

Empowering Women Farmers through Agricultural Transformation: Lessons from GAFSP projects

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Mrs. Heu Sokleap, a farmer and Chair of the Aphivat Meanchey Agricultural Cooperative in Cambodia, tending to her pigs as part of the project's integrated home farming activities. PHOTO: CamboDHRRA

Introduction

Gender inequality remains one of the most significant structural barriers to achieving food security and nutrition, resilient livelihoods and sustainable food systems. Across agrifood systems, women are farmers, seed custodians, traders, processors, caregivers and organisers of household nutrition, yet they continue to face systemic constraints in access to land, inputs, finance, training, markets and decision-making spaces while disproportionately shouldering the risks. These inequalities reduce productivity, limit dietary diversity and undermine the realisation of the right to adequate food.ⁱ

The United Nations has declared 2026 to be the International Year of the Woman Farmer, celebrating the centrality of women to food security and economic resilience, while acknowledging their often unrecognised

roles. The UN declaration calls for gender gaps to be closed and women's livelihoods to be improved.ⁱⁱ

The International Year of the Women Farmer further amplifies the recommendations of policy guidelines and reports on gender equality and women's empowerment developed by the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

The CFS **Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment** (2023)

emphasise that gender equality is critical to meeting human rights obligations, while also contributing to improved agricultural performance, nutrition outcomes and climate resilience. They highlight women's equal access to resources, participation in governance and protection from discrimination as core pillars of food system transformation.

The CFS High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE)

report **Reducing Inequalities for Food Security and Nutrition** (2023) recognises that inequalities

affecting women occur across the entire food system from access to resources needed for food production, processing and marketing to other food environments including governance processes and consumptions. These are reinforced by structural drivers such as discriminatory norms, unequal labour burdens, gender-based violence and public exclusion. Women are consistently among the groups most affected by food insecurity globally, particularly smallholder farmers, Indigenous women, migrants and informal workers.ⁱⁱⁱ

The **Civil Society and Indigenous People's Mechanism (CSIPM)** of the CFS has stressed that addressing gender inequality requires not only technical inclusion but structural transformation of power relations. Feminist approaches to food systems are necessary to address care work burdens, violence, land rights and participation in governance while recognising women's leadership in agroecology and community food systems.^{iv}

Additionally, addressing gender inequality in agricultural investment requires inclusive and intersectional approaches that strengthen agency across diverse social groups. Marginalised groups, Indigenous women, young women, widows, persons with disabilities and non-traditional gender identities frequently experience intersecting forms of exclusion from agricultural resources and decision-making.

Such inequalities intensify during crises, such as conflicts, pandemics and climate disasters, further restricting women's access to markets, services and livelihoods.^v

Gender transformative priorities for agricultural programming

Across these guiding documents -- the CFS Gender Equality Guidelines, HLPE inequalities framework, CSIPM feminist policy analysis -- several consistent priorities emerge for gender-transformative agricultural programming. These priorities provide a framework for assessing how agricultural projects are contributing to lasting gender equality outcomes.

1. Strengthen women's access to land, productive resources, finance and markets.
2. Support women's leadership and participation in producer organisations and governance.
3. Support the roles of women in conserving local seeds and indigenous knowledge.
4. Reduce unpaid care burdens and address discriminatory norms.
5. Expand equitable participation across all aspects of food systems.
6. Promote nutrition-sensitive and agroecological production systems.

7. Address intersecting inequalities affecting Indigenous, remote, and vulnerable persons and communities.
8. Strengthen social protection, resilience, and safe livelihood alternatives in fragile contexts.

Lessons from GAFSP-supported projects

The multi-lateral Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) was established by the G20 in 2010, as part of a wave of measures responding to the 2007-2008 food price crisis. GAFSP has two distinct focus areas: (i) food system outcomes, including increased agricultural productivity, improved farm-to-market linkages, reduced risk and vulnerability, improved rural livelihoods and entrepreneurship, and improved institutions; and (ii) cross-cutting outcomes, including improved climate resilience, empowered women and girls, and improved nutrition. GAFSP provides financing through two tracks: a grant-based financing track (GBFT), which allocates grants to countries and producer organisations (POs), and a public private partnership-led funding track, which provides both grants and concessional funding through a business investment financing track (BIFT).

The Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP conducted participatory reviews of ongoing GAFSP-supported projects across seven countries in late 2025 and early 2026. As empowered women and girls is one of GAFSP's crosscutting themes, each of the projects reviewed integrated activities, in varying degrees, to support women's livelihoods and reduce gender inequality.

This brief offers lessons, drawn from these projects, on how agricultural projects can contribute to lasting gender equality outcomes.

The **Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP** is a consortium of civil society organisations that has been contracted by GAFSP to assess a selection of their grant-funded projects. The consortium is led by ActionAid International, together with the Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF), Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRRA), and Coordination pour des Actions en Santé et en Développement d'Haïti (COSADH).

Burundi – CAPAD cooperatives support resiliency

This PO-led project seeks to restore agricultural productivity and household resilience through cooperative-based banana and bean value chains following pandemic disruptions. It addresses gender inequality by supporting women farmers disproportionately affected by COVID-19 market losses and care burdens through cooperative participation in processing and access to additional varieties of crops.^{vi}

Cambodia – Organic agriculture for smallholder farmers

The PO-led project entitled Building Back Better strengthens climate-resilient organic production and cooperative value-chain participation among smallholder farmers, including Indigenous communities. It promotes gender equality by supporting women's participation in cooperatives and targeted training in production, nutrition and leadership.^{vii}

DRC – Nutrition sensitive agriculture strengthens resiliency

This government-led project links nutrition-sensitive agriculture with social cohesion and livelihood diversification in conflict-affected provinces. The project strengthens women's participation through community dialogue platforms, farmer training groups and financial inclusion initiatives.^{viii}

Haiti – Agroforestry for food and livelihoods

Led by the Haitian farmers' organisation ROPAGA (Réseau des Organisations Producteurs/trices de la Grand'Anse), this project supports agroforestry systems, seed distribution and farmer-organisation strengthening following earthquake-related disruptions. Women producers are prioritised in training, agroecological transition activities and in the institutional strengthening process of ROPAGA.^{ix}

Liberia – Smallholder agriculture development for nutrition security

This government-led project improves productivity, seed multiplication systems and institutional procurement linkages for smallholders. It strengthens women's participation through farmer-based organisations, savings mechanisms, and includes plans for engagement in school-feeding supply chains.^x

Lao PDR – Agriculture for nutrition

The government-led project promotes nutrition-sensitive agriculture in remote upland areas facing high poverty and malnutrition rates. Gender-transformative approaches strengthen women's roles in livestock production, household nutrition and community participation.^{xi}

Tanzania – Baridi Sokoni

Led by the producer organisation MVIWATA, this project strengthens horticulture and spice value chains through agroecological production, storage improvements and market coordination. The project offers training and creates opportunities for women to take leadership and decision-making roles within their cooperatives, producer groups and village community structures.^{xii}

Strengthening women's access to productive resources

Secure access to land, inputs, livestock, credit and extension services is fundamental for women's empowerment in agriculture. Improving access to productive resources increases productivity and strengthens household food security outcomes.

Savings and credit mechanisms in Liberia enabled women farmers to invest in seed multiplication and value-chain participation. Cooperative-based banana rehabilitation and biofortified banana and bean production in Burundi

similarly strengthened women's access to improved planting materials and collective marketing channels. In Lao PDR, livestock distribution and nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions increased income opportunities and women's participation in decision-making among remote upland households facing persistent poverty and malnutrition.

In the DRC, the reviewers noted that government, donors and supervising entities did not seem to consider the precariousness of land tenure for women in implementing the project, as many women are landless. The review observed that future project design could include actions to address such persistent inequalities.



Ms. Bouapho, a village facilitator and participant in the vegetable production group in Lai Yai village in Lao PDR. PHOTO: LAO FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

Supporting women's leadership in producer organisations and local governance

Producer organisations provide critical institutional platforms for strengthening women's agency. Inclusive producer organisations are essential platforms for reducing inequalities in food systems.

In Haiti, the project's strengthening of the producer organisation ROPAGA focused on improving women's participation in local cooperatives and participating in local decision-making processes. In Burundi, CAPAD cooperatives enabled women farmers to access collective marketing arrangements and extension services. In Cambodia, agricultural cooperatives supported women's participation in organic certification systems and value-chain coordination.

These institutional spaces strengthened women's bargaining power and access to services across multiple contexts. However, across projects, women's representation in the planning processes of national governments and larger institutions remained limited, constraining their influence over policy processes beyond local institutions.

Reducing unpaid care burdens and addressing discriminatory norms

To be gender-transformative, agriculture initiatives must address unpaid care work, violence and structural discrimination that limit women's participation in economic activities. Covid-19 pandemic-related disruptions highlighted how care burdens disproportionately affected women's

market participation and agricultural productivity. Women's care burdens are similarly impacted by climate disasters, conflict, and men's outmigration in many contexts.

Community-based dialogue and training platforms, such as the Dimitra clubs and farmer field schools, in eastern DRC helped address social norms affecting women's participation in agriculture and nutrition practices. In Lao PDR, nutrition-sensitive agriculture interventions combined with gender action training and dialogue involving both men and women helped change some male behavior and strengthened women's influence over household dietary decisions.

However, explicit strategies addressing unpaid care burdens were limited across most projects, suggesting an area for stronger integration in future programming.

Expanding women's participation in markets and value chains

Inclusive value-chain development is critical for strengthening women's economic empowerment. Equitable engagement in supply chains is essential for reducing food-system inequalities.

In Tanzania, improved storage systems and aggregation strengthened women's participation in spice and potato markets. In Cambodia, encouraging women's participation cooperative-based organic production supported access to premium markets while strengthening women's roles in production and certification processes.



Smallholder farmers involved in the *Baridi Sokoni* project at Njombe Market, Tanzania. PHOTO: ESAFF

In several countries, such as Haiti and Burundi (and planned in Liberia), public procurement arrangements linked women farmers to school-feeding programmes, creating stable demand for locally produced crops.

Despite the gains for women in these projects, women's roles in agricultural production remains concentrated in the local and lower-value segments of value chains, while non-local and more lucrative parts of value chains are often still controlled by men.

Promoting nutrition-sensitive and agroecological production in farms and gardens

The CFS Gender Guidelines, which call for women's empowerment and gender equality, encourage a focus on nutrition-sensitive agriculture to improve the nutrition of women and their families. In contrast, the HLPE and CSIPM reports emphasise the role of agroecology in empowering women.

All of the projects emphasise the importance of home gardens as part of a nutrition sensitive approach. The DRC project, for example, supports mothers of children diagnosed with malnutrition at health clinics with training and seeds for home gardens. But participation of women in the projects is not limited to production for home consumption, but also to improve women's income – for example, the market oriented organic rice project in Cambodia includes strong participation of women (women are 71% of cooperative members).

The Lao PDR project is a clear example of combining agroecology and nutrition-sensitive agriculture to strengthen women's participation in household decision-making on food production for consumption. The project reaches remote upland communities with high malnutrition rates through livestock distribution, promotion of diversified crop production systems, and community-based nutrition activities designed to improve dietary diversity.

The Burundi project focused on introducing new varieties of biofortified bananas and beans that were nutritionally fortified through plant breeding, but not through genetic engineering, and supported the integration of diversified cropping systems and women's participation in cooperatively organised seed distribution, value-added processing and marketing.

In Tanzania, women benefited from agroecological horticulture and spice production systems emphasising soil fertility management, nitrogen-fixing legumes, improved storage and reduced post-harvest losses. The project strengthened women's participation in value chains for beans, potatoes and spices crops central to agroecological diversification and household nutrition security, by helping them aggregate and store their crops for direct marketing through a national producer organisation, rather than giving up profits to middlemen.

The agroforestry project in Haiti provided strong agroecological support for women farmers by promoting tree-based farming systems, diversified crop production, goat rearing, beekeeping and soil restoration practices following earthquake-related disruptions.

Addressing intersectional inequalities in fragile and remote contexts

Inequalities affecting food security are intersectional and often compounded by geography, ethnicity and conflict exposure.

The GAFSP project in the DRC encouraged community dialogue through Dimitra clubs, an FAO developed model for local learning and dialogue among men and women, as part of nutrition-sensitive agriculture projects in conflict-affected provinces where insecurity, exclusion and displacement constrain agricultural production. Indigenous communities, especially indigenous women, in more remote rural areas in Cambodia benefited from targeted support for organic production and cooperative participation. In Haiti, earthquake recovery interventions strengthened resilience among women farmers facing overlapping climate and economic shocks.



Members of the Dimitra Club in Kawama, Tanganyika, DRC.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC

These interventions demonstrate the importance of territorial and context-specific approaches to gender equality among men and women. While the reviewers observed that in general the projects did not given enough focus on women's unpaid care work, the projects that deliberately included some gender-transformative activities (Cambodia, Haiti, Lao PDR, Tanzania), have begun to encourage more equitable sharing of responsibilities and joint decision-making between women and men, making progress toward improved household wellbeing and gender equality.^{xiii}

Strengthen social protection, resilience and safe livelihood alternatives in fragile contexts

Producer organisations and cooperatives serve as the most effective delivery mechanisms for scaling climate-resilient practices. GAFSP producer organisation-led projects in Burundi, Cambodia, Haiti and Tanzania helped develop the capacity of the lead organisations and their members, including women, to provide needed services, including

training, storage, processing and collective sales. Extension services were also strengthened and expanded, particularly through the government led projects in Lao PDR, Liberia and DRC. Women farmers in Liberia were encouraged to discontinue environmentally harmful practices of shifting cultivation to adopt lowland virgin cultivation, preventing deforestation.

Social protection policies, such as income transfers to vulnerable persons, access to health and rights-based entitlements, are an important element of supporting long-term equality and resilience in food systems. While most of the GAFSP projects reviewed did not directly encourage analysis of social protection needs or development of government programmes to protect individuals from poverty and livelihood shocks, the Lao PDR project took steps in this direction by working with local nutrition platforms to ensure coherence across different government initiatives. Although supporting large scale social protection may be beyond the size of GAFSP projects, they might offer opportunities to create dialogue and promote inclusive policy development.

Key recommendations:

For governments

- Strengthen land-tenure security for women.
- Expand gender-responsive extension systems.

For donors

- Require and support participatory governance mechanisms.
- Provide long term, flexible and accessible financing to farmer organisations and women led cooperatives.
- Ensure gender analysis informs project design and monitoring. This should include stronger gender-transformative indicators measuring leadership, participation, resource access and institutional inclusion across projects.
- Fund projects which address land rights, especially for women, and reduction and sharing of unpaid care and domestic work.

For civil society organisations

- Strengthen grassroots organising, feminist agroecology initiatives, and accountability mechanisms, ensuring women's participation in agricultural policy processes.
- Document and amplify women farmers evidence, experiences and innovations particularly in agroecology, nutrition and climate resilience
- Advocate for stronger land rights, social protection, gender responsive agricultural budgets and institutional representation of women farmers

Endnotes

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