

Chapter 8

GENDER ROLES IN SOUTH ASIAN FOOD SYSTEMS

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KEY MESSAGES

- Women are central to agrifood systems but face structural barriers such as limited access to resources, weak tenure and resource rights, and social norms that undervalue and restrict their contributions.
- Women's time in reproductive and care work is unrecognized, limits their participation in productive or market-oriented work, and reinforces gender disparities in time, income, and well-being.
- Gender norms and social hierarchies shape women's roles and limit empowerment across the food system, from agriculture to markets to the distribution of tasks and food within households, affecting diet and nutrition outcomes.
- Policy must go beyond recognizing women's work to leveling access to resources, ensuring fair pay and safe conditions, and tackling restrictive norms through gender-transformative approaches.
- Empowering women in food systems requires intersectional, data-driven action that addresses caste, class, mobility, and intrahousehold dynamics to ensure equitable food, livelihood, and health outcomes.
- Areas for future research include: engaging men, particularly in sharing care work; reducing labor burdens; and changing attitudes of the young through in-school curricula.

Understanding gender roles in food systems¹ is key to developing strategies that overcome social and institutional barriers to achieving healthy and nutritious diets for all. Although both women and men are key actors in food systems as producers, wage workers, processors, traders, vendors, and consumers, women face many more constraints and limitations, including less access to opportunities, technologies, finance, and other productive resources as well as weak tenure and resource rights (Njuki et al. 2022). Gendered structures and other axes of inequality drive inequities across key food systems components, namely production, food value chains, food environments, and consumers (and their behavior) (Figure 8.1), leading to inequality in diet and nutrition outcomes (HLPE-FSN 2023). Even within the same household, men and women can experience gendered differences in these outcomes due to their unequal roles across the food system and the subordinate status of women in their families and community (Quisumbing et al. 2023).

Globally, women spend at least three times as many hours as men on unpaid work on average, and consequently have a higher total work burden than men, when both unpaid and paid work are considered (ILO 2024). Attempts to increase women's participation in market-oriented work or in remunerative activities have been stymied by the time they spend in reproductive and care work – both unrecognized and uncompensated (Quisumbing et al. 2023) – and the possible toll that market work takes on the welfare of women and their families. Gender disparities in the distribution of paid and unpaid work have important consequences for women's

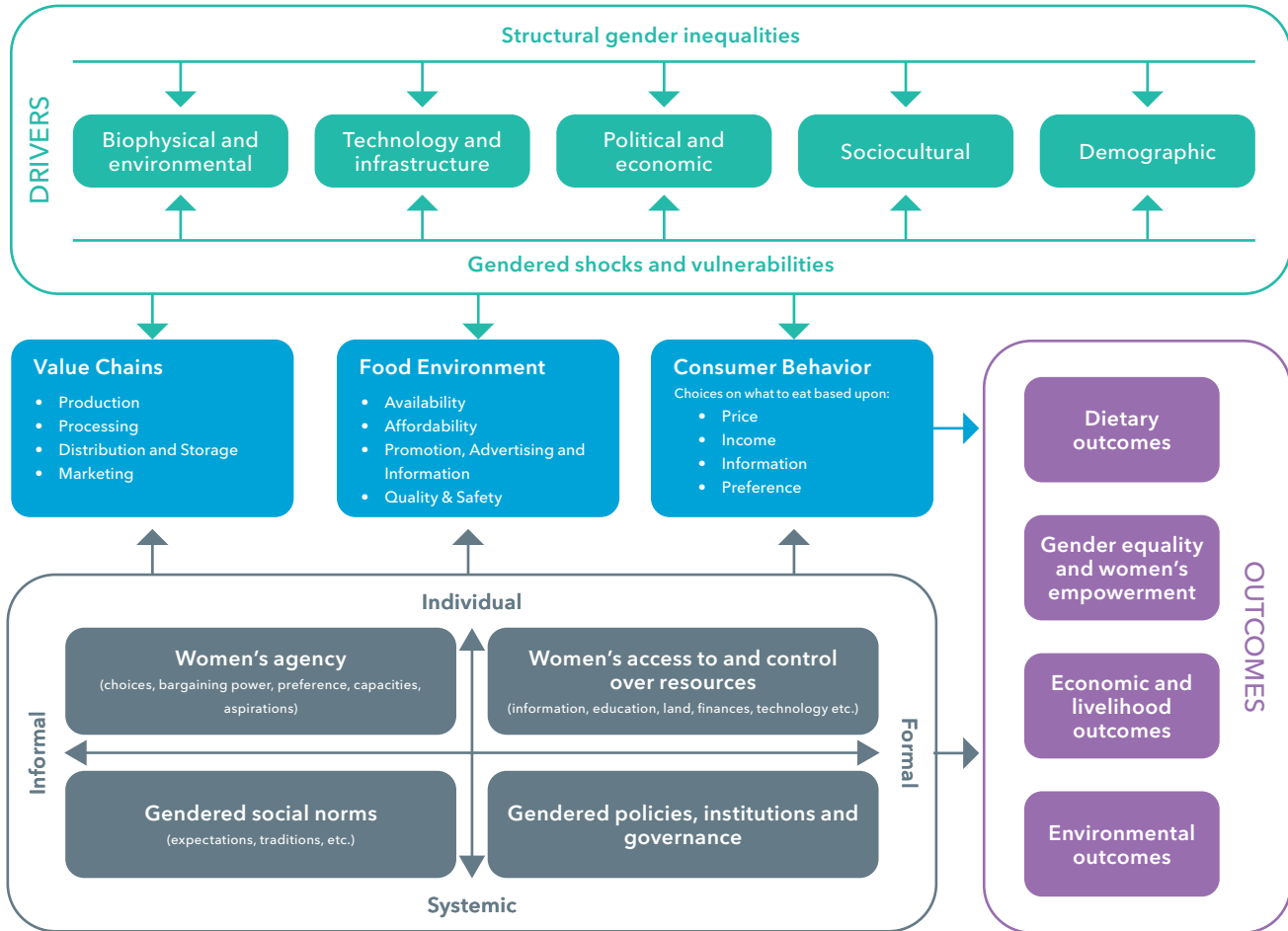
livelihoods; access to paid employment; time for education, leisure, and social activities; and ultimately, their welfare (Seymour et al. 2020).

This chapter draws on existing and new evidence from South Asia to examine women's work within food systems, their roles in the food environment, their work within the household, and factors that influence how food is prepared and allocated. We describe the need to address the multiple barriers and constraints women face, particularly the triple duty of productive, reproductive, and social work, in the formulation of appropriate food systems policies and programs. Finally, we discuss the policy and enabling environment needed to enhance gender equality within South Asian food systems and identify areas for future research and action.

WOMEN'S WORK WITHIN THE AGRIFOOD SYSTEM

Globally, as of 2019, 36 percent of working women and 38 percent of working men were employed in agrifood systems, with substantial variations within and across regions. Agrifood systems are a more important source of livelihoods for women than men in many countries (FAO 2023). This is especially the case in South Asia, where 71 percent of women in the labor force work in agrifood systems versus 47 percent of men. In comparison, in sub-Saharan Africa, 66 percent of working women are in agrifood systems, compared with 60 percent of men. Women's paid and unpaid roles in South Asian agrifood systems – and (lack of) recognition thereof – reflect gendered societal norms. Unlike in sub-Saharan Africa, where women's contribution to the agriculture sector is better recognized, in South Asia women are often invisible and undercounted in agriculture (Shah and Soumya 2022). Despite their extensive involvement in agrifood systems, women are assumed to be confined to the domestic sphere and focused on reproductive and care work. These norms are deep-seated and informed by hierarchical and patriarchal structures that place gendered constraints on

1 According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), agrifood systems comprise the entire range of actors and their interlinked activities that add value in food and nonfood agricultural production and related off-farm activities such as food storage, aggregation, postharvest handling, transportation, processing, distribution, marketing, disposal, and consumption. Food systems, a subset of agrifood systems, comprise all food products derived from crop and livestock production, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, and other sources, such as synthetic biology. For our purposes, we treat these two terms as interchangeable (FAO 2023, 5).

FIGURE 8.1 Framework reflecting gendered food systems

Source: Njuki et al. (2021); adapted from de Brauw (2019).

decision-making and on access to titles for land and water, markets, agricultural extension, and credit, and also shape the conditions under which paid and unpaid labor takes place (Timsina et al. 2023; Gillespie et al 2019).

Within South Asian agrifood systems, women's share of labor has remained stable over time, while men's share has decreased (FAO 2023). Women are also engaged in agrifood system activities that are closely linked to diets. For example, a higher proportion of women are involved in chicken raising and home gardens (Wong et al. 2017; Patalagsa et al. 2015). Despite women's prominence in agrifood

systems, policies and programming often fail to address gender-specific barriers to women's ability to participate in and benefit from this sector. For example, a study found that women working in food processing plants receive less training than men on improving the quality of food and ensuring hygienic practices (Devi and Somokanta 2016). Norms also shape the lens through which women's employment is understood. In India, employers view women as less capable than men of performing both technical and physically demanding tasks and as primarily capable of unskilled labor (Devi and Somokanta 2016). In Afghanistan, even if women participate in

agricultural activities, their participation is viewed as “help” rather than production or an economic contribution, as they are mainly viewed as mothers and caregivers (Tavva et al. 2013).

Women are not equally represented across stages of the value chain and tend to be less present in downstream, higher-paid nodes, such as marketing, when these involve direct interaction with clients, particularly unrelated men. For example, in the Transforming Agrifood Systems in South Asia (TAFSSA) study – a CGIAR Research Initiative that conducted district-representative household surveys of rural areas in 2023, with study sites in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal² – women made up a minority of retailers. In the Bangladesh sites, all the vendors in multi-vendor markets were men, while in India, only 20 percent of retailers were women. In contrast, 57 to 60 percent of retail stores in the two Nepal sites were owned by women. There is also evidence that participation in some nodes of the value chain is more empowering than in others (Bi et al. 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e). One study in Bangladesh suggests that women’s relational roles in value chains matter to their empowerment and well-being, with women in wage worker and entrepreneur households being less empowered than women in farming households (Raghunathan et al. 2021). While entrepreneurship is often viewed as empowering for women, poor women often engage in small businesses with very low returns. Moreover, intersectionalities between gender and identities shaped by cultural norms, especially around caste and class, add complexity to work patterns among women. In South Asia, these intersectionalities affect women’s ability and need to work. Thus, some studies find that in Bangladesh, as in other countries in the region, women in wealthier households are less empowered, reflecting the value placed on social seclusion for women in higher

socioeconomic strata (Raghunathan et al. 2021; Quisumbing, Heckert et al. 2021). These issues point to the need for both policy and other gender-transformative approaches in South Asia that target structural inequalities and social and gender norms to achieve greater gender equality in agrifood systems and a more equitable distribution of their benefits.

WOMEN’S ROLE IN THE FOOD ENVIRONMENT

The food environment is a critical consumer interface within a food system that “encompasses the availability, affordability, convenience, promotion and quality, and sustainability of foods” (Downs et al. 2020). Despite the sparsity of literature, there is evidence of gender inequities across these food environment dimensions (Twyman et al. 2020). The constraints women face to participation in food-environment-related off-farm activities are similar to those they face as producers, including a higher likelihood of being engaged in informal employment and having less access to productive resources and support services (FAO 2023). Through women’s involvement in food purchasing decisions, they do influence their families’ and their own diets and nutrition (Connors et al. 2023; Sariyev et al. 2020), but the prevailing gender dynamics in South Asia also create challenges in women’s interactions with the food environment as consumers. First, food affordability is affected by constraints that limit women’s access to resources, making it difficult for them to afford certain foods. Second, although accessibility is often linked with physical attributes such as wealth, road networks, and distance to markets (Turner et al. 2018), women’s access to food can be constrained by restrictions on their mobility that limit their travel to markets and other public spaces. Therefore, women who have low autonomy regarding their mobility are less likely to participate in acquiring food and in making decisions related to food acquisition. Women’s mobility has been noted to

2 The TAFSSA cross-sectional household survey was conducted in early 2023 in three South Asian countries. The specific country sites were Bangladesh (Rangpur and Rajshahi), India (Nalanda), and Nepal (Banke and Surkhet).

be positively associated with children's nutrition (Sethuraman et al. 2006).

Women and men spend different amounts of time on food procurement and preparation, with men being more responsible for the former and women the latter, which has implications for the "convenience" dimension of the food environment. Although better knowledge and training can improve women's decision-making for her own and her family's nutritional well-being (Kjeldsberg et al. 2018), the numerous paid, unpaid, and care tasks women undertake affect what they buy and prepare, and can lead them to opt for more convenient, easier-to-cook foods (Bailey et al. 2018; Masilamani and Sudaram 2012).

WOMEN'S WORK WITHIN AGRICULTURAL HOUSEHOLDS

New evidence from the TAFSSA agrifood systems assessment surveys in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, shows that, in addition to performing a wide array of agricultural tasks, women are disproportionately responsible for unpaid care work and domestic chores within the household (Gupta et al. 2022). Although the TAFSSA surveys are not nationally representative, the data offer useful insights on gender roles within the agrifood system, particularly for rural households, given that 89 percent of households in the sample were involved in doing agricultural tasks. Gendered social norms and women's agency affect intrahousehold task allocation, as indicated by the lower left-hand box of the gendered food systems framework (Figure 8.1).

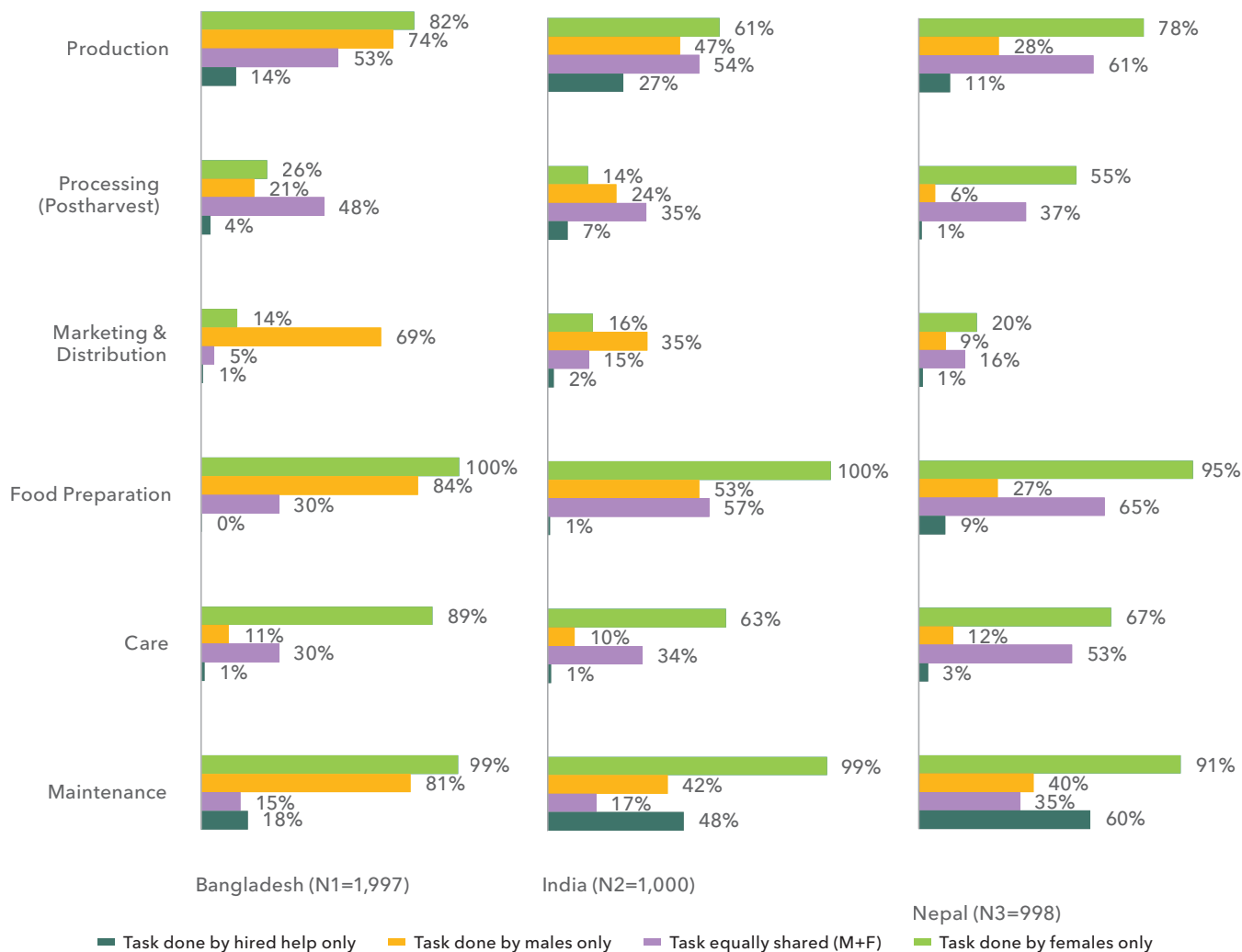
Figure 8.2 compares the distribution of tasks by gender across the agrifood system in the three TAFSSA country sites, for broad task categories: agricultural production, postharvest processing, marketing and distribution, and tasks related to food preparation, care, and maintenance. (Each broad category is an aggregate across specific tasks, for which there may be substantial variation, so the percentages do not sum to 100 percent.) Women perform agricultural production tasks in

all three countries. Among households engaged in agricultural activities, more than four-fifths (82 percent) of Bangladeshi women respondents reported participating in agricultural production tasks, followed by 72 percent of Nepali women, and 61 percent of Indian women. Across all three countries, there is significant sharing of agricultural production tasks between male and female household members undertaking these activities – 56 percent of tasks are shared in Bangladesh, 60 percent in Nepal, and 80 percent in India. Women are less involved in postharvest processing and marketing of agricultural products in all three countries.

In contrast to women's involvement in agriculture-related tasks, men are uniformly less involved in food preparation tasks in all three countries, albeit to varying degrees across study sites. Food preparation tasks are often shared in India (57 percent of households) but less so in Bangladesh (30 percent) and Nepal (27 percent). Care tasks are performed predominantly by women, ranging from 59 percent in Nepal to 89 percent in Bangladesh, although sharing of these tasks between men and women is also common. A large fraction of both women and men report undertaking maintenance tasks. Although labor markets are active, the use of hired help is confined mainly to agricultural production and maintenance tasks, with variation across countries.

Migration of men to cities or other countries to work and send back remittances is common in South Asia, resulting in changes in household structures and task allocation. Although our data do not permit us to directly infer that households without adult males are those with male outmigrants, our analysis of the TAFSSA data enables us to compare task sharing among households with and without adult male members present (Hathi et al. 2021). In our Bangladesh sites, households without adult men present are more likely to rely on hired help for several on-farm tasks (preparing the land, weeding, irrigation, and harvesting), and the female members to perform many of the cultivation tasks and tasks

FIGURE 8.2 Gender distribution of household tasks across Bangladesh, India, and Nepal by task type



Source: Data from TAFSSA agrifood systems assessments.

Note: Percentages refer to the proportion of households and may not sum to 100% due to overlapping task responsibilities.

that involve leaving the homestead (taking produce to market, purchasing food, and obtaining fuel wood).³ Similar patterns are observed in our India sites for households with and without adult men present. In Nepal, where men and women more often share cultivation tasks, women perform many of the

tasks exclusively if adult men are absent, and women and/or hired help are more likely to perform home repairs and maintenance tasks in their absence.

GENDER NORMS AND THE INTRAHOUSEHOLD DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD

Gender norms interact with women’s ability to ensure that resources are mobilized for their own and their family’s nutrition. Although women are most directly

³ The detail by task is not shown here but can be found in the following data notes: Banerjee et al. 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2023e.

engaged in all aspects of care for children under age five, including what is cooked for and fed to the children, women's nutrition knowledge does not always translate into preparing healthy food or nutritionally sound eating behaviors within a household. The actual practice of intrahousehold food allocation is determined not only by women's knowledge but also by their income, bargaining power, and social status (Harris-Fry et al. 2017; Hathi et al. 2021; ILO 2024). In the region, women "eating last" is well-documented (Hathi et al. 2021). Not all household members have an equal opportunity to eat the food acquired; eating patterns that favor men and boys over women and girls are highly prevalent. Women are most vulnerable to inequitable intrahousehold food allocation in food insecure households; however, women are also more disadvantaged in high-caste, wealthier households compared to lower caste, poorer households.

Empowering women is not a straightforward solution to changing intrahousehold food allocation dynamics, although cross-country evidence shows that directing resources to women, rather than men, is more likely to improve household well-being, particularly in relation to health and nutrition (Yoong et al. 2012). In South Asia, a woman investing more in her sons than daughters may be motivated by self-interest rather than altruism, given the prevailing male advantage in labor markets and property rights, women's need for male mediation in the community, and women's dependence on sons in widowhood or old age (Agarwal 1997). Evidence from a nationally representative survey in Bangladesh shows that, while women's empowerment is associated with more diverse diets for adult men and women, adolescent girls have worse diets than adolescent boys in households where women are more empowered (Sraboni and Quisumbing 2018). This reflects the prevailing marriage pattern in which girls are expected to leave the household to marry during adolescence, meaning parents may not invest in them. This phenomenon may jeopardize young women's future nutrition and reproductive health.

SUPPORTIVE POLICIES AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

Transforming agrifood systems toward gender equality and better diets requires a more inclusive approach and enabling mechanisms to reduce gender inequalities in livelihoods, food security, and nutrition outcomes. To recognize the extent and importance of women's work in agrifood systems, this work must be measured and reported. The availability of gender-disaggregated data on agrifood systems has improved in the last few decades, but the extent and coverage remain incomplete. We need data that not only capture who is employed along the value chain but also their workplace conditions and the extent to which the policy environment supports gender-equitable outcomes. Data disaggregated by gender on resilience, reliance on natural resources, and gender-based violence are all critical when using an evidence-based approach to reducing gender inequities in food systems (Forsythe 2023).

Recognition of women's work also includes valuing the time spent in unpaid care work, which is often overlooked. Fifty-six percent of South Asian women cite care obligations as a reason for not being a part of the work force (ILO 2024), particularly while pregnant and caring for young children. Social protection programs can play an important role in this regard. For example, in India, the National Food Security Act, passed in 2013, gave access to maternity benefits to all pregnant women. However, it was not implemented for the first four years. In 2017, a national maternity benefit scheme, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) was announced, but it reduced the value of the transfers and limited them to the "first living child." The PMMVY had its own implementation challenges, and the absence of monitoring data made it hard to assess the program's coverage or effectiveness. Despite good intentions, this effort exemplifies the difficulty in designing and implementing such policies.

To reduce gender inequalities in agrifood systems, one must go beyond recognizing women's work to leveling the playing field. This requires

creating (1) economic opportunities for women that compensate them fairly; (2) equal access for both women and men to resources required for success; and (3) an enabling environment in these spaces to ensure that women are able to fully benefit from the opportunities available, including safe working conditions (Maestre and Thorpe 2016), maternity benefits, social protection for women involved in casual, part-time, or seasonal work (Rola-Rubzen et al. 2023), and reduction of mobility challenges. If instead of focusing on options considered “opportunities for women,” we focus on narrowing the major resource gaps between men and women, we can address most of these issues. Understanding the nature of these gaps is important. For example, given that a large majority of the jobs/economic opportunities in South Asian food systems are in the informal sector, policies that focus on skills and infrastructure rather than labor laws would have more impact. Training can focus on the skills that small entrepreneurs need in competitive markets (such as vegetable vendors in vegetable markets) so that women have the bargaining power to command the same price for their products as men. The huge gender gap in retail outlet ownership revealed by the TAFSSA data show the potential of giving women access to the retail sector, an initial step toward expanding entrepreneurship. Understanding the barriers to women’s participation, including gendered aspects of the food environment and labor market, will be important. Policies that support enabling environments are needed so that women are not confined to low-return nodes of the value chain.

Leveling the playing field is not enough. To ensure that women are empowered to leverage and use their equal access to resources, gender-transformative approaches are needed to create an environment where women can succeed. Taking into account intersectionality when targeting policies and programs is especially critical because even among poor women, important differences exist across ethnic, caste, and religious groups in South Asia that have implications for food procurement, waste, and consumption (Ashik et al. 2022). Given the deeply entrenched

social norms underlying gender disparities in the region, gender-transformative approaches – that is, methods that address structural barriers and constraining gender norms – are required and would include addressing gender-biased norms at institutional, community, and household levels that create and perpetuate power asymmetries. Tackling social and gender norms at all levels requires the engagement of those in power, whether men and influential people within their households (such as mothers-in-law) or others in positions of power. There are successful examples of such gender-transformative approaches in Bangladesh, where community leaders were engaged in ensuring that women receiving microfinance loans retained control over the funds, rather than their husbands (Arnold et al. 2021). Learning from these approaches can help identify the range of possible policies and interventions that can be mobilized to change gender norms in the household, community, and society.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND ACTION

Transforming gender roles in South Asia requires changing deeply rooted practices and norms. Research can inform the design and implementation of policies and programs for gender transformation. Beyond disaggregated data, more intersectional analysis is required to understand gendered participation across different nodes of value chains (Stoian et al. 2018) and to evaluate trade-offs entailed by interventions that may lead to both empowering and disempowering outcomes (for example, participation in value chains may increase while caretaking tasks or wages remain the same, thus increasing women’s workloads).

Another important step is to consider the role of private industry, especially multinational and global companies, and examine the commercial determinants of gender inequities in the food system that stem from private companies. These companies influence the standard for working conditions and set targets for both producers and suppliers, which

do not always consider gender inequities. There is a role for policy action that targets such companies to support gender-sensitive workplace policies for ensuring safety and improving working conditions (Pyburn et al. 2021; Sidanius et al. 2018).

Promising topics for future research include:

Increasing men’s engagement in care work.

Several interventions in South Asia have used materials such as Helen Keller International’s Nurturing Connections curriculum to engage men and influential family and community members in supporting women in their productive and reproductive roles (Quisumbing, Ahmed, et al. 2021). Approaches such as the Gender Action Learning System have been used to encourage the (re)distribution of care work within the household; discussion with program staff in an intervention in Nepal indicated that men willingly took on additional reproductive work and shared women’s workload (Quisumbing et al. 2023).

Reducing drudgery. Technological development and provision of infrastructure that reduces drudgery, particularly in tasks performed by women, needs to continue. Beyond technology development, implementors must look toward making tools affordable, particularly for low-income women who cannot afford to purchase the technology, such as by promoting rental markets or encouraging group ownership.

Changing attitudes of the young through early in-school curricula. Community interventions aimed at targeting groups at the household level to change collective gender norms have shown promise. For example, in Nepal, newly married women, their husbands, and their mothers-in-law were engaged in a weekly group discussion and activity groups for four months as an approach to change collective gender norms around pregnancy. Improved knowledge on nutrition during preconception and pregnancy and a lower proportion of women eating last

was noted following the intervention (Diamond-Smith et al. 2022). Community conversations among adolescent boys and girls are already being used in attempts to change mindsets among youth. For example, a randomized controlled trial examining a classroom-based gender equality curriculum on gender attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors taught to adolescents in Haryana found a positive impact on gender-equitable behavior and progressive attitudes toward gender equality (Dhar et al. 2022). However, ideas about what is and is not appropriate for women and men to do are set in childhood. Early in-school curricula and modeling by teachers and other adults can be used to encourage girls and boys to share tasks and to move beyond traditional gender roles.

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