



GENDER EQUITY FOR NATURE-POSITIVE FOOD PRODUCTION

A pathway for safeguarding human and planetary health

ACTION GUIDES FOR THE FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT

The goal of the [UN Food Systems Summit Action Track 3](#) is to boost nature-positive food production at the scale needed to meet the fundamental human right to healthy and nutritious food, while at the same time restoring balance with nature. Together with farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, local communities, policymakers, scientists, extension agents and the private sector, Action Track 3 will co-design game-changing solutions and collective actions that simultaneously work for nature, people, and the climate.

This series of Action Guides introduces agroecological approaches and regenerative practices that make food production systems more sustainable and resilient. The strategies and actions presented in these Action Guides are evidence-based, proven to be effective, and can be adapted to diverse settings.

Each Action Guide focuses on key elements that influence the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of food production: soil, gender, tenure, youth, drought and water scarcity, livestock and pastoralism, among others. Collectively, the series offers a systems perspective to guide regenerative actions for both small and large producers to promote nature-positive transformation.

THE ISSUE

Women everywhere play a vital role in every aspect of growing, harvesting, processing, and marketing what we eat. They produce over half of the world's food. But compared to men, they are often held back from their ambitions by tenure, customs, or laws that perpetuate unequal access to productive resources, credit, and extension services.

Such widespread gender gaps have profound implications for household income, food and nutrition security, and childhood development. Low female involvement in decision-making often makes women farmers and their children vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition, especially when crisis strikes.

Gender-responsive approaches target existing disparities and strive to overcome or remove them. They highlight women's contributions to agriculture and their critical role as agents of change. The empowerment of rural women can foster innovation and provide wide-reaching and long-term benefits, from household to global scales.



IMPACTS OF GENDER INEQUALITY



Women comprise

43%

of the agricultural labor force, over half in many African and Asian countries

Source: FAO, 2011. The State of Food and Agriculture 2011: Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development, Rome.

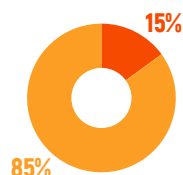


An estimated

66%

of the world's 600 million livestock producers living in poverty are women

Source: FAO, 2011. The State of Food and Agriculture 2011: Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development, Rome.



85%

Fewer than

15%

of agricultural landholders are women

Source: FAO, 2018. The gender gap in land rights, FAO and CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions and Markets.



For every 100 men living in extreme poverty there are

122

women (aged 25-34)

Source: UN Women, 2018. Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. New York, USA.



Women in the workforce are paid on average

23%

less than men

Source: UNFPA, 2017. State of World Population 2017.



On average, women spend

2.5

times as many hours on unpaid household work as men

Source: ILO, 2017. World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for women 2017 International Labor Office, Geneva.

Everyone benefits when women have equal opportunities

Despite their often-large contribution to farm and household workloads, rural women typically receive fewer financial and health benefits from food production than men. Often, this is because they have fewer and [less secure rights to land](#), and a smaller voice in determining what foods are produced or how they are processed and marketed. This limits their access to resources like agricultural extension services and finance. They also rarely have the same chances as men to work outside of food production. As a result, women and their children often bear the brunt of land degradation, food price shocks, and climate-related disasters.

Agroecology can provide safe spaces for women to work together, support each other and gain the confidence to challenge discrimination, including customary laws, in their communities.

Enabling women to equitably participate in agricultural planning and operations can unlock many new opportunities. For example, by using their knowledge of traditional practices, and their husbandry of locally adapted crop and livestock species, they can improve productivity and agrobiodiversity. Greater freedom to spend the profits of their labor as they choose can also improve educational opportunities for girls, children's health and nutrition, and household incomes.



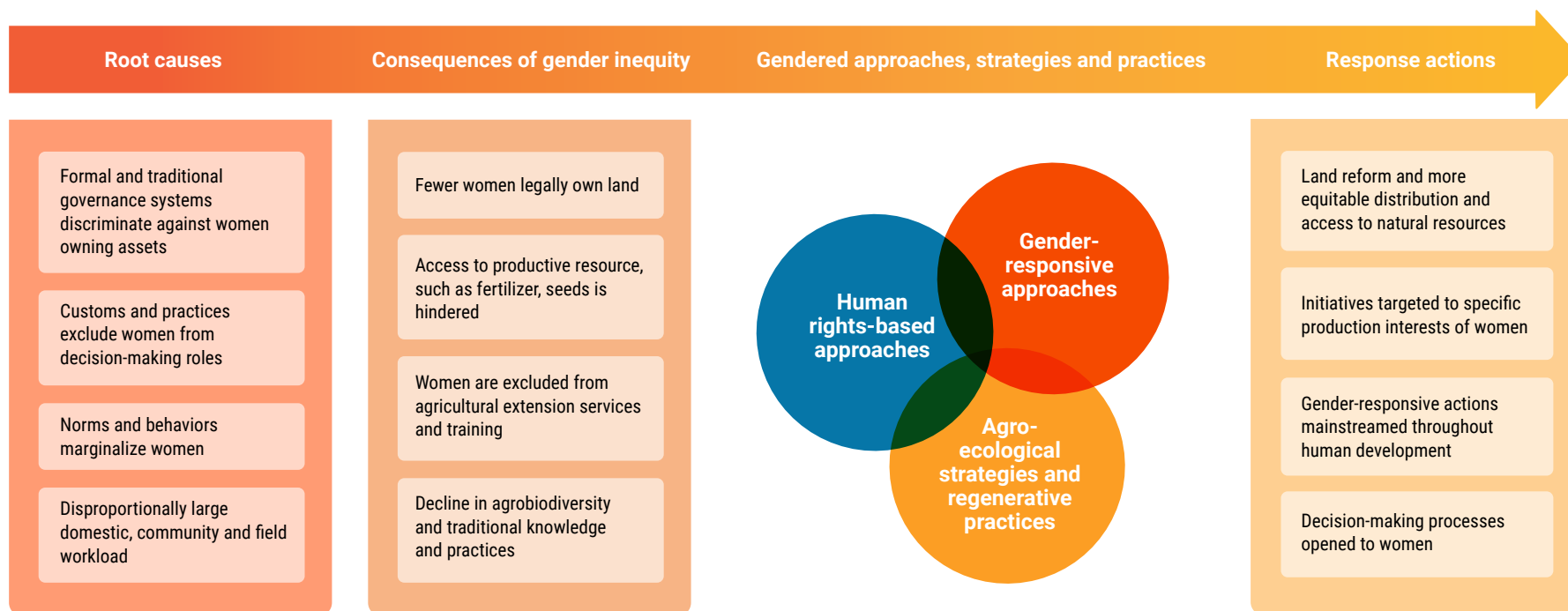
Transforming gender norms

In many rural societies, laws, customs, and practices restrict women's independence and their opportunities to participate equally in food production decisions. Women's empowerment and more equal benefit sharing between genders requires addressing unequal power relations and discriminatory attitudes to gender roles and responsibilities.

Gender-responsive and **rights-based approaches** acknowledge how these social constraints hold back women's potential to increase nature-positive food production. These insights can then help shape effective and evidence-based strategies to reduce gender discrimination in rural development policies and initiatives which aim to 'level the playing field'.

These approaches – whether in wider society or specifically linked to the uptake of nature-positive agriculture – usually support greater equity, social wellbeing, and environmentally sustainable outcomes. To be effective and change mindsets and attitudes, they should **involve all parts of society** – males both at home and in the community, traditional leaders, the private sector, and government representatives.

Balancing agricultural growth and social equality with environmental sustainability is the only pathway to a food secure future



Women farmers nourish people and nature



Nature-positive

Many **innovations led by women** are based on agroecological principles, such as crop management, to increase nutritional diversity, conserve agrobiodiversity, and reduce the use of chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Inclusive decision making and community organizations that recognize the central role of women in sustainable food production can transform a situation of exclusion, crisis, and vulnerability, into one of innovation, solidarity, and growth.



People-positive

Changing gender norms and community behaviors to empower women can mean more income and food at home, and household assets being shared more equally. Better child nutrition, particularly for infants, promotes growth in early childhood and provides lifelong benefits in health and wellbeing.

Studies show that providing women with the same access to technology and training as men **increases agricultural yields** in developing countries by 20 to 30%. Improving access to, and control over, land and natural resources encourages women-led rural businesses. In turn, local economies are enhanced which can help to reduce gender discrimination and violence in wider society.



Climate-positive

Climate change demands new techniques in agriculture. Agroecological and nature-positive practices **build resilience** by working with nature, rather than against it. Women are often custodians of vital traditional knowledge on the heat-, drought- and pest-tolerant plant and animal varieties best suited to thrive in a changing climate. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions and locking away carbon in soils and plants is an added benefit from the adoption of climate-smart practices.

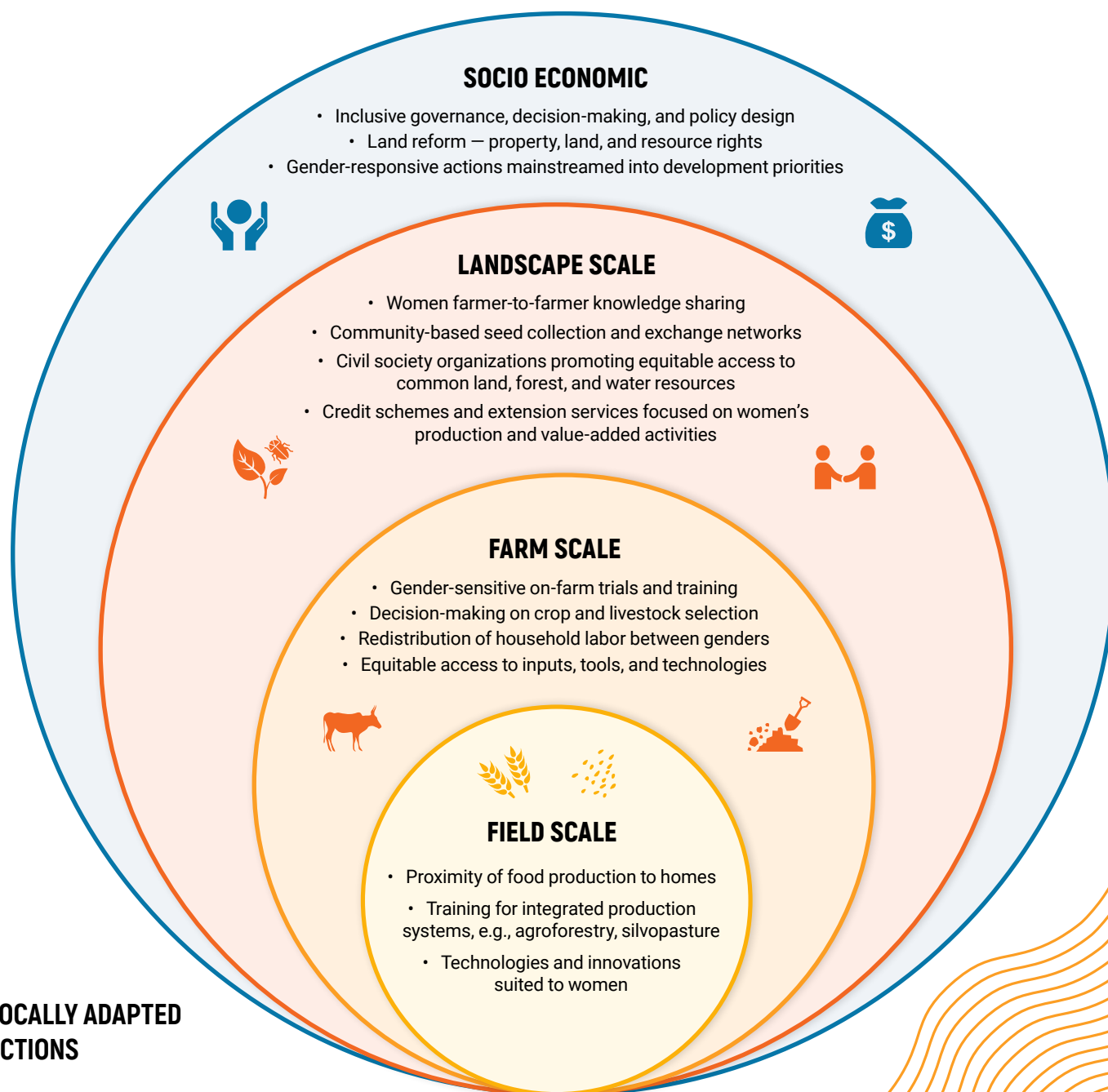
Gender-responsive actions at multiple levels

Gender-responsive actions at all levels in society are more likely to give women better opportunities to realize the benefits they deserve from their work in food production. These include more inclusive governance, secure tenure, and targeted initiatives to support women where they work.

Engaging with men and boys, especially those with power and influence – elders, traditional and religious leaders, or prominent farmers – is also vital to bring about cultural changes needed to achieve gender equity. Facilitated dialogues within households, communities, and institutions can help to avoid conflict and ensure a smooth implementation of gender-responsive actions, as can advocacy for policy and legislative reforms.

“We need women’s voices and leadership to be prominent in food systems. It’s the only way to ensure that food systems are just.”

LOCALLY ADAPTED ACTIONS



Women as guardians of agrobiodiversity

The beginning of [agriculture in the Andes](#) occurred when nomadic families, particularly women, first began to select and cultivate wild plants. Today in the Peruvian highlands, there are over 4,000 native varieties of potato, each with unique nutritional qualities and growth requirements. Such genetic diversity is vital for food and nutrition security, and nurtures healthy and well-functioning mountain agroecosystems that are resilient and more adaptable to climate change.

Gender roles in potato production are clearly defined; for example, the management of seed potatoes is traditionally the domain of women. Women control the selection, storage, and use of seeds at planting time. Despite their vast knowledge, traditional farming customs and family duties often prevent women from participating in seed fairs, training courses, and other economic opportunities.

The tradition of holding weekly agricultural fairs is still very strong throughout the Andes. Women 'potato custodians' develop their seed collections by trading varieties at these events. This not only ensures crop diversity and the conservation of genetic resources, but it also helps share knowledge with new generations, reinforcing agro-cultural heritage.

To maintain these traditions and bolster their share of the economic benefits, women farmers and seed custodians established the [Association of the Guardians of the Native Potato from Central Peru](#). Partnering with the private sector, the Association supports members to develop their cultivation, conservation, and business skills. It also creates a direct link between private sector users of potato diversity (breeding and seed companies) and conservers of genetic resources. The partnership means more income for members, and formal recognition of the value of women's work.



The agri-business case for gender equity

Helping rural women to become active change agents in food production strengthens rural economies and can solve local and regional challenges. Governments can develop the legislation, policies, and incentives that enable women to gain meaningful benefit from their efforts in the agri-food value chain. By encouraging private sector and social enterprise investment in [female-led agri-businesses](#), such policies improve women's livelihoods, opening new credit and market opportunities.

Average maize yields increased by

36%

when women farmers in western Kenya chose pest control methods

Source: Diirro, G.M. et al. 2018. Women's empowerment in agriculture and agricultural productivity: Evidence from rural maize farmer households in western Kenya. PloS one, 13(5), p.e0197995.

Closing gender yield gaps and increasing domestic production could reduce numbers of undernourished people by

12-17%

Source: FAO 2011 The State of Food and Agriculture 2011: Women in Agriculture: Closing the Gender Gap for Development (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome).

Empowered women in agriculture increased the number of plants and animal produced by

15%

compared to disenfranchised women

Source: Bonis-Profumo et al., 2021 Measuring women's empowerment in agriculture, food production, and child and maternal dietary diversity in Timor-Leste. Food Policy 102, 102102.

Returns on investment actions to reduce poverty are greater where they also improve human health, environmental sustainability, and gender equity.

Empowering women to make better use of their assets and skills for nature-positive food production is only one way that governments and the private sector can assist. Other effective ways to overcome gender barriers and '[level the playing field](#)' for women include targeted initiatives, networking and mentoring facilities, and community workshops that build more equitable and balanced societies.



Gender equity for food system transformation

Empowering women in agriculture and food production is a vital step in the journey to nature-positive food production.

With more equal land rights and access to resources, women can improve human health, food and nutrition security, and resilience to climate change, while helping conserve biodiversity.

The business case for investing in gender equity is compelling, with benefits to the health and wellbeing of everyone in a community.

More than a human right and social justice issue — Empowering women as equal partners in sustainable development is vital in tackling many food system challenges. Gender equality can deliver it all: sustained progress in the social, economic, and environmental aspects of development.

Gender equality is an inter-generational issue — Enabling the best decisions around food production will help establish a just and healthy foundation for future generations. Realizing this future depends upon everyone, everywhere challenging discrimination whenever they encounter it.

Sparking a virtuous cycle of benefits — The interlinked global challenges facing humanity mean the gender dimensions of food production cannot be tackled in isolation. Using both gender-responsive and rights-based approaches, together with nature-positive practices, can help safeguard human and environmental health.

Monitoring gender outcomes matters — Addressing the vast diversity of contexts and priorities of rural women requires gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation to determine which policies and programs work best. Even when women are not the target beneficiaries, robust evaluation will help stop discrimination from being entrenched and identify effective actions that can be scaled up.



United Nations
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