



INITIATIVE ON
Gender Equality

Gender norms in agrifood systems affect women's economic resilience to climate change

The ongoing and increasingly devastating climate crisis is making agri-food systems across the globe more vulnerable than ever. Women are especially at risk of losing their livelihoods and suffering from lack of food and shelter and from lack of opportunities to improve their livelihoods more generally. To reduce vulnerability to climate crises, it is important that women achieve economic resilience. Restrictive structures and processes that are largely mediated by discriminatory gender norms seem to impede women from achieving economic resilience.

- Gender norms denote what approved conduct is for women and men in a particular context. Gender norms shape human interactions across spheres of influence ranging from the household to the community and to institutional and national levels.
- Resilience refers to “the ability to draw upon a set of capacities to deal with shocks and stressors before, during and after a disturbance in a way that maintains or improves wellbeing outcomes, such as food security or adequate nutrition” (Bryan et al., 2023:1).

In this brief, we discuss the findings from a synthesis study that collated evidence on how gender norms facilitate or hamper women's abilities to achieve economic resilience in the face of the climate crisis. The study identified 11 gender norms operating in agrifood production systems, which affect women's ability to achieve economic resilience. A further four gender norms were identified that affect women's ability to consume and to provision healthy and sufficient food to their families. This brief further synthesizes these norms to create a list of eight cross-cutting gender norms that apply across the entire food production to the consumption food system. These eight gender norms appear to be particularly relevant to women's ability to become economically resilient in the face of climate change.

Gender Norm 1. Men are the main income earner

Men are schooled from birth on the gender norm that they should be the main breadwinners. Men's standing in their households and in their communities is often contingent on their performance in terms of income earning. When women begin to earn the same, or more, than men, this can pose a significant challenge to this norm. Men may face community-level sanctions, including ridicule and exclusion. Economically successful women may face name-calling, the break-up of their marriages, and gender-based violence. Women also tend to receive less recognition and appreciation in their households and communities, as compared to men, when they are successful in generating income since their performance in other domains is considered more important.

The gender norm that men are primarily responsible for income generation means that, broadly speaking, interventions targeting crops or livestock (and associated technologies) are likely to benefit men over time, even if the crop is normatively controlled by women prior to the intervention, and even if the intervention is targeted to women. The normative framing associating small and less lucrative agrifood systems with women, and larger more lucrative agrifood systems with men, is

frequently steered and deepened by other food actors in the organizational spheres of influence, such as private sector partners, the rural advisory services, development partners and policymakers. Widely held assumptions that men are primary farmers, decision-makers, and the holders of household bank accounts affect the ways in which the macro-environment is structured, for example, around land legislation, how producer organizations are constituted and legally recognized, and the forms of collateral that formal financial institutions expect. This gender-based normative framing in the organisational sphere has important implications for the kind of services and support offered to women and men agrifood system actors in terms of targeting, extension advice, business advice, finance, knowledge development around climate mitigation and adaptation, and so forth. One consequence of the systemic gender biases in agrifood systems is that young women frequently have little interest in engaging in farming as a business.

Gender Norm 2. Women are responsible for care tasks

Women have less time to undertake income-generation activities because norms often dictate that they prepare food and engage in care tasks, whether looking after children, older people, or ill people. Women also take on housework. Conversely, the norm that men should not conduct unpaid household and care work is widely held.

This norm affects women in different ways across their lives. Girls typically spend much time learning and sharing tasks with their mothers. Following marriage (or informal family formation), which can occur in some communities at a very young age, girls become mothers and find themselves caring for children. The time required frequently negatively influences their abilities to earn an income through developing a business, or other forms of paid work. It is only in middle age that many women find they have more time to spend on income generation and achieve economic resilience. They may be assisted directly by their children or receive remittances when their children secure work elsewhere. At all stages of their life, particularly in patrilineal systems, women are at risk of losing the assets they have built upon becoming divorced, separated, or widowed. This frequently puts women, especially mothers of young children, in precarious situations in which they have few assets and limited opportunity to earn an income, yet have to provide for their children.



Vegetable market, Myanmar (Cathy Rozel Farnworth)



Farmer with her children and calf, Uganda (Anne M. Rietveld)

Gender Norm 3. Men are the primary decision-makers in the household

Men dominate intra-household decision-making, though in differing degrees depending on household typologies, and the degree of negotiation between household members. In unitary households, the senior man and woman typically negotiate primarily with each other. In extended families, the senior man may make decisions on behalf of - or with - their spouse(s), as well as junior women and men. Individual agency and different permutations around jointness affect the degree of dominance by the senior man in the household. In terms of setting development outcomes for the household, men's priorities do not necessarily concur with women's priorities, leading to tensions.

In households where men as lead decision-makers are absent, single women, divorced women, and widows often experience strengthened decision-making powers due to their status as head of household. This can help them improve their economic resilience. Their power to decide, though, is mediated by the ways in which women access and gain control over assets and can tap into the informal and formal networks that men access. In situations where married men out-migrate, their wives' decision-making power is affected by broader intra-household relationships, including relationships with other women in the household and, in particular, with mothers-in-law.

Gender Norm 4. Women and men eat differently

Although women typically prepare food, gender-based norms grant men a degree of control over food decisions. These norms frequently prioritize providing food to men rather than women, and children may come second to adult men. Men may thus eat more and eat more healthy

foods. Men are also more likely to eat out and consume animal-source foods. In some cases, men exert gender-based violence when they perceive women have not prepared sufficient, and sufficiently tasty, food at the desired time. These practices have the potential to harm the health of women, their unborn and breastfed children, and children's health more broadly.

Gender Norm 5. Men control land and other productive resources and assets

Men continue to control significant productive assets, including land. Women often access land through their relationships with men, as well as through other relatives. However, increasing pressure on land due to climate change, land fragmentation, and population growth is challenging men's ability to successfully access sufficient land for themselves. Women are consequently finding their access to land and maintaining their rights to its production increasingly threatened as men prioritize their own production.

Women who own land tend to have more decision-making autonomy around how to farm their land, which technologies to adopt, and receive a greater share of the benefits than women who work on their spouse's land. Furthermore, women landowners are more likely to be targeted by external actors for information dissemination on climate change, and for training in new technologies. This relates to a gender norm held by many organisational actors that landowners are more likely to be decision-makers. Despite the benefits of holding land title, women sometimes decline their rights to land under legislation conferring land rights to women. Relinquishing control over land to significant men in their lives may signify that women lack the means to farm independently. Land does not farm itself – resources of all kinds, including labour, machinery, finance, seeds, knowledge networks, and so on, are required. Since gender norms continue to award men preferential access to these resources in many locations, women may prefer to cultivate good relationships with men to access land and associated resources rather than endanger them by claiming land rights.

In some regions, communal land systems developed over many generations afford women specific rights and entitlements with complex systems that distribute common and individualized rights. Yet interventions in some systems aiming to privatize them for use as plantations are instituting the norm that men are household heads with unitary decision-making power. Men rather than women

are compensated for land taken, and complex rights that may have afforded women cultivation and harvesting rights are removed. These practices are not only reducing women's economic resilience, but they are also destroying women's and men's ecological knowledge.

Gender Norm 6. Men out-migrate

Though women out-migrate in some regions, men dominate outmigration in many locations. This gender norm fuses with the norm that men are breadwinners. Conversely, the widely held gender norm that women are responsible for household and care work restrains women – particularly women with young children – from seeking off-farm income generation opportunities.

Increasingly, men's outmigration is a symptom of climate change and simultaneously a means of adaptation to climate change challenges. In some cases, men's remittances are central to keeping the farm, and their families, afloat. Nevertheless, when men are absent, the persistence of gender norms around the gender division of labour can challenge women's abilities to ensure the farm or agri-business is economically viable. In some



Street cafe, Myanmar (Cathy Rozel Farnworth)

situations, gender norms are changing to accommodate men's absence. However, women may find themselves increasingly time burdened as they take on work previously ascribed to men as well as household work, including food procurement and preparation, women's traditional work in the fields and in processing, and their own agri-business. This can make the adoption of climate-smart packages harder because women need time to become involved, get trained, and apply the new technologies.

Furthermore, the persistence of the gender norm highlighting the primacy of men's decision-making powers, even in their absence, presents women with further challenges. Farming is a science contingent upon just-in-time decision-making. When men make decisions at a distance, it can be hard for women to make potentially more pertinent decisions about which technologies to adopt and how to respond to risk effectively. Importantly, though, there is evidence that, when men are absent, some women experience a significant increase in the agency in relation to decision-making over how to deploy their income and find themselves able to grow their businesses. They become more mobile, handle larger sums of money, develop customer networks, and become formally banked.

Gender Norm 7. Organisational partners do not recognize women as significant food system actors

Men are often constructed as the primary generators, holders, users, and transmitters of agrifood knowledge and innovation within communities and by external actors. Organisational partners are more likely to target men than women for knowledge development around climate change adaptation and mitigation. These organisational biases are reinforced by gender norms operating in the household and community sphere of influence that limit women's abilities to participate effectively in meetings; they restrict women from asking questions or debar them from "speaking loudly."

More broadly, there appears to be a significant lack of data and knowledge at scale about women - what they do and earn, what they need to become more economically resilient - among actors operating in the organisational spheres of influence. Agrifood development programs thus continue to prioritize crops and resource-intensive growing arrangements directed at men. These often foster monocropping and broader agricultural arrangements that can inhibit adaptation to climate change, or which only the wealthier in the community can adopt.



Woman with traditional yogurt gourd, Kenya (Anne M. Rietveld)

Gender Norm 8. Organizational partners target only women for nutritional interventions

External institutions tend to target only women for nutrition interventions. This institutional focus can lead to disjuncture and conflict within the household. Food sourcing and preparation and ensuring nutritious meals are widely considered to be a woman's responsibility. Yet these tasks can be difficult to achieve because gender norms prescribe that men make key decisions over household budget allocations, including how much money is to be spent on food. In addition, men frequently control which food is to be bought, and they may also decide whether nutritious foods produced by the household, such as dairy and eggs, as well as fruit and vegetables, are to be sold or retained for household consumption. Training women on their own can result in backlashes as men's knowledge and decision-making powers are challenged. Nevertheless, targeting men for nutrition training needs to be done with care. The kitchen for women frequently represents the only space they have as their own.



Fish market, Myanmar (Cathy Rozel Farnworth)

Gender norms fuse and intermesh

Overall, the eight cross-cutting gender norms illustrate how gender norms perpetuate inequities and challenge women's abilities to become economically resilient in the face of climate change. Understanding better how gender norms affect women's ability to build economic resilience opens up opportunities for targeted gender-transformative development interventions.

For clarity, the gender norms described have been presented separately. However, in reality they intermesh and systemically reinforce each other. There can be discrepancies between how gender norms are enacted in the community and how they are understood by macro-environmental and organisational actors working with these communities. Interventions and policy should pay greater attention to the realities of how gender norms are enacted in communities and how dynamics might vary over time and space, and with intersectional identities.

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