UNITED NATIONS FOOD SYSTEMS COORDINATION HUB

SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SAC)

GENDER JUSTICE IN NATIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS PATHWAYS
COMMITMENTS, GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute close to 40% of the global agrifood system workforce, with over 65% in many parts of Asia and Africa. Yet women own only a small proportion (10-15%) of agricultural land, face productivity gaps as high as 24% between female and male-managed farms and continue to earn 82 cents for every dollar earned by men (FAO, 2023). Limited access to and control over land also restricts women's access to water, finance, markets, technology and extension services, as well as compensation for climate-related and other losses.

Against this backdrop, national food systems pathways provide an important window into how countries recognise these inequalities, the responses they propose, and the extent to which commitments are being implemented. This policy brief examines these patterns across country-led food systems documents, including how gender-related commitments are framed, what implementation actions are reported, and where continuing needs are identified.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The UN Food Systems Coordination Hub led the preparation of this brief. The draft was developed by Dr Trish Muzenda and Dr Nicole de Paula, with inputs from Ms Ludovica Nesbitt and Ms Lara Blanco, and review and technical guidance from members of the Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), including Professor Nitya Rao and Dr Shakuntala Thilsted.

KEY FINDINGS

- Countries most commonly identify inequalities in women's labour and economic contribution, access to land and finance, participation in markets and value chains, unpaid care responsibilities, and restrictive social norms.
- Proposed responses centre on economic empowerment, legal and regulatory reform, institutional integration, participation in decision-making, and norms and behaviour change.
- Country reporting points to identifiable programmes, financing measures and institutional changes, but provides less evidence of sustained improvements in women's agency, control over resources or exposure to discriminatory norms.
- Countries continue to request support on finance, meaningful participation, institutional capacity, data and gender-responsive implementation.

RIGHTS AND RECOGNITION OF WOMEN IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS: ADDRESSING GENDER INEQUALITIES

Gender justice in agrifood systems requires recognition of women as farmers and economic actors in food systems, not as a vulnerable group. It also requires equitable access to and control over resources and services, representation in governance and policy coherence across sectors. These dimensions are closely linked. For example, the shift towards digital extension services may widen inequalities where women have less access to devices, connectivity or digital skills. Likewise, limited land ownership can restrict access to affordable credit and push women towards higher-cost informal finance. To accelerate progress, the UN General Assembly declared 2026 the International Year of Women Farmers, drawing attention to the persistent discrimination women face as farmers and food system actors.

Calls for recognition of women farmers and the elimination of discrimination have been raised since the Fourth World Women's Conference held at Beijing, in 1995. Women's rights to land are also reflected in targets across SDGs 1 (poverty reduction), 2 (reducing hunger) and 5 (gender equality). The Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girl's Empowerment in the context of Food Security and Nutrition, endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security in 2021, provide a global framework for advancing gender equality in food systems. In 2021, the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) reinforced this agenda and created a country-led process through which governments set out national pathways for food systems transformation. Despite normative progress, girls and women continue to disproportionately suffer from economic, environmental and social inequalities.

NATIONAL PATHWAYS AS A POLICY ENTRY POINT FOR OVERCOMING GENDER BARRIERS

National pathways are country-led documents that set out national priorities, commitments and proposed actions for transforming food systems. They were developed through the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) process and reflect how countries frame their own food systems challenges and intended responses. They provide an entry point for understanding what countries recognise, what they commit to address and how gender is positioned within broader transformation agendas.

This policy brief draws on three complementary country-led sources: national pathways published or updated between 2021 and 2025, the 2023 Voluntary Progress Reviews, and 2025 Country Needs Assessments, all in the context of the UNFSS follow up process. Together, they provide a picture of commitments, reported follow-through and continuing support needs. They do not constitute an independent monitoring or evaluation exercise. Accordingly, the analysis is grounded in information provided by countries in the documents reviewed. The findings therefore reflect country-identified priorities rather than a comprehensive assessment of all gender-related issues in food systems. Some important dimensions may be less visible where they were not explicitly raised in the documents reviewed.



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WHAT THE NATIONAL PATHWAYS SHOW

The depth of gender-related solutions framing varies across the pathways. Some recognise women's roles in food systems, whilst others also identify the structural barriers shaping their participation. This includes unequal land tenure, restricted access to finance, labour invisibility, market exclusion, limited voice and restrictive social norms. In some cases, these barriers are linked to proposed policy responses.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

- 68 English-language national pathways were reviewed.
- An initial keyword search identified 63 pathways containing references to "women" or "gender".
- Following manual review, five pathways were excluded because their references to women or gender were limited to passing mentions and did not contain substantive gender-related content. The remaining 58 pathways were included in the analysis.
- The 2023 Voluntary Progress Review analysis covered 61 countries. Of these, 37 were also represented among the 58 national pathways included in qualitative analysis. This overlap allowed comparison of commitments and reported follow-through across the two sources.
- Differences in timing affect direct comparability: the Voluntary Progress Reviews were submitted in 2023, while the national pathways reviewed include documents published through 2025.
- Gender-related needs identified in ten 2025 Country Needs Assessments are used illustratively rather than as a representative assessment of all countries.
- The findings reflect the countries and documents included in the review and should not be generalized to all Member States.



BEYOND RECOGNITION: SIX THEMES FROM THE PATHWAYS

An inductive reading of national pathways identified six recurring themes ranging from production and processing to marketing and consumption. These reflect how governments themselves described women's roles and gender-related barriers in food systems.

- **Women's labour and economic contribution.** Several pathways recognise women as major contributors to agricultural production and food systems. However, this contribution is not matched by equivalent access to and control over land and other productive resources, income or decision-making. India notes that more than 70% of its female workforce is in agriculture, yet women 'hardly participate in marketing of crops where production is translated into income. Liberia similarly describes women's roles as 'invisible' despite their 80% share of agricultural labour.

- **Land and resource access.** Land tenure emerges as a consistently identified structural barrier, including questions of ownership, secure access and customary land rights. These barriers have implications for women's access to finance, inputs, services and markets. The Gambia links women's limited land ownership to their inability to use land as collateral. India highlights the gap between formal inheritance and customary practice and proposes recognising women as cultivators in official land records. Liberia calls for women to have unhindered access to arable land through titled ownership, alongside finance, technology, training and extension services.

- **Finance and credit exclusion.** Limited land and asset ownership often compounds women's exclusion from formal finance. Liberia calls for Village Savings and Loan Association rules to be made more favourable to women, including access to low-interest loans. Honduras describes specialised financial products and preferential access to agricultural and non-agricultural credit for women and other priority groups. Kenya proposes revamping its Women Enterprise Development Fund to support existing and new women-led agribusinesses.

- **Women in markets and value chains beyond production.** Beyond primary production, national pathways recognise women as processors, traders, vendors and entrepreneurs. Malaysia highlights the importance of engaging women in informal markets, home-based food businesses and street vending, while Samoa notes that most market vendors and food processors are women, despite women accounting for only 11% of agricultural production. Egypt calls for support to small-scale women-led enterprises, including building women's capacity in production, drying and processing and strengthening links to local and international markets. India provides a further example through women-led cooperatives that purchase produce from small farmers, process and package it, and sell it through women-run distribution networks.



- **Nutrition, care and women's agency.** Women are often framed as mothers, caregivers or nutrition beneficiaries. However, Lao PDR moves beyond this framing by identifying the tension between food production and childcare, noting that rural women may have to choose between producing food and caring for young children. It proposes tailoring agricultural extension and health services so that women can combine food production with care responsibilities, while safeguarding infant and young-child feeding. The Gambia provides a further example, linking home-grown school feeding to girls' school retention, reduced early marriage and narrowing the education gap between girls and boys.

- **Social and cultural norms as a root cause.** Discriminatory norms, gendered divisions of labour and unequal decision-making emerge as underlying drivers of women's exclusion. Uganda proposes addressing negative and regressive cultural norms and practices that constrain women's access to control over resources alongside greater male support for women's participation in food systems. Samoa identifies stereotypes and traditional divisions of labour as barriers to women's access to resources and livelihoods. Kiribati reports that 68% of women aged 15 to 24 have experienced physical or sexual violence, alongside prescribed gender roles and financial dependence that deepen women's livelihood vulnerability.

FROM RECOGNITION TO RESPONSE: FIVE AVENUES OF ACTION

Across regions, some pathways move beyond identifying gender-related barriers to proposing responses. Together, they point to five connected avenues through which countries are seeking to enable women's participation. The 2023 Voluntary Progress Reviews and 2025 Country Needs Assessments help show how these commitments are being taken forward and where support is still required.

Reading the evidence across the three sources, the national pathways set out country commitments, the Voluntary Progress Reviews describe country-reported follow-through, and the Country Needs Assessments identify country-reported priorities for further support. The three sources do not cover the same countries or periods, and the analysis should not be read as a formal longitudinal evaluation, but as a triangulation of complementary country-reported evidence on commitments, implementation and continuing support needs.

1. Economic empowerment

National pathways emphasise women's access to land, finance, technology, services and markets, while recognising their roles as producers, processors, traders and entrepreneurs. India's women's self-help groups, for example, combine collective organisation, skills and market linkages to support women-led agricultural enterprises.

Reported follow-through is clearest where countries name programmes, targets or beneficiary reach. Ethiopia reports 1.2 million employment opportunities for women, while Guyana provides a concrete example of combining participation targets with enterprise support. Its 2023 reporting describes several agricultural programmes with explicit targets for women's participation, including a requirement that women comprise 20% of farmers under the Black Belly Sheep Project, a target of over 50% women beneficiaries under the Agriculture Innovation and Entrepreneurship Programme, and 50% women beneficiaries under the HESAD Project. It also reports that more than 4,000 women benefited from training in business planning and development for agriculture-based businesses through the Women's Innovative and Investment Network in 2022. These measures provide an example of broad commitments to women's economic participation being accompanied by defined participation targets and identifiable support mechanisms.

At the same time, the 2025 Needs Assessments show that access to finance remains a recurring constraint. Kenya calls for reforms to expand credit access, including dedicated funding windows for women and youth-led agribusiness initiatives. Malawi requests support for credit schemes and women- and youth-led enterprises, while Brazil identifies bureaucratic barriers, limited technical assistance and difficulty accessing institutional markets. Taken together, these responses suggest that the issue is not only the availability of finance, but whether financing arrangements and accompanying support are accessible to women in practice.

2. Legal and regulatory reform

National pathways identify laws, rules and customary practices that limit women's access to land, employment and productive resources. Nepal proposes measures on equal pay, workplace protections and inclusive land tenure. Tajikistan responds to the legal barriers faced by women managing farms in contexts of male labour migration, while India highlights the gap between formal inheritance rights and customary practice.

Country reporting provides some evidence of follow-through on land and regulatory measures. Ethiopia reports land certification for 300,000 women-headed households and a further 800,000 households in which certification recognised equal rights for women. This provides evidence of an identifiable gender-related land measure, although the VPR does not provide further detail on how these rights were recorded or whether certification translated into greater control over land or household decision-making. The Gambia reports that a land policy is under development and that agricultural finance and value-chain measures are intended to prioritise women and other groups. Malawi's 2025 Needs Assessment also identifies land, tax and trade reform alongside finance and monitoring support. These examples point to the importance of linking legal and policy reform with accessible finance, implementation capacity and practical mechanisms through which women can exercise formal rights.

3. Institutional integration

Institutional integration involves embedding gender within food systems policies, programmes, implementation structures and monitoring systems. The Philippines treats gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting feature of its pathway, while Bangladesh and Cambodia call for stronger gender-disaggregated data and tracking of women's participation.

The Voluntary Progress Reviews indicate that some countries are carrying gender commitments into broader implementation arrangements. Zimbabwe provides an example of gender being incorporated into institutional arrangements as well as programme delivery. Its 2023 reporting notes the establishment of a Department for Gender and Social Inclusion, the mainstreaming of women, youth and social inclusion across agricultural policies and strategies, and the launch of the AGRIC4SHE initiative in 2022. Tanzania identifies gender as an enabling element of food systems transformation and reports the Building a Better Tomorrow initiative for women and young people in agricultural value chains. Kenya links gender inclusion to planning and resource allocation and reports strategies targeting women's access to finance and women's participation in irrigated agricultural enterprises. Together, these examples suggest that institutional integration can take several forms, from dedicated gender structures to mainstreaming across sectoral policies and targeted implementation programmes. They also show the value of linking gender commitments to identifiable institutional responsibilities and delivery mechanisms.

Monitoring remains uneven in the pathway documents. Of the 58 pathways containing substantive gender-related content, 11 include some form of gender-specific monitoring, evaluation or accountability language. Lebanon provides the clearest example, naming indicators on women's share of landholdings, women's minimum dietary diversity and employment in agriculture and the agrifood sector by gender. Marshall Islands and Cambodia commit to sex-disaggregated data, while Bangladesh identifies age- and gender-disaggregated data on governance, implementation and coverage as a national priority. This captures what is explicit in the pathways and does not assess countries' wider monitoring systems.

4. Participation in decision-making

Pathways from Lao PDR, Cambodia and other countries emphasise women's voice, leadership and representation in organisations, policy processes and food systems governance. This moves beyond treating women only as beneficiaries and recognises them as actors who should shape priorities and implementation.

The Voluntary Progress Reviews show that women's organisations were widely recognised as stakeholders. Kenya names women's organisations and networks working on advocacy, capacity-building, finance, entrepreneurship and market participation. Nigeria reports including women's groups in its national pathway implementation task team, while Egypt identifies the National Council for Women as part of its engagement process. The VPRs confirm participation in national processes, although they provide less detail on the depth of involvement or the extent to which women's contributions shaped decisions.

The Needs Assessments indicate continuing challenges around meaningful participation. The Gambia identifies inadequate involvement of women and youth as a continuing constraint. Fiji reports that gender inequalities restrict women's meaningful participation in food governance, while Jordan identifies limited engagement of women in leadership and production roles. The evidence therefore points to a distinction between being present in a consultation and having meaningful influence over priorities, resource allocation and implementation. Future support should focus not only on representation, but on the conditions that enable women and women's organisations to shape decisions.


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5. Norms and behaviour change

Some pathways directly address the social expectations and unequal divisions of labour that constrain women's participation. Lao PDR identifies the tension between women's productive work, housework and childcare expectations. Uganda proposes greater male involvement in challenging regressive practices. Samoa highlights stereotypes and traditional divisions of labour, while Kiribati links prescribed gender roles, violence and financial dependence to women's vulnerability.

A difference in reporting is apparent around gender norms, unpaid care and intra-household power. These issues are visible in several national pathways but are much less apparent in the Voluntary Progress Reviews and Country Needs Assessments than finance, programmes, institutional arrangements or participation. This may partly reflect the broad design of those documents, which did not include a dedicated gender section. Even so, the contrast is important: countries are more likely to report identifiable programmes and economic support than action on unpaid care, discriminatory norms, violence or shifts in household and community decision-making.

For the Hub and wider ecosystem of support, this points to an area where continued dialogue, evidence and technical support may be needed. Economic and institutional measures are important, but they may have limited effect if the norms, care burdens and power relations shaping women's participation remain unaddressed, a point also raised by the Belem Gender Action Plan (2026-2035) at the Conference of Parties (COP 30) in 2025.

WHAT THE THREE SOURCES SHOW TOGETHER

The three sources provide a country-led picture of gender-related commitments, reported action and continuing support needs at different points in the policy and implementation process. The national pathways set out gender-related priorities, structural barriers and proposed responses. The Voluntary Progress Reviews report examples of programmes, financing measures, institutional arrangements, participation mechanisms and beneficiary reach, while the Country Needs Assessments identify continuing needs around finance, meaningful participation, institutional capacity, data and gender-responsive implementation. Across the documents reviewed, there is less information on changes in women's agency, control over resources (and income), unpaid care responsibilities or exposure to discriminatory norms. This highlights an important distinction between documenting gender-responsive actions and assessing whether those actions have contributed to changes in the underlying inequalities identified in the national pathways. The analysis therefore suggests a need to place greater emphasis on implementation, outcome tracking and linking gender-related commitments to specific targets and indicators.

ACTION POINTS FOR THE HUB AND THE ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT

In the context of this review, the following actions could be prioritized in support of national pathways through a gender-lens:

- Support countries to move from gender commitments to implementation packages. Where national pathways identify barriers such as land, finance, care or limited participation, support could help countries define the corresponding policy action, responsible institution, financing requirement, timeline and indicator. This would involve cross-ministerial and cross-sectoral collaboration.
- Use Country Needs Assessments to match gender-related needs with technical and financing support. Recurrent requests around women's access to finance, women-led enterprises, inclusive governance, institutional capacity and gender-disaggregated data provide concrete entry points for connecting countries with UN entities, technical partners and financing mechanisms.
- Embed gender criteria within wider food systems investment and implementation processes. Rather than developing parallel gender activities, financing and implementation support should assess who can access resources, who benefits, who participates in decisions and whether interventions address the structural barriers identified in national pathways.

- Strengthen country-led reporting on outcomes (including on nutrition and health), not only activities. Future follow-up could complement reporting on programmes and beneficiary numbers with information on women's control over resources, decision-making, income, unpaid care and exposure to discriminatory norms, all of which have implications for consumption and nutrition, supported where possible by sex-disaggregated indicators.
- Facilitate targeted peer learning on gender-responsive implementation. Building on the five avenues identified in this review, the Hub could compile a small set of country cases documenting the response adopted, the implementation process, institutional arrangements, time required and lessons emerging. These could be shared with National Convenors and used to support exchange between countries facing similar implementation challenges. Where relevant, existing gender-focused networks or partners could also be engaged to inform this learning.
- Support convergence across existing reporting frameworks and datasets to strengthen gender monitoring in food systems. The Hub could consider drawing on indicators already being collected through existing national and international reporting systems. These could include Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women (SDG indicator 2.2.4.b); women's ownership or secure rights over agricultural land (SDG indicator 5.a.1); women's participation in National Pathway governance and implementation processes, drawing on Hub reporting; discrimination in laws, social norms and practices captured through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Social Institutions and Gender Index (OECD SIGI); women's experience of violence and related empowerment measures available through Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS); and time spent on unpaid domestic and care work (SDG indicator 5.4.1), drawing on national time-use data. Where data are available, measures of public provision or expenditure on childcare could provide additional information on support for reducing unpaid care burdens.

Scope note: This analysis covers English-language pathways only. Of the 68 pathways reviewed, 58 contained substantive gender-related content after manual review. Findings should not be generalised to all Member States without caveat.

DISCLAIMER

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