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Gender integration in food-system policies: an adapted policy assessment framework

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Generating Evidence and New Directions for Equitable Results (GENDER) is CGIAR's impact platform designed to put equality and inclusion at the forefront of global agricultural research for development. The Platform is transforming the way gender research is done, both within and beyond CGIAR, to kick-start a process of genuine change toward greater gender equality and better lives for smallholder farmers everywhere. gender.cgiar.org

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Abstract

Food systems are complex and include multifaceted processes in food production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and post-consumption disposal of food products. Ensuring gender equality within food systems is important because they connect various domains, such as health and nutrition, climate change, environment, fisheries, livestock and agriculture. This interconnectedness within food systems leads to significant implications for human health, including nutrition and diets, as well as climate and environment-related indicators. Interactions of gender within these domains complicate the equitable derivation and distribution of benefits from agricultural activities by women and men. Therefore, policies governing food systems in low- and middle-income countries need to integrate gender-responsive approaches into their design, implementation and monitoring, recognizing the multifaceted processes of food systems and how gender interacts with these processes. The existing tools and frameworks that assess gender integration within policies about food systems do not extend beyond the scope of agricultural production into other interacting domains. This working paper addresses this gap by developing an enhanced framework for evaluating gender integration in policy documents within and beyond agriculture. The thematic reach of this framework includes agriculture, livestock, fisheries, climate change, health and nutrition, environment, and natural resource management. By leveraging a gender and food-systems framework that deconstructs food-systems functions, and how they impact women and men differently, the framework offers structured guidance for incorporating gender-related considerations within policy documents relating to food systems. The framework also has implications for participatory policy processes—design, implementation and monitoring—that aim to foster gender-equitable benefits from food-systems interventions.

Keywords: *gender analysis, gender equality, agrifood systems, policy analysis*

1. Introduction

1.1 Gender dynamics in food systems

Food systems are complex because they cover the entire cycle of food production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and post-consumption disposal. Interconnected within food systems are various actors, activities, resources and the environments that help to meet the food requirements within a society. Food systems also interact extensively with other key systems such as energy, trade and health systems (FAO 2018). To achieve the desired outcomes of sustainable global development, managing the interconnection of food-system components, such as agricultural production and food value chains with diets, human health, livelihoods and agroecosystems, requires harmonization (Webb et al. 2021; Fanzo et al. 2021). Recognizing potential synergies and trade-offs within food systems, food security and nutrition, livelihoods and environmental sustainability—has led to an increasing call for a more holistic approaches to policymaking (OECD 2021). Sustainability of the food system, which lies at the heart of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), requires food security and nutrition be delivered so that the economic, social and environmental bases are preserved for future generations (Valentini et al. 2019; Sibanda and Mwamakamba 2021).

Ensuring gender equality within food systems is imperative because gender disparities often disadvantage women, creating obstacles for them to build resilient livelihoods and achieve food and nutrition security (FAO 2023; Maraka 2021). These inequalities lead to inefficiencies and productivity gaps, affecting overall system performance (Singbo et al. 2021). Literature highlights that women in sub-Saharan Africa bear a heavy burden of both productive and reproductive tasks, crucial for household welfare (Ngwa 2024; Njuki et al. 2016, 2021). Women often have limited decision-making power, despite active engagement in off-farm and on-farm activities. This negatively impacts their access to production capital, participation in markets and overall control over income and nutrition decisions within their households (UN Women 2019). These gender disparities underscore the need for targeted policy interventions to empower women and enhance their agency. Appropriate policy interventions will allow or facilitate women to fully participate and benefit from food systems, leading to sustainable and equitable outcomes in agricultural and household contexts.

This working paper investigates the nexus between gender and food-system policies and the interactions within food-system domains beyond agriculture, including climate, health and nutrition, the environment and natural resource management. This paper adapts a standardized analytical framework for comprehensively evaluating the gender sensitivity of policies that apply to the broader food system. While this evaluation provides evidence about the status of gender integration in existing policy documents, this evidence should be a starting point for initiating validation discussions with a wider range of stakeholders as part of a broader policy process.

2. Gender equality, policy and food systems

2.1 Gender inequality in food systems

According to the 2023 *Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* by FAO, gender inequalities in agriculture persist, with women farmers particularly vulnerable to hunger, especially during crises (FAO 2023). Women and girls make up nearly half of the agricultural workforce in low- and- middle-income countries. Structural inequalities, both formal and informal, limit women's access to agricultural and economic resources, services, information and educational opportunities. These inequalities arise because women and men often have distinct roles and responsibilities within food systems and interact differently with various components of these systems, whether as farmers, processors, wageworkers, traders or consumers (Bryan et al. 2023), creating a cause and outcome of unsustainable and unjust food systems (Bryan et al. 2024; Njuki et al. 2021; UN Women 2019).

Other studies highlight the link between severe food insecurity and higher levels of gender inequality (FAO 2023; Botreau and Cohen 2020). The 2023 *Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (FAO 2023) reveals that, globally, the food insecurity gap between women and men widened from 1.7 percentage points in 2019 to 4.3 percentage points in 2021. During this period, gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence and abuse against women and girls, also increased, alongside a growing care burden disproportionately shouldered by women.

Despite women's significant roles in agricultural food systems and household food and nutrition security, their contributions are often undervalued, unpaid and overlooked. These studies also reveal that women have unequal access to, and, in some cases, unequal rights to, important resources such as land, water, pasture, seeds, fertilizers, chemical inputs, technology, information, and extension and advisory services. This inequality reduces women's potential to be productive in food production, become empowered to make strategic decisions, act on those decisions and achieve their goals (Doss 2018; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2019; Mulema and Damtew 2016; Madzorera and Fawzi 2020; Njuki et al. 2016, 2021; Ngwa 2024). Gender inequality also places women and girls at greater risk of gender-based violence, human trafficking, early and forced marriage and other human rights violations (Dutta and Das 2024).

According to Njuki et al. 2021, the prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) is a systemic barrier to women's empowerment in food systems. In the context of women's roles in agricultural production and water resource management, environmental degradation of soil, water and other natural resources, GBV has a direct, negative impact on the livelihoods and nutrition security of women and their families. Patriarchal social norms perpetuate gender inequality by reinforcing unequal power dynamics and rigid gender roles, including unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, land rights disparities, limited access to productive resources, employment insecurity, exclusion from decision-making and political representation, and restrictions on women's mobility and access to transportation (Iruonagbe 2009; Farnworth et al. 2020; UN Women 2019; Jost et al. 2016; De Pinto et al. 2020). Patriarchal social norms result in disproportionate disadvantages for women and girls, potentially impacting their ability to mitigate risks and recover from shocks and stressors (Gutierrez-Montes et al. 2020; Njuki et al. 2021).

Growing evidence across various agricultural subsectors shows that addressing gender concerns and supporting women's empowerment in policies and programs contributes to

more sustainable, productive and equitable food systems. Research shows that integrating gender concerns and women's empowerment into environmental conservation leads to improved ecological functions and better governance, characterized by social inclusion, equitable regulation enforcement, accountability, transparency, rights protection and citizen participation (Agarwal 2009; Leisher et al. 2016). In agriculture, addressing gender issues and empowering women enhances knowledge, awareness and accountability, helping to tackle gender inequality in food-systems programs and policies. This approach unlocks the full potential of equitable and inclusive agricultural development outcomes for present and future generations (Howland et al. 2021; Grépin et al. 2013; World Bank 2011).

Furthermore, integrating gender-equality objectives into livestock policies improves overall effectiveness in increasing production, income generation, food security, nutrition and public health protection (Njuki and Miller 2019). Key factors such as livestock ownership, production diversity, market access and women's empowerment play crucial roles in influencing household consumption and nutrition. These factors, in turn, directly impact the livelihoods of individuals within food systems (Sibhatu et al. 2015; Mulmi et al. 2016). Besides, increasing resources controlled by women improve fisheries, livestock and overall agricultural productivity, as well as family health and nutrition (Quisumbing 2010). Women having access to various assets and resources such as engaging as stewards for key fishery resources is documented to improve the enforcement of regulations of nearshore ecosystems (Clabots 2013). Increasing women's access to improved fish processing technologies reduces product loss and increases product value, allowing fishing families to realize the same income while catching fewer fish (FAO 2016).

In contrast, there is a significant dearth of literature exploring the extent gender perspectives are integrated within national food-system policies beyond agriculture, including climate, health and nutrition, the environment and natural resource management. Similarly, there is lack of evidence on how the failure of governments and other entities to address gender dynamics and the complexities of food systems might be limiting the potential benefits accruable to food-system interventions. Incorporating gender dynamics into the development of national and sectoral policies, legislation, programs and institutions will support the implementation of gender-responsive approaches in all these domains.

2.2 Gender integration in food-system policies

Gender integration in food-system policies involves strategies that consider gender norms and address gender-based inequalities throughout program planning, assessment, design, implementation and monitoring. This approach is integral to achieving national development goals and addressing the specific challenges faced by women, men and individuals of all gender identities within food systems (Njuki et al. 2013; Catacutan and Naz 2015). Gender integration is often used interchangeably with gender mainstreaming, which the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) defines as the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action in all areas, including policies and programs (UN-ECOSOC 1997). Unlike simply adding a "woman's component" or a "gender-equality component" to existing activities, gender integration requires deep consideration of the experiences, needs and interests of both women and men in social, political and economic development agendas (ILO 2022). In the context of food systems, the goal is to transform unequal structures for more equitable and just food-systems outcomes for both women and men.

Globally, food-system policies shape food choices by influencing food availability, accessibility, affordability and acceptability (Naz and Granet 2024). Food-system policies also play a crucial role in advancing gender equality by promoting equal access to opportunities, resources, and rights for women, men, and individuals of all gender identities (Hervías Parejo and Radulović 2023). Research has shown that integrating gender into policy decisions not only raises awareness of gender disparities but also fosters improvements in food security, agricultural development and the empowerment of both women and men (Drucza et al. 2020; Maraka 2021).

Various voluntary guidelines and binding commitments relevant to food systems provide policy frameworks that offer guidance aimed at promoting gender equality based on best practices, lessons learned, gender mainstreaming, transformative interventions and innovative solutions. These guidelines and commitments include the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) (UN Women 2015), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) tool for gender-sensitive agriculture and rural development policy and program formulation (FAO 2013), Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the Context of Food Security and Nutrition (FAO 2022a), the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) Voluntary Guidelines on Food Systems and Nutrition (FAO 2021), the 2016–2025 UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (WHO 2016), the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (FAO 2022b), the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (FAO 2015) and Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems (FAO 2014).

However, while these frameworks emphasize the need to integrate gender directly into policies, programs and strategies that govern various food-system domains, challenges persist in fully addressing the complex interactions and roles of women, men, girls, and boys, and the barriers women face due to unequal access to assets and resources, limited agency, and discriminatory gender norms (FAO 2023; IGWG 2017). *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems* (FAO 2023) noted that in low-income countries, most of the agricultural and rural development policy documents acknowledge women's roles and challenges, but few explicitly address gender equality or women's rights, and even fewer encourage women's participation in the policy cycle. Similarly, a study by Acosta et al. (forthcoming) revealed that while 76 percent of national agricultural policies from 83 countries, covering low-, lower-middle- and upper-middle-income economies acknowledge women's roles and challenges in agriculture, only 28 percent have explicit objectives and specific measures to promote gender equality and or women's empowerment.

In Africa, the integration of gender in food-system-related policies reflects a growing recognition of women's roles in food security, nutrition and agriculture. While many countries have adopted gender-sensitive policies, gaps remain, particularly in tackling the structural barriers that limit women's participation in food systems. For instance, FAO (2023) reports highlighted that although most agricultural policies acknowledge women's roles, few provide specific measures to promote gender equality or women's empowerment. Similarly, Bryan et al. (2023) note that the level of gender integration in the design and implementation of policies, investments and interventions interacts with gender inequalities in decision-making and leadership roles climate risks, further shaping differentiated outcomes for women and men.

Sub-Saharan African countries have made notable progress in recognizing the importance of women's leadership and participation in addressing food-system challenges. These countries have made significant strides toward integrating gender into their climate policies, as evidenced by the inclusion of gender-responsive actions in updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement. As of August 2023, 40 out of 41 African countries that submitted NDCs have incorporated gender considerations, with many emphasizing gender-responsive climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies (UNDP 2023). Of the African countries that submitted NDCs, 25 countries have incorporated gender-responsive actions related to climate change adaptation, while 12 countries have included gender-responsive actions related to mitigation. Furthermore, nations such as Nigeria and Malawi have updated their national policies and institutional frameworks to ensure gender-responsive climate action, with Nigeria revising its National Gender Policy and adopting a National Action Plan on Gender and Climate Change (UN Women 2022).

2.2.1 Types of food system–related policy documents

Categorizing policies governing food systems based on the extent they integrate gender considerations is crucial for identifying areas for improving and advocating for more gender-transformative approaches that create more just and equitable food-system outcomes. For classifying policies and programs, various established frameworks such as those developed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and USAID’s Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG), FAO and other organizations have a continuum of approaches—ranging from exploitative to transformative—to gender integration in policies. Based on these frameworks, Table 1 describes the categories of gender integration.

While Table 1 describes seven categories of gender integration, for the purposes of this working paper, we adapted categories from the Gender in Agricultural Policies Assessment (GAPo) tool (FAO 2016), and the Gumucio and Rueda (2015) framework to settle on four levels of gender integration: gender-blind, gender-neutral, gender-accommodative and gender-transformative. This decision reflects the need to maintain conceptual rigor, which avoids overlaps in meaning between categories such as gender-sensitive and gender-responsive that may share similar characteristics, or where an organization interchangeably uses terms such as gender-neutral and gender-blind.

We discuss the adapted policy assessment framework in section 4, showing how refining the four levels of integration allows for a clearer classification and ensures consistency in assessing the extent of gender integration across policy documents.

Table 1. Levels of integration continuum

Category of gender integration	Description
Gender-exploitative	Policies or programs that intentionally or unintentionally reinforce harmful gender norms, stereotypes or inequalities. These policies exacerbate discrimination and violate the development principle of “do no harm” (IGWG 2017).
Gender-blind	Policies designed and implemented without accounting for gender dynamics, assuming a one-size-fits-all approach. They overlook culturally defined roles, responsibilities and power differentials, potentially perpetuating discrimination and existing inequalities (Breakthrough Action 2018).
Gender-neutral	Approaches that aim for fairness by treating everyone the same, irrespective of gender. While they seek to prevent discrimination, they fail to address the distinct needs and challenges of different genders, often resulting in unintended inequities (IDRC 2023).
Gender-sensitive	Policies that recognize and account for gender differences and power dynamics in their rationale and framework. However, they may lack consistent application of a gender lens across all stages of policy design and implementation (IGWG 2017).
Gender-responsive	Policies that integrate gender considerations into their design and take specific actions to reduce gender inequalities. However, they do not address the root causes of structural gender power imbalances, limiting their transformative potential (UNESCWA n.d.).
Gender-accommodative	A subset of gender-responsive policies that address gender-specific needs and challenges but operate within existing norms and power structures. They promote gender equality but do not challenge or transform the underlying systems that perpetuate inequalities (IRI and WDN 2020).
Gender-transformative	Policies designed to challenge and change discriminatory social norms, unequal power structures, and harmful cultural practices. These approaches aim to create systemic and lasting change by addressing the root causes of gender disparities (IDRC 2023; FAO, IFAD and WFP 2020; Johns Hopkins University Affiliate 2020; Hillenbrand 2015).

2.2.2 Conceptual framework on gendered food systems and food-system policies

This working paper builds on Njuki et al.'s (2021) framework, expanding it into a broader analytical tool for evaluating gender integration across sectors within food systems, beyond agricultural policies. The adapted framework maps the extent of gender integration within policies related to the environment, climate change, health and nutrition, agriculture, fisheries and livestock. [Figure 1](#) shows the conceptual framework, highlighting the influence of policies across these interconnected food-system areas and their essential role in promoting sustainable food systems that support food security, improved livelihoods, healthy diets, gender-responsive environmental outcomes, gender equality and women's empowerment.

This framework and other research findings highlight how gender inequalities, climate-related shocks and stresses, as well as vulnerabilities to health pandemics and violent conflicts, stemming from unequal access to assets, limit agency for women and discriminatory gender norms affect agricultural, livestock and fisheries production, as well as nutrition and health outcomes. These disparities influence how women and men experience and respond to various drivers within food systems (Sraboni and Quisumbing 2018; Malapit and Quisumbing 2015). It is therefore essential to integrate gender considerations into formal and informal food-system policies and regulations governing agriculture, fisheries, livestock, environment, climate change, nutrition and health. This integration helps to combat gender-based discrimination and can lead to improved outcomes in food systems, such as healthier diets, improved livelihoods, gender equality, women's empowerment and consideration of gendered environmental impacts (Njuki et al. 2021).

Policies facilitating inclusivity in food systems must align with prevailing gender and social norms, recognize their contextual and cultural nuances and acknowledge their profound influence on women's empowerment (Eissler et al. 2020; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2019; Bryan and Garner 2020). For instance, integrating gender-equality goals in livestock and fisheries policies may result in enhanced outcomes such as increased production and income, improved food and nutrition security and enhanced public health (Njuki and Miller 2019). Including gender considerations in health and nutrition policies can enhance the health of women and children and their active participation in decision-making and policy processes. These outcomes positively impact nutritional behaviors and maternal and child health, as well as empowerment outcomes (Adu and Owusu 2023; Weerasekara et al. 2020). Including guidelines that address the roles of both women and men in delivering and benefiting from nutrition services, with specific measures that cater to their unique nutritional needs, can accelerate family health outcomes and empower women (Carlson et al. 2015; Galvin et al. 2023). However, focusing solely on women's reproductive roles in providing nutrition may unintentionally reinforce gender biases and the stereotype that only women should be responsible for care work. Instead, promoting shared responsibility in nutrition and caregiving can help to reduce gender bias and support a more equitable division of care (Ketema et al. 2024).

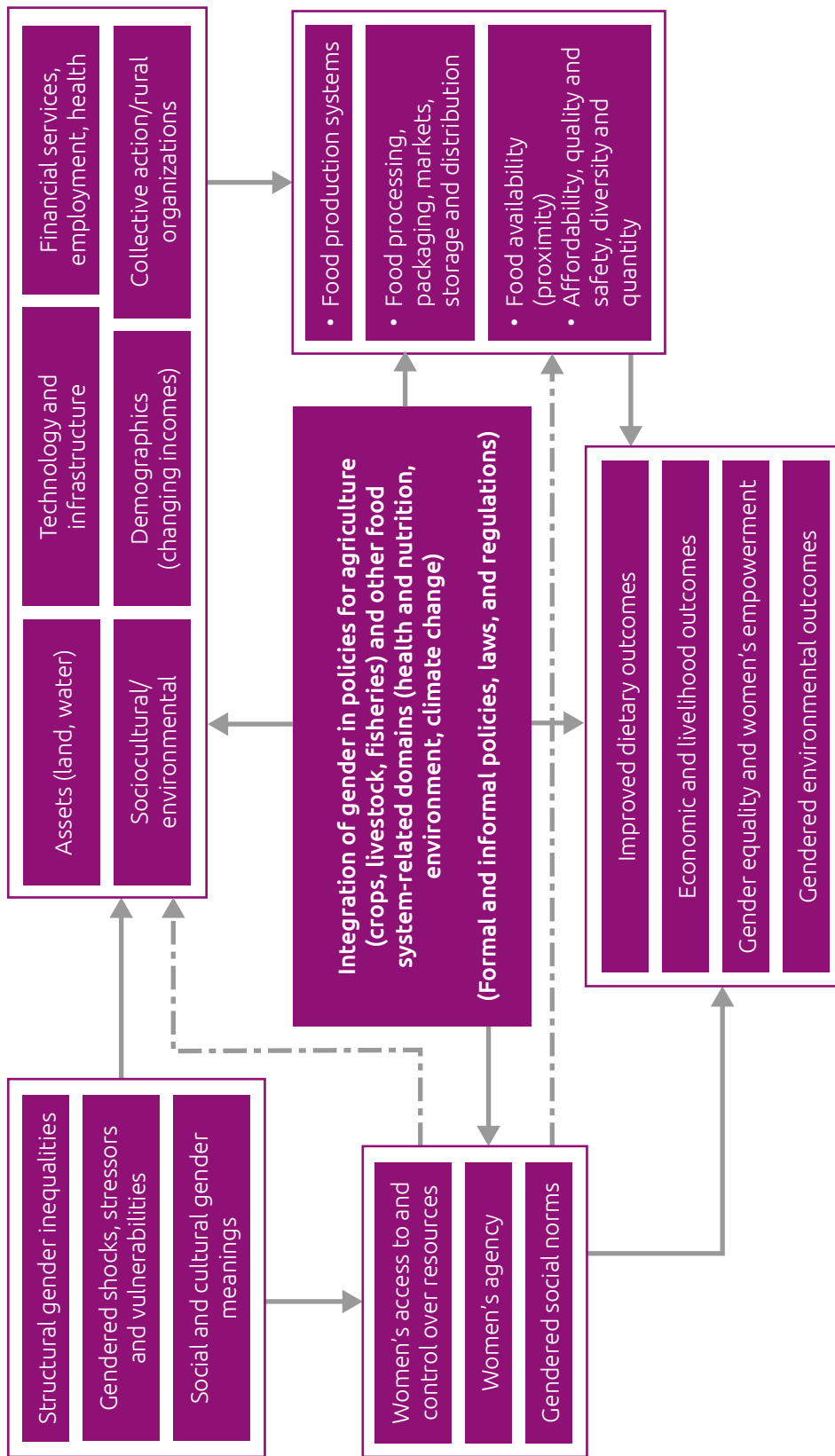


Figure 1. Conceptual framework on gendered food systems and food-system policies

Source: Adapted from Njuki et al. 2021

2.2.3 Challenges to gender integration in food-system policies

While there is progress in integrating gender into food-system policies in some countries, evidence suggests that the performance of the policies is mixed. National governments recognize they should embed gender perspectives within development programs and policies and make the investments necessary to implement those policies. However, the outcomes fall below expectations. Of the 47 countries that participated in the 2017 Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme's biennial review, only eight were on track to achieve their gender targets by 2019 (African Union Commission—Department for Rural Economy and Agriculture (AUC-DREA) and New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) 2019). AUC-DREA and NEPAD (2019) identified several key challenges including limited integration of gender perspectives into national policies, programs and action plans; weak and under-resourced gender institutions, poor budgeting and limited enforcement at local and national levels; limited capacity of gender focal persons; and weak data management and monitoring systems.

Studies highlight structural gaps and challenges for gender integration in current policy planning processes and recommend ways to implement outcome-oriented, gender-focused activities (Gumucio and Rueda 2015; Aura et al. 2017). Major gaps in policy planning and implementation include the lack of institutional and staff capacity and budgetary resources allocated to support gender integration (Howland et al. 2021; Nunan et al. 2012; Ampaire et al. 2017; Bryan et al. 2017; Njuki et al. 2016).

In East Africa, budgetary allocations for gender integration are not completely embraced by governments in Tanzania and Uganda, resulting in "gender-blind" policies and a lack of gender sensitization at the governmental level (Ampaire et al. 2017). Ampaire et al. (2017) reported minimal engagement with local communities and limited communication with subnational governments during the initial stages of policy formulation in Uganda. Ineffective decentralization of gender budget allocation at the local governance levels is also reported to result in political interference and dysfunctional implementation structures (Ampaire et al. 2017).

Compared to the national level, the gender budget allocation at the local level in Tanzania and Uganda is very low and does not correspond to the estimated national budgets (Ampaire et al. 2017). However, Rwanda and Uganda have successfully embedded gender budgeting tools into existing budgeting procedures at the national level and, as a result, gender budgeting has reportedly influenced changes in fiscal policies (Stotsky et al. 2016; Tchelishvili et al. 2024). The substandard processes of gender mainstreaming in East Africa are linked to a gap between policy design and implementation, lack of institutional commitment and leadership, and resistance (Ampaire et al. 2017).

In the years between 2010 and 2016, while gender was explicitly mentioned in policies at both international and national levels, there were few gender-responsive programs at the grassroots levels in sub-Saharan African countries. Additionally, findings show that even when gender considerations were identified and incorporated in policy design, they were often overlooked during implementation (Bryan et al. 2016). Recent literature still highlights the poor performance of sub-Saharan African countries in including gender considerations in policy processes. This issue underscores the need for more comprehensive efforts to develop and implement gender-responsive policies and institutional arrangements for enabling, among other things, climate-smart agriculture at the grassroots level (Ogisi and Begho 2023).

Diverse interpretations of the literature and data arise due to a mismatch between the conceptualization of gender mainstreaming internationally and its adaptation to local cultural and social contexts (Acosta et al. 2019). Furthermore, evidence shows that incorporating gender considerations into activities is perceived as adding more work and resources to already strained processes (Bryan et al. 2017). This explains the lack of interest from governments in collecting adequate gender-disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data

for monitoring and evaluating food system–related policies (Bryan et al. 2016; Ampaire et al. 2017; Gutierrez-Montes et al. 2020; IICA 2015). Often, monitoring and evaluation of gender programs is limited to tracking the participation of women and men in activities without effectively assessing progress and addressing the underlying structural inequalities (Bryan et al. 2016; Ampaire et al. 2017). In this sense, gender indicators are considered biased because they have limited capacity to assess gender relations, both within households and organizations, and how these relationships change over time (Gutierrez-Montes et al. 2018).

Evidence by Njuki et al. (2016) highlights the absence of measurements for gender gaps, including underlying measuring factors related to health, asset control and decision-making. These gaps hinder the ability to effectively inform project design and impact household productivity, food security and health outcomes. Additionally, the evaluation of policies and food-systems interventions aimed at addressing shocks and stressors affecting women in food systems is insufficient (Moore et al. 2021). This limitation hinders our ability to assess the extent integrating gender into policies and interventions contributes to improved food-system outcomes and also hampers a comprehensive understanding of the associated dynamics. We observed a disparity in how gender-equality integration is addressed across various sectoral policies in different countries.

While some policies mention the integration of gender equality, the policies often lack clear objectives or actionable steps. For instance, the Kenya Fisheries policy documents (Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries Development (2005) and Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute (2020)) fail to provide demonstrable measures for integrating gender. Conversely, other national policies, such as the Fisheries Integration of Society and Habitats (FISH) project in Malawi, have embraced recommendations from gender-responsive programs. In Malawi, fishery programs advocated for the recognition and mainstreaming of diverse, yet complementary, gender roles in addressing health-related concerns like HIV/AIDS throughout the subsector (Mvula 2016). According to Kolovich and Monique (2024), who conducted a survey across 34 sub-Saharan African countries, each of the countries mentioned they had introduced at least one gender-budgeting practice or tool in their existing national budgeting procedures.

A study by Howland et al. (2021) examined gender mainstreaming in policy formulation across gender, agriculture, climate change, food security and nutrition sectors in Central America, focusing on Guatemala and Honduras. The study found that while international policy commitments influenced agricultural policies at national and subnational levels, effective gender mainstreaming throughout the policy process was limited. Key barriers to gender integration included challenges in translating international policies to national contexts, structural limitations at the national level and issues related to behavior, corruption and staff-capacity deficits. Although potential solutions to these barriers have been identified, deeply ingrained societal issues such as structural racism, machismo, religious extremism and entrenched power dynamics continue to impede policymakers' and implementers' ability to fully integrate gender in policy cycles.

3. Tools for assessing gender integration in policy analysis

While the literature on integrating gender into policies for development outcomes within food systems is limited, developing an adapted framework involved an iterative process of identifying, refining and aligning the most relevant components from existing gender assessment tools. Two fit-for-purpose tools were identified: the (GAPo) developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (FAO 2016), and a rubric developed by Gumucio and Rueda (2015). These tools were selected because they have been used in gender-focused policy analysis and are particularly relevant to the food-systems context, offering practical frameworks for evaluating the extent of gender integration in policies.

3.1 Gender in Agricultural Policies Assessment tool

The GAPo tool uses high-level guidance documents such as a country's constitution and development plans to evaluate how well a policy document aligns with broader gender-equality mandates, provisions and priorities. By offering analytical guidance, it empowers national governments and their stakeholders to conduct a thorough assessment of gender integration in agricultural sector policies, strategies or programs (FAO 2016). The GAPo tool also facilitates collaborative stakeholder engagement to diagnose, analyze and reflect on gender-equality gaps, capacity limitations and inconsistencies in policy formulation and implementation. It also assists countries to identify gaps between the gender content of their national policy documents and agricultural sector policies.

To classify policy documents based on their level of gender sensitivity, the GAPo tool uses standardized, color-coded scorecards that denote gender-responsive (green), gender-neutral (yellow) and gender-blind (red) policy documents. Using the GAPo tool, policy assessment comprises two main components. The first component involves assessing how gender and women's empowerment issues are addressed in a policy document. This assessment involves three critical aspects of gender sensitivity: (1) gender as a policy objective, (2) women's roles and challenges and (3) policy coherence with established gender mandates, such as those outlined in the SDGs. The second component involves a thematic evaluation of gender integration across key policy areas critical to the livelihoods and empowerment of women. These areas include access to land and productive resources, rural organizations, financial services, rural employment, agricultural markets and agri-food value chains, as well as agricultural research, technology and rural advisory services (Kosec et al. 2023). Within this assessment framework, thematic evaluation of gender integration examines policy documents to assess their level of gender integration, categorizing them into four levels from 1 (ignoring gender considerations and inequalities) to 4 (addressing the root causes of gender-based inequality).

3.2 A rubric

In assessing policies' levels of gender integration using guidelines and methods for gender inclusion, Gumucio and Rueda (2015) applied a rubric that aligns with other frameworks and evaluation instruments for gender mainstreaming, such as a rubric used by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD 2016). IFAD used this tool to evaluate the state of gender inclusion in national policies related to climate change in seven target countries of the CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) research program in Latin America (Gumucio and Rueda 2015), as well as in national policy documents about climate change, agriculture and natural resource management in East Africa (Ampaire et al. 2020). This rubric provides checklists that help to determine policy documents' gender sensitivity by assigning grades based on how comprehensively they integrate and address gender issues, with grades ranging from 1 (with no mention of gender) to 5 (where gender is integrated throughout the policy document).

4. Assessing gender integration in food systems: adaptation of a policy analysis framework

Guided by the GAPo tool and rubric, with additional literature on policy assessment that emphasizes the interconnectedness of gendered food-system themes (e.g., IFPRI 2024; CGIAR 2023; IFPRI 2022; OECD 2021; Ashley 2019; Howland et al. 2021; OECD 2016), we developed an adapted framework to evaluate gender integration across food-system policies. Previous research highlights that while many agricultural policies address aspects of gender integration such as empowerment, access to resources and gender roles, significant gaps remain. These gaps include the limited scope of gender interventions, insufficient inclusion of women in policymaking processes and inadequate recognition of discriminatory social norms (CGIAR 2023; Acosta et al. forthcoming). While the GAPo tool and rubric provide a foundational framework, they cannot fully assess policies within the broader food system. Our adapted framework extends beyond agricultural policies to include national and sectoral policies in health, nutrition, climate change and natural resource management, which are critical domains for advancing inclusive and sustainable food systems.

This adapted policy analysis framework is operationalized through a three-step assessment process for a comprehensive evaluation of gender integration and responsiveness in food system-related policies across various domains. This stepwise approach incorporates guiding questions for evaluating policy components and standardized scoring to assess the gender responsiveness of national and sectoral policies. Frimpong-Wiafe et al. (2025) operationalized this approach by evaluating food-system policies in four African countries. [Figure 2](#) summarizes this process, providing a quick reference guide that outlines the objectives and key components of each step.

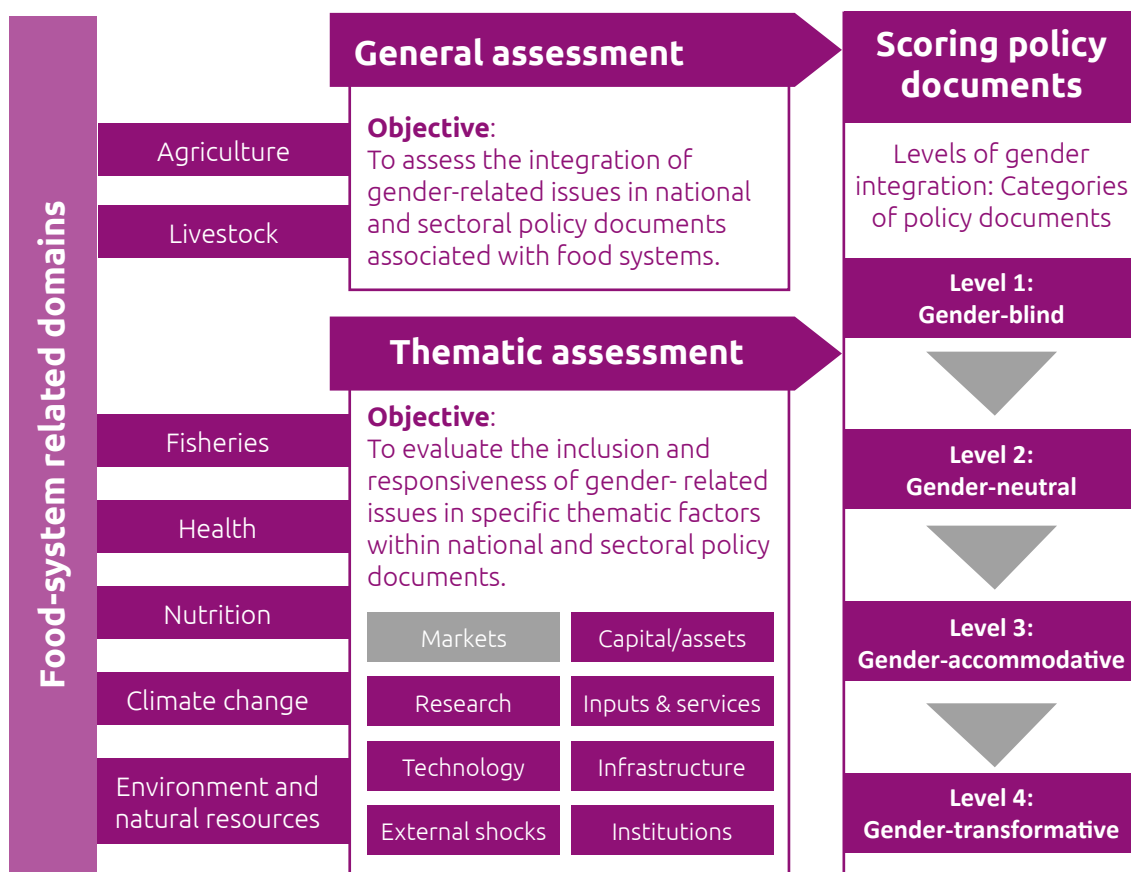


Figure 2. The adaptation of a food-systems policy analysis framework

4.1 General assessment of policy documents

The objective of a general assessment of policy documents is to evaluate the inclusion and responsiveness of gender-related issues in national and sectoral policy documents associated with food systems. This qualitative general assessment is guided by specific questions that evaluate gender-related elements of policy documents, examining whether they:

- include gender equality as a policy objective
- recognize women's critical roles and contributions
- address women's specific needs and challenges
- promote equitable access to resources, such as capital, inputs and opportunities
- tackle restrictive social norms and other barriers to women's empowerment
- ensure women's inclusion in decision-making and policy processes
- incorporate sex-disaggregated data for monitoring and evaluation
- allocate budgets for gender-responsive initiatives
- demonstrate adequate institutional capacities to implement gender-responsive policies
- align with national gender-equality frameworks

The general assessment of policy documents examines whether the policies recognize women's critical roles and contributions, address their specific needs and challenges and promote equitable access to resources such as capital, inputs and opportunities. It also considers whether policies tackle restrictive social norms and other barriers to women's empowerment, ensure women's inclusion in decision-making and policy processes, incorporate sex-disaggregated data for monitoring and evaluation, and allocate budgets for gender-responsive initiatives. The assessment also evaluates the adequacy of institutional capacities, and the alignment of policy documents with national gender-equality frameworks.

While common evaluation questions apply across all domains, [Appendix 1](#) includes a comprehensive list of unique gender considerations specific to each domain. The questions are designed to elicit "yes" or "no" responses, then used to score policy documents on a scale from level 1 to level 4. This structured classification evaluates whether policies are simply aware of gender constraints or actively work to transform the underlying structures that perpetuate inequalities:

- Level 1: Assigned to policies that completely ignore gender considerations and gender inequalities or contain measures that discriminate against women
- Level 2: Assigned to policies that recognize women's roles and the associated gender inequalities constraints, but do not include specific measures to address these constraints
- Level 3: Assigned to policies that recognize women's constraints and promote specific services and measures to address them
- Level 4: Assigned to policies that address the root causes of gender-based inequality, promote services and measures to tackle gender barriers, and include strategies to transform harmful gender norms and unequal power relations between women and men

Analyzing the content, structure and alignment of policies with gender-equality goals may involve some subjectivity due to the reliance on judgment, the use of predefined criteria and the inclusion of standardized questions.

4.2 Thematic assessment of policy documents

In this framework, the general assessment and thematic assessments of policy documents related to agri-food systems are not sequential and can be mutually exclusive depending on the objective of the evaluation. The general assessment provides an overall evaluation of how policy documents within a domain address gender-related considerations. The thematic assessment, on the other hand, is undertaken when a more in-depth evaluation is required, focusing on specific thematic factors of interest. This assessment expands the application of both the GAPo tool and rubric to include sectors and themes beyond their original focus. An agri-food-focused evaluation, shown in the conceptual framework (Figure 1) is designed to explore a policy document's consideration of gender issues and how it addresses the impacts of gender inequalities, shocks and stresses within various thematic areas.

The assessment evaluates whether policies' objectives aimed at advancing gender equality implement measures to meet women's specific needs and safeguard their rights for improved food-system outcomes. It also examines the extent policies facilitate equal access to markets, inputs, financial services and capital, while incorporating mechanisms such as research, technology, and institutional frameworks to mitigate the negative impacts of external shocks on women's livelihoods across policy domains.

Drawing on the Gendered Food System Framework (Njuki et al. 2022), which highlights the drivers of inequality and factors influencing food-system outcomes, we identified capital and assets, inputs and services, institutions, livelihoods, markets, research and technology and external shocks as the key thematic factors within the agriculture domain. These factors are extended to other food system-related domains, with the assessment questions adapted to reflect the specific characteristics of each domain. The detailed questions in the [appendix](#) elicit a "yes" response for a positive outcome and a "no" response otherwise, offering a standardized evaluation process.

This thematic assessment applies the same structured scoring approach as the one used in the overall general policy assessment, but shifts its focus on evaluating the integration of gender in individual thematic areas within the overall national or sectoral policy documents. By focusing on scoring thematic factors individually, this targeted assessment provides a nuanced understanding of how policies address gender-related issues across dimensions such as capital and assets, inputs and services, technology, institutions, and external shocks. This approach enhances future policy design or amendments by identifying gaps and opportunities for fostering gender equality within food system–related policies.

Each thematic area within a policy document is categorized into one of four levels as follows:

- Level 1: Completely ignores gender considerations and gender inequalities
- Level 2: Acknowledges women as users or owners (of the thematic factor), recognizes their roles and constraints, but does not include specific measures to address the gendered constraints
- Level 3: Recognizes women’s constraints and also promotes services and measures to address them
- Level 4: Addresses the root causes of gender-based inequality, promotes services and measures and includes strategies to transform harmful gender norms and unequal power relations between women and men

In this assessment, the focus shifts from evaluating individual policy documents with an overview lens, to evaluating policy documents based on their gender integration performance across multiple thematic contexts (e.g., capital and assets, inputs and services, institutions, etc.). To achieve this, we calculate the median of the scores from all thematic areas to assign an overall score to each policy document. The median is chosen because it represents the central tendency of the scores, ensuring that a document’s classification is less susceptible to variability, where a few thematic areas score either exceptionally well or poorly.

4.3 Categorizing policy documents

Based on the assessment’s objective, we classify policy documents to evaluate the overall performance of a domain or to analyze the detailed performance of the documents themselves. Scoring the general and thematic assessments of gender integration aligns with the framework’s objective of identifying national and sectoral policies that go beyond gender awareness to being gender-accommodative and, ideally, gender-transformative. This process uses a scoring mechanism adapted from the GAPo tool. While the GAPo tool categorizes policies into three color-coded levels—gender-blind (red), gender-neutral (yellow), and gender-sensitive (green)—we refine and expand this mechanism by subdividing the gender-sensitive category into two distinct levels: gender-accommodative and gender-transformative (both green). This enhancement provides a more nuanced evaluation of policies, capturing a broader spectrum of gender responsiveness, as follows:

- **Gender-blind:** These policy documents ignore gender considerations and fail to address gender inequalities. They score 1 in the general assessment or have a median score of 1 in the thematic assessment.
- **Gender-neutral:** While these policy documents acknowledge women’s roles, contributions and unique constraints, they do not include specific measures to address these constraints. They score 2 in the general assessment or have a median score of 2 in the thematic assessment.

- **Gender-accommodative:** These policy documents recognize women’s constraints and incorporate services or measures to address them. They score 3 in the general assessment or have a median score of 3 in the thematic assessment.
- **Gender-transformative:** These policy documents go further by addressing the root causes of gender inequality, promoting targeted services and incorporating strategies to transform harmful norms and unequal power relations to achieve gender-equitable outcomes. They score 4 in the general assessment or have a median score of 4 in the thematic assessment.

As an additional step in the general assessment to compare performance across domains, we aggregate the scores of multiple policy documents (rated levels 1 to 4) within a specific domain and use the median score to determine the category that reflects the extent of gender integration in that domain. While this approach provides a reliable indicator of a domain’s overall performance in integrating gender considerations, it is most useful in comparative analyses, such as evaluating how different countries integrate gender across domains, rather than for single-country case studies. In single-country contexts, its utility is limited, unless the goal is to compare the relative performance of domains within a country or across countries.

After completing the assessment and scoring of gender integration across policy documents, the next step is to outline actionable steps and recommendations to strengthen gender integration based on the scoring outcomes. These post-scoring actions are designed to address identified gaps and guide future improvements in policy formulation and implementation.

5. Post-scoring actions and recommendations

This desk review methodology evaluates gender integration within food-system policies by classifying policy documents along a continuum from gender-blind to gender-transformative. To effectively use the results, an integrated approach is essential, ensuring that evaluation findings are not used in isolation but contribute to a broader effort to develop better policies that achieve gender-equitable outcomes. This approach includes the following four steps.

5.1 Step 1: Interpret assessment results

Review both the general and thematic assessment scores from the desk review and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the policy documents. Then, based on the interpretation of those scores and the classification of policy documents as gender-blind, gender-neutral, gender-accommodative or gender-transformative, highlight the thematic areas where gender integration excels and pinpoint areas requiring more attention. This approach will help create recommendations for best-practice policy development and implementation strategies for targeted policies.

5.2 Step 2: Enhance gender integration in policy documents

The following recommendations outline strategies for enhancing gender integration across policy documents based on their current level of gender integration.

Gender-blind policy documents should be revised to explicitly integrate gender considerations. This revision should include conducting thorough gender analyses, using gender-disaggregated data and ensuring that policy measures address the distinct needs, constraints and opportunities of all genders.

Improvements for gender-neutral policy documents should focus on moving beyond basic acknowledgment of gender roles and constraints. Specific recommendations should include actionable measures that actively support gender equality and women's empowerment, ensuring that these policies create meaningful change.

Gender-accommodative policies should be encouraged to progress toward transformative approaches. This progression should involve addressing the underlying structural and social causes of gender-based inequalities and implementing strategies that challenge and change harmful gender norms.

Gender-transformative policy documents should be highlighted as best-practice models. Adopting their principles, approaches and successful strategies should be promoted across other policies to inspire broader systemic changes.

5.3 Step 3: Validate results and engage stakeholders

The adapted assessment framework is not intended as an end, but as a tool to initiate change. The results from the stepwise policy assessment become a foundation for initiating validation discussions with stakeholders, forming part of a broader policy process. Our experience in developing this adapted framework highlights the critical need to modify existing tools to better capture the unique aspects of gender integration in the specific policy area of interest. In our case, we adapted existing tools to evaluate food system-related policies. This process should, ideally, involve consultation with key stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers and gender experts to ensure that the framework meets practical and contextual needs. Stakeholder engagement is crucial for identifying relevant thematic considerations, and ensuring that the framework is applicable and comprehensive across diverse domains.

To test this framework, Frimpong-Wiafe et al. (2025) applied it to assess gender integration in food-systems policies across four African countries. The study revealed notable progress in incorporating gender considerations into policy documents. However, it also highlighted significant disparities, especially in policies governing national agriculture, livestock and climate change. A stark finding was the environment sector's lag in integrating gender perspectives and promoting women's empowerment, highlighting a critical area for future intervention.

Building on such study findings, it is recommended that stakeholders such as policymakers, subject-matter experts and food-system actors discuss and validate the study results. In addition, engage stakeholders to evaluate the framework's practicality, comprehensiveness and user-friendliness. Collaborative efforts can develop strategies to improve tools and processes for gender integration in policies and related instruments. A feedback mechanism should be established to refine the policy assessment framework and recommendations, incorporating input from stakeholders to ensure continuous improvement and relevance.

5.4 Step 4: Implement, monitor and undertake continuous improvement

Actionable plans to address identified gaps should be developed based on stakeholder-approved recommendations and integrated into existing policy frameworks and processes. A monitoring and evaluation system should track progress in gender integration within policies, assessing the effectiveness of interventions and making necessary adjustments. This process should be treated as part of an ongoing cycle of policy improvement, with the evaluation framework and methodologies regularly updated to reflect new insights, emerging issues and evolving gender dynamics. The inherent gender biases of policymakers and implementers influence gender actions embedded in policy. This report recommends follow-up discussions to identify gender-biased implementers to address and reconcile these challenges.

Consulting stakeholders when adapting or using the framework as well as during the monitoring and evaluation cycle can enhance policy coherence and reduce fragmentation across sectors. By including representatives from sectors such as agriculture, health and the environment, the framework can help integrate gender considerations across domains. This collaboration can identify synergies and trade-offs, promoting coordinated, multisectoral national policies, laws and programs for safe, healthy diets through sustainable food systems. Such engagement will help to ensure that the framework addresses practical needs and contributes to more effective and inclusive policy interventions.

6. Conclusion

Our analysis of gender integration in food system–related policies includes a wider landscape, beyond the agricultural sector, including livestock, fisheries, climate change, environment, health and nutrition. Our report synthesizes an established food-system framework and existing analytical tools that assess gender integration in policies relevant to food systems. This work culminated in designing a streamlined analysis tool to measure the degree of gender integration across more policy domains using guiding questions specific to agriculture, livestock and fisheries, as well as health, nutrition, climate change mitigation and adaptation and environmental conservation. Assessing whether policy documents recognize the critical roles women play in these domains is crucial because it reveals the extent of promotion of gender equality and women’s rights and whether the unique needs and challenges of women are addressed. This recognition is essential for developing inclusive food systems that ensure better resource allocation, enhanced productivity and greater resilience. Neglecting these aspects in the policy cycle can perpetuate gender inequalities, limit women’s potential and hinder overall development and sustainability.

The adapted framework, inspired by the GAPo tool (FAO 2016) classifies policy documents into four levels: gender-blind, gender-neutral, gender-accommodative and gender-transformative. This categorization provides a structured way to evaluate gender integration in policy documents. By distinguishing between these levels, policymakers, together with stakeholders, can identify areas in policy processes that require improvement and ensure policies actively address and transform the underlying causes of gender inequality. This approach helps target specific thematic areas for intervention, promotes accountability and supports the development of more inclusive and effective policies that contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment in agri-food systems.

Although the adapted framework shows significant potential as a practical and effective tool, continuous testing, validation and refinement are essential to ensure its robustness and broader applicability. Testing the framework’s operability will identify areas where policy formulation and implementation could be strengthened. Looking ahead, this framework can be applied, tested and further refined to assess the effectiveness of policies in promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment across other critical sectors not covered in this paper, such as education, trade, energy and manufacturing. These sectors play a pivotal role in driving economic growth, fostering social progress and achieving sustainable development.

In conclusion, while substantial strides have been made in integrating gender into food-systems policies, particularly in Africa, continuous efforts are needed to ensure that policies acknowledge gender disparities and actively work toward addressing disparities in a transformative and sustainable manner. These efforts must involve inclusive dialogue and collaboration with key stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers and civil society, to foster the development of comprehensive, multisectoral approaches to gender equality in food systems.

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Appendix 1. General assessment guidelines for scoring policy documents

The following proposed questions elicit a binary response about gender integration in policy documents within each domain included in the adapted policy assessment framework.

a. Agriculture, livestock and fisheries domains

The policy document:

1. Recognizes women's roles in agriculture, livestock and fisheries and rural development.
2. Has gender equality in agriculture, livestock and fisheries or women's rights as explicit policy objectives.
3. Includes specific measures to address women's agriculture-, livestock- and fisheries-related needs.
4. Promotes women's participation in policy formulation, implementation and evaluation processes of agriculture, livestock and fisheries policies.
5. Promotes the use of sex-disaggregated data for policy monitoring and evaluation in agriculture, livestock and fisheries policies.
6. Includes strategies that actively address and seek to change discriminative social norms and power dynamics to promote equitable outcomes for all genders.
7. Includes mention to national mandates for gender equality (e.g., gender equality provisions in constitution, national development plan or gender policy).
8. Includes gender-sensitive measures, gender-sensitive works, budgeting for gender-specific activities and any other gender-sensitive indicators for agriculture, livestock and fisheries sectors.

b. Health domain

The policy document:

1. Specifies women's access to proper healthcare (including sexual and reproductive healthcare), hygiene and sanitation as specific objectives.
2. Includes measures to address women's exposure to diseases, experience of crisis and emergency situations.
3. Recognizes women's role in the improvement of health for children, girls and women.
4. Includes measures that support and encourage women to bring children for vaccination as and when necessary.
5. Recognizes the need for women to be involved in the decision-making process of nutrition and general health that affect individuals directly.
6. Promotes the need for women to be involved in the multisectoral activities and dialogues that are geared toward addressing gender issues in the health sector.
7. Includes strategies that actively address and seek to change discriminative social norms and power dynamics to promote equitable outcomes for all genders.

c. Nutrition domain

The policy document:

1. Has specific objectives that aim to ensure equal access to proper nutrition benefits for women and children.
2. Includes measures to address crisis that affect nutritional well-being of girls, boys, women and men.
3. Recognizes the need for women to be involved in the decision-making process of nutrition at the household, community and national levels.
4. Includes interventions to support women's involvement in the control of household resources and access to feeding patterns.
5. Includes measures to address gender roles, social norms, cultural beliefs and attitudes, that impact access to and control over food and nutrition for women, men and children.

d. Climate change domain

The policy document:

1. Recognizes women's role in the mitigation and adaptation of climate change.
2. Includes interventions to improve the participation of women in the implementation and dialogues regarding climate change mitigation and adaptation.
3. Provides measures to support and train women on the proper practices and activities in the household that will help reduce the risks of climate change.
4. Includes interventions to protect the vulnerable in the society—especially women, children and older adults—from the health and safety threats of climate change.
5. Includes strategies that actively address and seek to change discriminative social norms and power dynamics to promote equitable outcomes for all genders.
6. Uses gender-disaggregated data to evaluate gender differential impacts of climate change adaptation.
7. Includes budgeting at the national level that funds climate action with gender consideration as the main focus.

e. Environment and natural resources domain

The policy document:

1. Recognizes women's role as active agents in the conservation and restoration of natural resources as well as the protection of the environment.
2. Promote women's participation in the decision-making and implementation of activities regarding environmental management.
3. Includes measures to train women in best practices that promote the safety of the environment and the conservation of natural resources.
4. Promotes the equal access to land, water resources and overall natural resources to both women and men.
5. Includes strategies that actively address and seek to change discriminative social norms and power dynamics to promote equitable outcomes for all genders.



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