disruptions, food crises and other adversities. The WTO estimated that women employed in sectors and industries particularly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 were more likely than men to suffer the consequences of pandemic-related trade disruptions (WTO, 2020). The disruption of rural-urban market linkages threatened rural women in particular, compounding pre-existing mobility restrictions (ILO, 2022; FAO, 2020b).

Trade openness (the ratio of total trade to gross domestic product) was found to be associated with gender equality performance, as measured by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index (GII) (World Bank and WTO, 2020). The GII is a composite measure showing the loss in potential human development due to inequality between women and men in three dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment, and the labour market (UNDP, 2022). A low GII value indicates low inequality between women and men in the three dimensions considered, and vice versa. In 2021, for example, the regions that performed better in gender equality (thus having low GII values), were also the regions more open to trade, with the exception of Arab countries, as shown in Table 1.

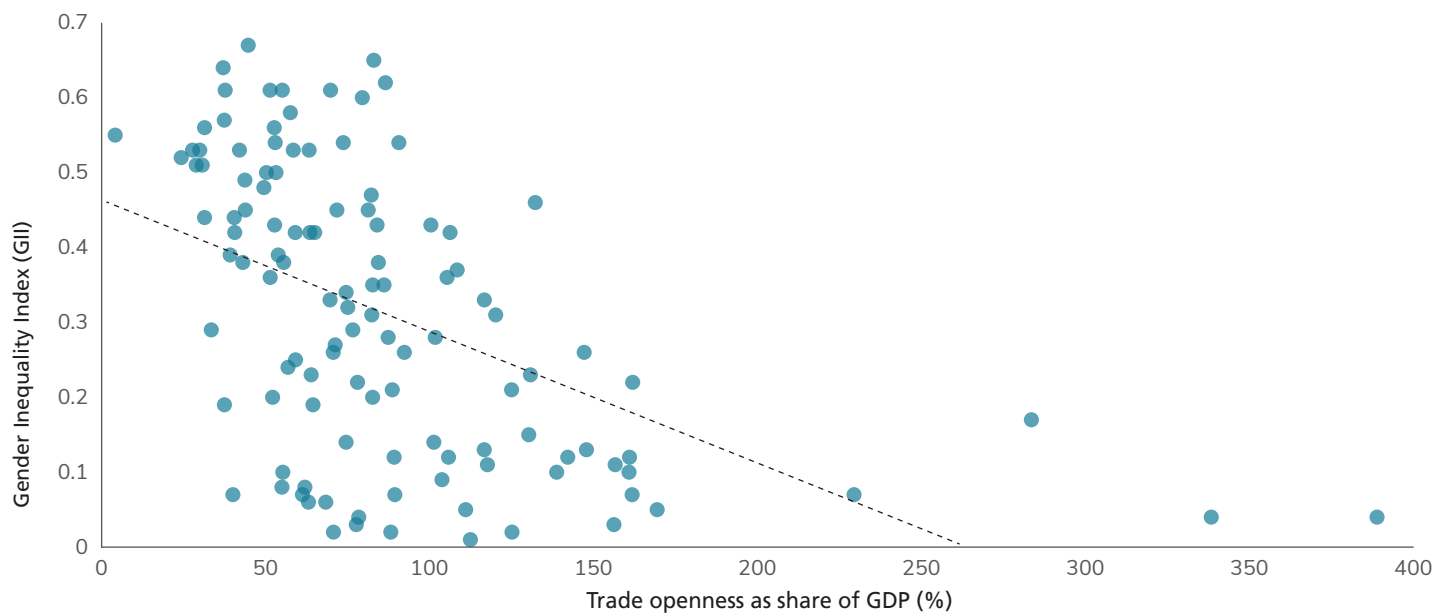
**Table 1.** Gender inequality (GII) and trade openness (trade as a percentage of GDP) in 2021, by region

Region	GII	Trade (% of GDP)
Europe and Central Asia	0.227	84
East Asia and the Pacific	0.337	56
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.381	55
Southern Asia	0.508	42
Arab States	0.536	60
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.569	45
Least developed countries	0.562	48
<b>World</b>	<b>0.465</b>	<b>57</b>

Sources: Authors' calculations based on data from UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2022. *Human Development Report 2021/2022. Uncertain times, unsettled lives: shaping our future in a transforming world*. New York, UNDP. [https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22pdf\\_1.pdf](https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22pdf_1.pdf); and World Bank. 2022a. Trade % of GDP. In: *World Bank Data*. Cited 17 April 2023. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.TRD.GNFS.ZS>.

A negative correlation between trade openness and the GII was found for 116 observed countries in 2021 ( $r = -0.5$ ). Countries with higher levels of gender inequality (that is, high GII values) are also the countries less open to trade, as shown in Figure 2.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 2.** Trade openness and gender equality performance in 116 countries in 2021



Sources: Authors' calculations based on data from UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2022. *Human Development Report 2021/2022. Uncertain times, unsettled lives: shaping our future in a transforming world*. New York, UNDP. [https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22pdf\\_1.pdf](https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22pdf_1.pdf); and World Bank. 2022a. Trade % of GDP. In: *World Bank Data*. Cited 17 April 2023. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.TRD.GNFS.ZS>.

It needs to be noted that robust knowledge on the impacts of gender equality dynamics on trade, and on the gender-differentiated impacts of trade, is challenged by unreliable or fragmented data across different domains (for example, trade statistics, households and enterprise surveys), which compound the analytical challenges in applied research (UNCTAD, 2018) (see Box 1).

### Box 1. Measuring trade and gender equality: progress and challenges

In recent years, the gender dimension has been increasingly included in trade analyses, and methods and tools have been developed to assess the ex-ante and ex-post gender-distributional impacts of trade policy reforms (UNCTAD 2016; UNCTAD 2019). From a qualitative perspective, assessing gender equality change over time means looking at socio-cultural processes grounded in local realities and subjective experiences. This can represent a methodological challenge for applied research in agricultural development contexts. For instance, how can trade-induced changes in women's empowerment in small-scale commercial farming at the household level be assessed? To navigate such complexities, there is a need to develop contextually valid indicators able to capture gender and empowerment changes within specific contexts and local understandings (Tavener and Crane, 2022). Recently, promising analytical frameworks and tools have been adopted. These include the gender-based analysis plus (GBA+), gender-transformative approaches (GTAs), the Reach-Benefit-Empower framework and the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), among others (Malapit, Quisumbing and Hodur, 2020). Building on the WEAI, the recently developed pro-WEAI + MI (Market Inclusion) includes complementary indicators to investigate barriers to domestic market access and inclusion for different value chain actors (Alkire *et al.*, 2013; IFPRI, 2020).

At the micro-level, analysing the interplay between trade and gender and their multifaceted layers requires the adoption of a case-by-case approach. Improving trade and gender data would provide an important baseline for informing gender-responsive policies in agriculture and trade and promote more inclusive agrifood markets. Indeed, trade gains are not automatically equally redistributed among women and men in the absence of gender-sensitive policy interventions; thus, women-supportive measures in agriculture, trade, social protection, and other relevant sectors are needed to ensure that trade benefits are fairly distributed among women and men.

<sup>2</sup> Using similar methodology, World Bank and the WTO arrived to similar results for 2017 (World Bank and the WTO, 2020). The correlation could be explained by the fact that in some instances, countries with less openness to trade are more backwards with regard to the three dimensions measured by the GII.

### 3. Trade and gender dynamics in the agrifood sector: some key dimensions

The intersections between trade and gender (in)equality in the agricultural sector, and their implications for developing countries, are not easy to determine, especially in the informal economy. Much of the literature has focused on the study of gendered patterns of employment in export-oriented agrifood sectors; the gender-differentiated impacts of trade liberalization on smallholder farming systems or labour markets; household coping strategies in farms engaging in commercial agriculture; and the effects of trade policies on women-owned agri-businesses. In the next sections, essential features of the interplay between agrifood trade and gender are illustrated, in relation to the dimensions of employment, agrifood production and marketing, and entrepreneurship.

#### 3.1 Employment: women workers in export-oriented agrifood sectors

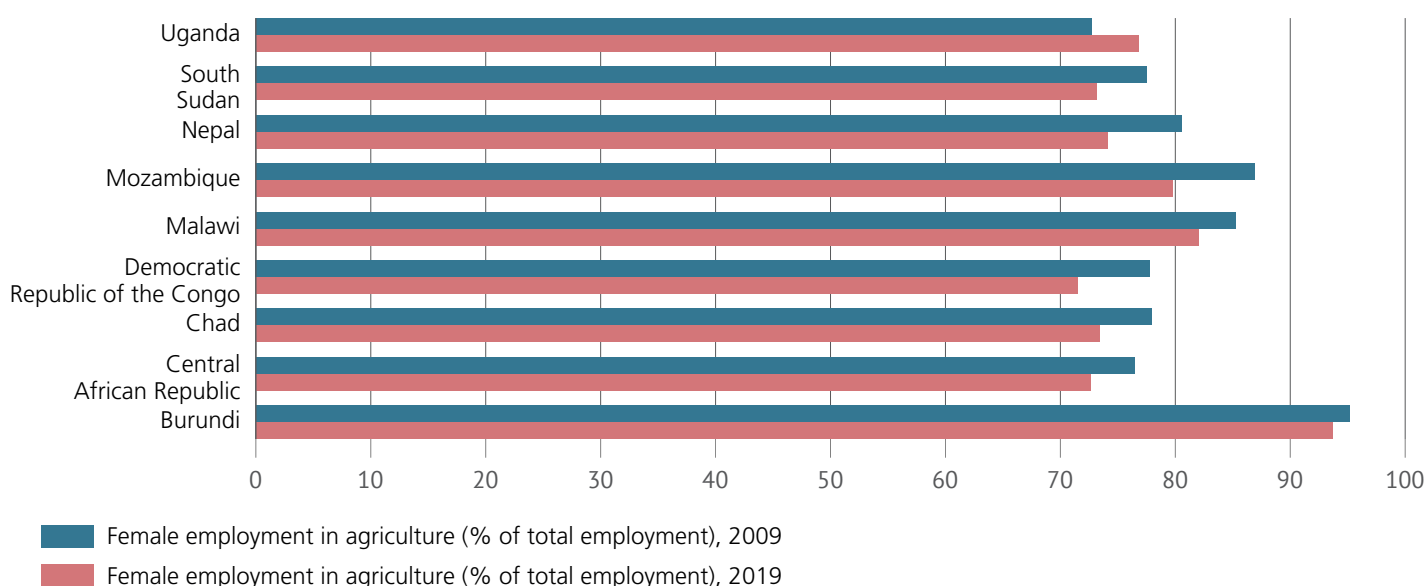
Agriculture remains the main source of employment for millions of women in developing countries. In 2020, women accounted for approximately 37 percent of global rural agricultural employment, a share that raises to 48 percent in low-income countries (FAO, 2022a).

In developing countries, openness to trade affects gender inequality through differential impacts on labour and wages across sectors (FAO, 2022a). Agricultural trade can affect employment patterns by changing food prices, labour demand, and wages, with impacts and magnitude varying across regions and countries (FAO, 2018b). Under liberalized markets, export-oriented sectors tend to expand, contrarily to import-oriented ones. Over time, female labour participation increased in many countries which also witnessed growing levels of exports. However, employment gains are more pronounced for women working in firms and sectors most linked to global supply chains, such as in high-value and non-traditional agricultural sectors like the cut-flower industry (FAO, 2006; World Bank and WTO, 2020).

With regard to female agricultural employment, eight out of the ten countries more open to trade also ranked among the top 30 countries with lower female employment rates in agriculture in 2019. These countries are Belgium; China, Hong Kong SAR; Ireland; Luxembourg; Malta; Singapore; Slovakia; and the United Arab Emirates (ILOSTAT, 2022; World Bank, 2022a). The GII mean score for these countries is 0.086, pointing to good gender equality performance on average (World GII score = 0.465).

The top ten countries with the highest rate of female employment in agriculture are all Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The estimated share of female agricultural employment ranges from 71 percent to 93 percent in 2019, decreasing from 2009 (with the exception of Uganda) (Figure 3). All these countries showed high levels of gender inequality in 2021 as measured by the GII index (mean score = 0.563; world average = 0.465) but a decrease from 2009 when the mean score was 0.612 (UNDP, 2022).

**Figure 3.** Female employment in agriculture (percent of total employment) in net food-importing countries, 2009 and 2019



\*Modelled ILO estimates. Sources: ILOSTAT (ILO Statistics). 2022. Employment rate by sex and sector. In: *ILOSTAT*. Cited 5 January 2023. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/>.

The expansion of export-oriented agribusinesses has created more job opportunities for women. However, this growth does not automatically translate into better labour conditions, gender equality or women's empowerment. Evidence suggests that trade liberalization had mixed effects in the agricultural sector, negatively impacting female workers in Africa, but benefiting those in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Ethiopia, following a reduction of tariffs, women moved faster from agriculture to the service sector but their low levels of education led them to shift into low value-added sectors (FAO, 2022b).

Market competition can put pressure on wages, aggravating women's unsafe or adverse working conditions, especially in the informal sector (van Steveran *et al.*, 2007; Rai and Waylen, 2014). Gender discrimination and inequalities contribute to women's persistent over-representation in low-skilled low-paid agricultural jobs (horizontal labour segregation) and under-representation in higher positions (vertical segregation). Female occupational segregation is used as a cost strategy by many export-oriented agribusinesses relying on cheap labour (UNCTAD, 2014). Not surprisingly, gendered employment patterns in growing export-oriented sectors where women's participation is high can foster economic growth, at least in the short- to medium-term. In cases where women are used by firms as a source of competitive advantage, gendered employment patterns can be reinforced, thus increasing gender inequality (van Staveren *et al.*, 2007).

Women are exposed to higher job insecurity than men, as they are disproportionately employed in the lowest value-added segments for import-competing food crops, which are more subject to demand fluctuations. For more lucrative cash crops, in contrast, there is a predominance of men (Bussolo and De Hoyes, 2009).

Women suffer the consequences of job loss as a result of import competition in the informal sector more than men (Çağatay, 2001). Greater trade openness, for example by lowering tariffs, can have a negative impact on vulnerable workers who are not covered by social safety nets, which is typical for women. A comprehensive set of policy measures is necessary to protect women from the negative externalities of trade and economic shocks which are aggravated for vulnerable groups who are not adequately supported by health and occupational protection mechanisms.

### 3.2 Production and marketing: women smallholders' market participation

In recent decades, the rising demand for higher-value agricultural products spurred cash crops and commercial farming at both the large- and small-scale levels. Market-driven agricultural intensification and commercialization are transforming the agriculture sector of many developing countries. The increasing market participation of small-farm households is driving changes in the traditional socioeconomic organization of farming systems, leading to either empowering or disempowering effects on women.

Open trade can benefit small-scale producers by increasing availability of agrifood products and inputs for agricultural production. However, market competition can be detrimental to women farmers, who are generally more constrained than men by the gaps outlined in section one. Evidence shows that female-headed farming households and female-managed plots have lower productivity levels compared to male-headed households due to gender gaps in assets, inputs, land rights, technology, knowledge, and social capital, among others (World Bank and WTO, 2020). In many countries, market participation results are significantly lower for female-headed households than for male-headed households (FAO, 2020a; World Bank, 2020).

Greater market participation can bring benefits to farm households in terms of higher incomes, leading to improved living standards, food security and nutrition. Women's increasing involvement in commercial agriculture can facilitate their pathway towards financial autonomy and well-being by fostering income diversification and engagement in off-farm activities. Nonetheless, it can also have economic and social costs (FAO, 2006, 2020a). In fact, women's livelihood conditions may not improve even when household income rises as a result of greater participation in growing export agrifood markets. Women can be excluded from the most lucrative business activities, losing control over profits in favour of men, even for traditionally female-intensive crops (UNCTAD, 2014; Croppenstedt, Goldstein and Rosas, 2013).

As commercialization intensifies, women's unpaid and domestic workload can increase while decision-making power over income can decrease. In the Ethiopian dairy sector, greater milk market participation was found to be positively correlated with higher household income; however, control over milk-derived income is more likely to shift from women to men. In Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania, sales of crops and livestock are associated with declining female control over resources within farm households; diversification, in contrast, is positively related to increased female control (Tavener *et al.*, 2019). Dairy production intensification involves women in additional chores which can be burdensome in the absence of external workforce or labour-saving technology (Lenjiso, Smits and Ruben, 2016).

Overall, women's engagement in commercial agriculture and modern value chains remains low in many countries (FAO, 2020a). Despite their contribution in export-oriented crop and non-traditional sectors, women are less likely to produce cash crops, and engage less than men in the production and marketing of agricultural products that are internationally traded (World Bank and WTO, 2020). In many developing countries, women smallholders are largely employed in low value-added agricultural value chains and in subsistence agriculture, carrying out labour-intensive tasks in upstream nodes like production, while their engagement decreases further downstream. This is partly due to social norms and cultural biases related to women's and men's farm work responsibilities, land rights, and business ownership.

Women are key actors in territorial markets, where food is produced, processed, traded and consumed within a given territory linked to local, national and/or regional food systems. Yet they are still largely excluded from modern contract farming arrangements, facing barriers to adopting innovative sustainable agricultural practices (FAO, 2020a). Gender-responsive policies can facilitate a more equitable distribution of resources and the promotion of women's participation in sustainable agricultural



value chains. Initiatives supporting territorial market arrangements, like the experimental Food Acquisition Programme in Brazil, proved to be beneficial for women small-scale rural producers and their communities (HLPE, 2020; CSM, 2016). Certification schemes promoting non-discrimination policies can play a role in reducing gender disparities encouraging women's integration in the value chain and a more gender-balanced revenue distribution, as reported in a study among Ugandan coffee-producing households. Nevertheless, attention has to be paid to emerging trade-offs when introducing quality standards that can increase women's bargaining power but also their workload (FAO, 2020a).

### 3.3 Entrepreneurship: women-led enterprises in international agrifood trade

Globally, women's involvement in international trade is low compared to men. In low-income developing countries, women are more likely to engage in trade activities as wage workers, rather than be self-employed (Fontana, 2016). Women-led micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (W-MSMEs) tend to concentrate on lower value-added value chains and low-paying sectors at the small-scale level in contexts with a high degree of informality (ILO, 2016). W-MSMEs could benefit in some cases from increased returns generated by open trade, including in non-traditional agrifood sectors. While most trade and business challenges are similar to those that men-owned/run MSMEs face, others are gender-specific. Some examples of gender barriers and their impacts on women's business activities are illustrated below.

**Finance gap.** Limited access to credit dramatically reduces women's likelihood to access international markets. Coupled with the technology gap and capacity insufficiencies, the financing gap globally represents one of the top barriers to trade and one important cause for W-MSMEs' low formalization and market exclusion. Women willing to invest in upgrading their firms, for instance to increase export-oriented value addition or improve the quality of their products, have to struggle more than men to obtain financial support from financial institutions. Often, they cannot provide guarantees and collateral due to gender-based discriminatory norms, eventually failing to meet eligibility requirements. It is estimated that in 108 economies women cannot run businesses in the same way as men due to at least one legal constraint on women's access to credit, their ability to sign a contract, open a bank account, or register a business (World Bank, 2022b). Due to a lack of capital, W-MSMEs are often under-capitalized and more exposed to revenue loss and business failure.

**Trade regulations and standards.** Non-tariff measures (NTMs) have a notable impact on market access, especially for agricultural products coming from developing countries. While put in place to achieve public policy goals, NTMs can represent barriers to trade. The costs of compliance with sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and technical barriers to trade (TBT), including technical regulations, standards, and conformity assessment procedures, can be particularly burdensome for small-scale firms. SMEs from developing countries in particular struggle to comply with product requirements, and compliance costs tend to be higher for food and agricultural goods compared to other sectors, constraining their participation in trade (OECD, 2020; WTO, 2021). NTMs are generally perceived as gender neutral. However, their costs are particularly high for women exporters or potential exporters. Complying with trade regulations and standards is a major obstacle for W-SMEs because they are, for example, less equipped than male-owned/run SMEs with adequate processing capacity or quality control infrastructures. Moreover, existing gender gaps in education and low business literacy make women more disadvantaged, compared to men, in handling complex trade-related bureaucracy (von Hagen, 2014). Indeed, education and training are essential for women to gain the skills required to participate in economic activities, including trade. Overall, the gender dimension of tariff and non-tariff measures in the agriculture sector is still under-researched, and more studies are needed to assess the gender-differentiated effects of tariffs and non-tariff measures, as well as the impact of trade facilitation on gender equality outcomes (Shaw and Jobes, 2019).

**Informal cross-border trade.** Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) constitutes the main or only source of income for many women traders in developing countries. It is estimated that women account for approximately 70-80 percent of informal small-scale cross-border traders in sub-Saharan Africa. In this region, ICBT represents a large part of cross-border trade, playing a crucial role in securing food and income for vulnerable people (FAO, 2017; Lesser and Moisé-Leeman, 2009). However, the risks associated with ICBT, ranging from personal safety issues, harassment, and sexual violence, to corruption, bribes, and extortions at borders, remain very high for women in sub-Saharan Africa. Business challenges and the scarce prospects for better earnings discourage many women informal traders from formalization. Challenges include, among others, the high costs of formal trade, little information about export requirements and customs procedures, lengthy clearance processes, and bureaucratic hurdles. Establishing or strengthening gender-sensitive border security procedures, custom management strategies and infrastructure are key to creating a safer trading environment for women (DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR and UN Women, 2019). A simplified trade regime and trade facilitation measures can play a role in encouraging women's participation in trade by lowering export costs; facilitating compliance with trade regulations; expediting clearance of goods at customs; enhancing the transparency and predictability of trade flows; improving trading services; and increasing efficiency in border procedures. It is important that women traders and women-led SMEs, both in the formal and informal sector, are targeted in trade and agricultural development programmes for the promotion of inclusive trade and trade facilitation.

## Conclusion

Globally, women face major challenges in accessing agrifood markets and benefiting from trade-generated gains due to widespread social asymmetries and gender inequalities negatively affecting their livelihoods. Gender-based barriers to domestic and international markets are part of broader gender inequality dynamics at play in agrifood systems. These can have an impact on agrifood value chains, and at the macroeconomic level, implications for agricultural development, economic growth, and trade across the three dimensions of sustainability – social, economic and environmental. Trade leads to social and economic outcomes that vary by gender, which can either magnify or reduce existing gender inequalities, depending on underpinning societal conditions. The linkages between gender (in)equality and trade in agriculture are context-specific and multi-faceted, with multiple channels of interaction influenced by social structures and norms. Women can be differently impacted by trade-derived socio-economic changes, depending on their roles in society, the sector they work in, and national and international market scenarios.

Trade can create opportunities for women by generating income and more and better employment with multiple benefits and gains, such as increased financial autonomy, business growth and improved well-being. However, as workers, women are often disproportionately represented in low-paid low-skilled jobs and can be negatively affected by changing sectoral employment trends. Under liberalized trade, women producers in small-scale farming systems tend to struggle more than men in market competition. Women entrepreneurs are more likely to engage in trading low-value added products in local markets in the informal sector, rather than in high-value added products traded internationally. Barriers to agrifood markets, such as technical barriers to trade, constrain the participation of small enterprises from developing countries, and women-led enterprises especially risk being excluded from trading activities due to gender-specific challenges and discrimination.

Closing the gender gap in trade and agrifood systems requires evidence-based gender-responsive policies that can tackle the structural causes of gender inequality widely affecting economies, communities, and individuals. In the absence of effective women-supportive policy interventions, gender inequalities are likely to worsen, especially in contexts where they are systemic. Greater gender responsiveness in trade and agricultural policies can contribute to ensuring that women benefit from agrifood markets in a safe and fair trade environment. For example, gender-sensitive capacity building in soft and hard skills, and inclusive export promotion programmes, technical assistance in trade facilitation, business support services, facilities and infrastructures are some important means to remove barriers to trade, incentivize the engagement of women in trade, and facilitate their formalization.

However, agricultural and trade policy measures alone cannot address the arising trade-offs between promoting economic efficiency, market integration goals and social inclusion outcomes. A set of gender-responsive adjustment policies aligned across sectors, as well as effective social protection and education programmes, are needed to support women in adapting to rapidly changing market and economic scenarios. Innovative gender and social inclusion strategies can be adopted in national and regional policies and programmes that promote agriculture development and regional market integration.

In order to go beyond gender-sensitive methodologies that tackle gender constraints only partially, innovative and gender-inclusive policies need to enhance women's agency, equitable social relations at the household and community level, and promote change in societal structures in terms of inclusive policies, laws, and institutional settings. Enabling a gender-sensitive policy and regulatory environment conducive to a solid and fair structural transformation of the labour market, including through public-private investments, synergistic multi-stakeholder partnerships, and institutional coordination, can pave the way for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, as mandated by the United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

## Key messages

- ▶ Agrifood trade is an engine for sustainable and inclusive development, leading to social and economic outcomes potentially conducive to gender equality and women's empowerment.
- ▶ Gender inequalities create constraints to women's access to domestic and international agrifood markets and have an impact on agricultural value chain development, trade performance and economic growth.
- ▶ Gender-responsive agricultural and trade policies foster a more gender equitable trade environment and promote an inclusive market-led transformation of the agricultural sector, by removing gender barriers to domestic and international trade.



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## Glossary

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### Box 1. (page 4)

**Alkire, S., Meinzen-Dick, R., Peterman, A., Quisumbing, A., Seymour, G. & Vaz, A.** 2013. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index. *World Development*, 52: 71–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.06.007>

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### Glossary: gender-related terminology

**Gender** is a social construct, culturally defined, changeable over time and learned through socialization processes. Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between them. Gender roles and norms are produced and performed, explicitly or implicitly, at all societal levels, in households, communities, institutions, policies and legislation.

**Gender equality** refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, girls and boys. It means that such rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals would not depend on whether they are born male or female (OSAGI, 2001) or on their gender identity. Gender equality should not be merely considered a women's issue but fully concerning and engaging all genders, while recognizing that neither all men nor all women are a homogenous group (UN Women, 2022).

**Gender inequality**, on the other hand, can be defined as the "legal, social and cultural situation in which sex and/or gender determine different rights and dignity for women and men, which are reflected in their unequal access to or enjoyment of rights, as well as the assumption of stereotyped social and cultural roles" (EIGE, 2021). In many agricultural-based economies, gender norms constrain women's and girls' access to, and control over, land, inputs, productive resources, credit, markets, technology, and other assets (FAO, 2011). Gender inequalities are for example associated with increased risk of food insecurity. The gender gap in the global prevalence of moderate or severe food security widened from 2020 to 2021, driven by differences in Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia. In 2021, globally, 31.9 percent of women were moderately or severely food insecure compared to 27.6 percent of men (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2022).

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