

IS WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT BEARING FRUIT?

Mapping Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) Results using the Gender and Food Systems Framework

Emily Myers, Jessica Heckert, Simone Faas, Hazel Malapit, Ruth Meinzen-Dick, Kalyani Raghunathan, and Agnes Quisumbing



I. CONTEXT AND STUDY OBJECTIVES

- Women's contributions to and participation in food systems are often undervalued (Quisumbing et al., 2021). Understanding how women's empowerment and gender may influence food system outcomes is critical to supporting more equitable food systems.
- We conduct a **synthetic review** of the association between gender equality and women's empowerment and food system outcomes.
- We structure our review around the **Gender and Food Systems Framework** (GFS framework: Figure 1; Njuki et al., 2021), that conceptualizes gender as an important lever for progress, and measure empowerment using the **Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)** metrics (Alkire et al., 2013; Malapit et al., 2017; Malapit et al., 2019).

OBJECTIVES

- To use the existing literature to determine the direction of the relationship between food systems outcomes and empowerment and highlight possible mechanisms behind these relationships.
- To identify patterns in the findings and knowledge gaps that may be investigated in future research.
- To tease out the policy implications of our findings.

II. METHODS

- We used an iterative search strategy. We focused on studies published between 2012 and April 2022 that used WEAI metrics, which include WEAI indicators, as well as the aggregate individual- and household-level indicators that comprise WEAI, A-WEAI, and pro-WEAI.
- We used the GFS Framework to define the primary food systems outcomes in our review: food systems outcomes: diet, nutrition, and food security outcomes (including water, sanitation, and hygiene [WASH] outcomes); economic and livelihood outcomes; environmental outcomes; and well-being outcomes.
- We categorized each paper according to: primary food system outcome; study country; type of data (cross-section or panel); sampling design; empowerment measure used; key findings; positive, negative, mixed or null relationships; causal or observational

III. FINDINGS

Overview of studies

- Of the 30 papers included, 27 were cross-section studies and 3 were panel studies. 22 studies estimated associations or correlations. 8 studies attempted to identify causal effects using quasi-experimental methods: 6 used instrumental variables (IV) and two used switching regression models.
- The 30 publications covered agricultural and mostly rural populations in 9 African and 5 Asian countries, with 2 studies covering multiple countries. The most studied country was Bangladesh (12 studies).
- Table 1 summarizes findings, showing how much evidence in the existing literature there is around food system outcomes and to what degree the studies identified agree whether women's empowerment has a positive association or causality with the outcome.

Diet, nutrition, food security, and WASH outcomes

- Diet: 6 of 8 studies reported positive relationships between empowerment and dietary outcomes; 2 reported mixed results (i.e., both positive and negative associations).
- Nutrition: 8 out of 13 studies document positive associations of women's empowerment with various children's nutrition outcomes. 1 reported a negative association with male body mass index, 3 reported mixed results; 1 reported null (insignificant) results.
- Food security: 4 of 5 studies reported positive associations between women's empowerment and food security (measured by household dietary diversity score and per capita calorie availability), while 1 reported mixed results.
- WASH: Only 1 study examined WASH outcomes; it found a positive relationship between better WASH practices and women's empowerment.

Economic and livelihood outcomes

- 8 of 10 studies reported positive associations between economic and livelihood outcomes (measured by agricultural production, productivity measures, and poverty transitions) with women's empowerment, while 2 reported negative associations.
- The lone study on possible associations between women's empowerment and poverty transitions found that higher women's empowerment scores are associated with a lower likelihood that a household is in chronic and transient poverty.

Environmental outcomes

- No studies examining environmental outcomes and women's empowerment fit our inclusion criteria.

Wellbeing outcomes

- 2 of 2 studies found positive relationships between empowerment measures and their studied outcomes –(1) life satisfaction among women and men and girls' education in general and (2) for keeping older boys and girls in school.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Knowledge gaps

- Causal identification: The majority of the included studies are observational studies, which reflects both the impossibility of randomly varying empowerment status and the scarcity of studies that randomly assign treatments. Future research could help fill the gap in identifying causal relationships between women's empowerment and food system-related outcomes.
- Under-examined topics: Considerably more evidence is needed to establish the links between women's empowerment and individual or household well-being, WASH, and environmental and natural resources outcomes.
- Limited geographic scope: The lack of published studies on Latin America, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia is a clear gap that limits our understanding of women's empowerment and gender equality across a broader range of contexts.

Policy implications

- The case for addressing women's empowerment in development programming is strengthened by evidence that empowerment contributes to other development objectives.
- Commitments to funding programs and gender-sensitive evaluations using experimental and quasi-experimental methods is a first step to supporting holistic programs and monitoring whether they facilitate women's empowerment, and to what degree. Additionally, increasing support for qualitative work would allow for greater insights into how different domains of women's empowerment can lead to different outcomes across contexts.
- Greater support for gender research from stakeholders in Latin America, the Middle East, and some parts of Asia would generate more evidence around which indicators of empowerment matter for enhanced food system outcomes in their respective contexts. Closing these knowledge gaps would further clarify how future policy might target different aspects of empowerment to make sound investments in food systems.

V. REFERENCES

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FIGURE 1: Gender and Food Systems Framework (Njuki et al., 2021)

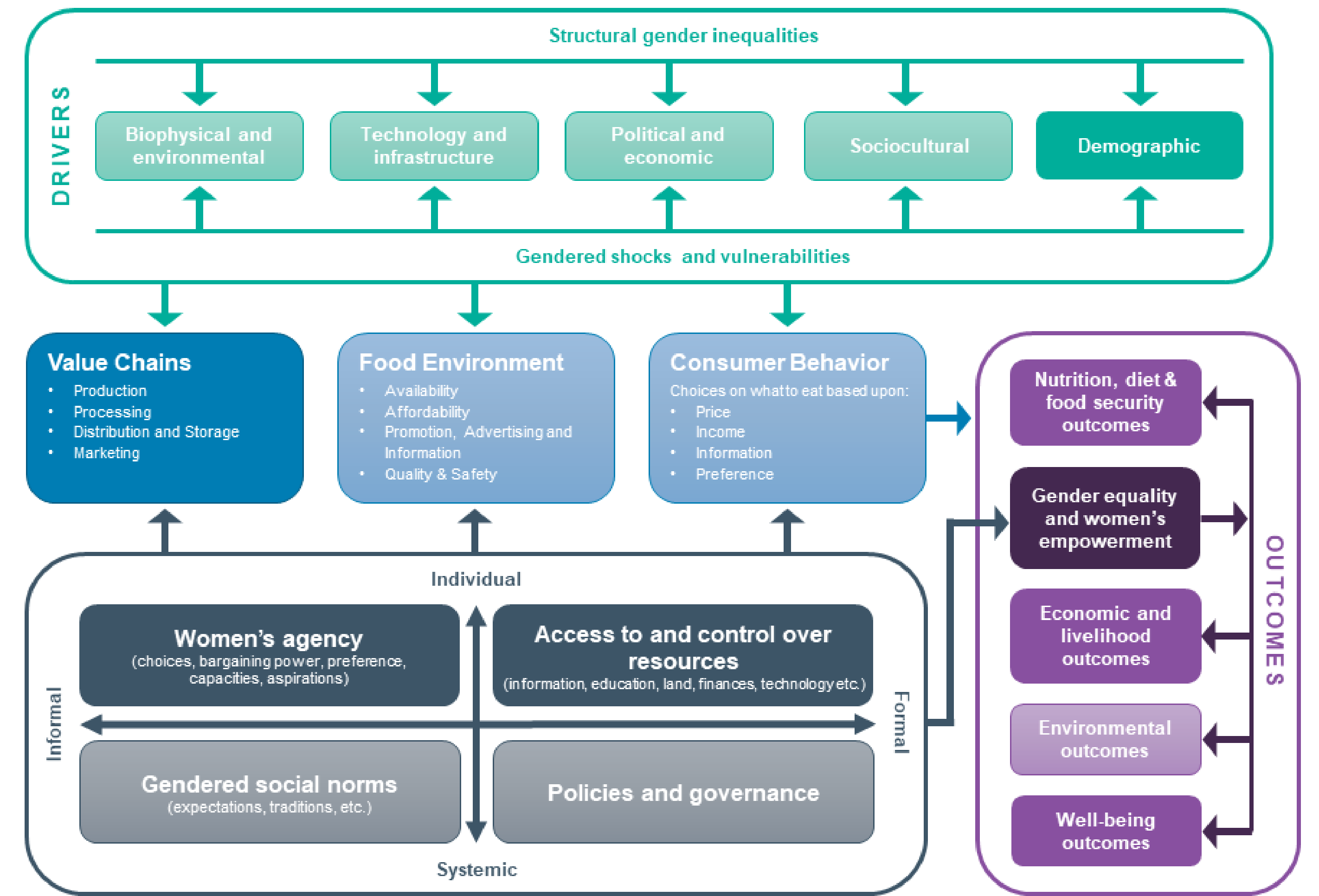


TABLE 1: Women's empowerment in relation to food systems outcomes

	Amount of evidence		
	Low (1 – 3 studies)	Medium (4 – 6 studies)	High (7 – 13 studies)
Degree of agreement among studies	Low		
	Medium	Women's nutrition and diets Household level food security and diets	Agricultural production
	High	Life satisfaction Children's educational outcomes WASH Poverty transitions	Child nutrition and diets

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