



INITIATIVE ON
Gender Equality

Gender norms in agrifood systems

A conceptual framework

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Agriculture is very often portrayed as a masculine activity (Elias et al., 2018), with men seen as “farmers” and women as helpers at best. Modern agriculture is indeed deeply masculinized (Cole et al., 2015; Farhall and Rikards, 2021), with women’s work devalued and often prescribed by what men do. This cultural linking of technology, leadership, and masculinity underpins gender norms influencing behaviors, opportunities, and constraints for both men and women (McDougall et al., 2021). The implications of these deeply rooted gender norms and assumptions about a masculinized agriculture and the limited role of women therein are far-reaching.

While increasingly recognized as critical influences, gendered social norms are relatively unexplored and not yet well understood in agrifood systems (AFS) research and practice. The need to integrate gender norms into the planning, targeting, and scaling strategies of agricultural innovation, moving beyond the predominant and assumption-laden

technical-technological focus, is becoming more widely acknowledged yet there is a methodological gap when it comes to assessing gender norms across contexts (Lopez et al., 2022). A standard set of validated indicators to measure gendered social norms in AFS does not yet exist: “measurement of shifts in social norms is relatively new to programming that targets food security and nutrition” (FAO et al., 2022). We contribute to addressing this lacuna by comprehensively reviewing literature at the intersection between gendered social norms and AFS. We develop a conceptual framework to guide the measurement of normative change, highlighting the most relevant norm domains to measure in AFS at different socioecological levels.

A critical literature review was undertaken September–November 2022, using several databases, including Google Scholar, Google Search, and JSTOR. The final database comprised 123 selected publications, which were sorted, reviewed, and coded using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. At a later stage (July–August 2023), the subset of the 62 AFS and gender norms publications reviewed were further analyzed manually to put together an evidence mapping table (see full report). Important to note is that a limitation of the search terms and methods used is that very little surfaced in relation to gender norms and consumption. For example, we did not tap into the vast literature on gender-related food taboos.

Why norms matter in agrifood systems

Several arguments emerge from the literature to support addressing gendered social norms that limit or constrain women in agrifood systems.

Good farm management and on-farm decision-making

Norms shaping how people perform their “gender roles” affect farm management decisions (Holmelin, 2019) and the scope that women and men have to be involved in decisions about the use of the income they earn as well as their control over that income (Kantor and Kruijssen, 2014). Limits to women’s on-farm decision-making, pressure to make particular decisions as a result of gendered social norms, and constraints to mobility and engagement in the public sphere severely hinder women’s potential.

Access to innovation and services

Technology and innovation alone will not improve the agriculture sector as social relations play a key role in shaping agricultural practices, knowledge, and outcomes (Kantor, 2013). Yet agricultural innovations intended to empower women continue to be risky for them (Sachs, 2019; Pyburn and van Eerdewijk, 2021; Petesch, 2022). Gender norms can and do constrain women’s capacities to access new technologies and practices (Badstue et al., 2017). Norms and the cultures in which they are embedded are reproduced in extension organizations and farmer organizations, as well as in households. Norms shape many aspects of extension, including staffing, methods used, extension packages, and messages promoted, all of which may disadvantage women (Mangheni et al., 2019). Public and private extension organizations working to foster agriculture and livestock production have been found to have striking anti-women biases, and tend to provide support primarily to men (Perez et al., 2015). As a result, women have been found to have less contact with services and are less active in the farmers’ organizations that are often used as a vehicle for service delivery (Mangheni et al., 2019). Further, new technologies can reduce the relative value of female labor, affecting women’s bargaining power in the household. Unequal gender norms, although originating in technology change, can be maintained as social norms (Mackie et al., 2015).

Capacity to innovate

Capacity to innovate is shaped by pressure to conform to social norms (Cohen et al., 2016), which, alongside agency and related assets and capacities – such as technical knowledge or social capital, influences women’s access to, participation in, and benefits from agricultural and environmental innovation (Badstue et al., 2017, 2018a). Gendered social norms influence men and women’s ability to try out, adopt, and make decisions around agricultural innovations (Badstue et al., 2018b). The fluidity of gender norms sets the context for engaging with agricultural innovation; more rigid norms can inhibit women’s capacity to innovate (Aregu et al., 2018; Petesch et al., 2018a). Men tend to be better positioned than women to take advantage of innovation opportunities, and women innovators risk facing criticisms for challenging local gender norms, more so than men (Badstue et al., 2018b). This is particularly the case when women are married, as spousal support is critical to the success of (married) women innovators (Badstue et al., 2018b). In addition, norms are shaped by women and men’s capacities to negotiate access to the resources and opportunities necessary for agricultural innovation (Petesch, 2022).

Addressing gender asset gaps in agrifood systems

A deeper understanding of how norms, customs, and laws influence the asset rights of women and men is needed (Weeratunge et al., 2012). Some norms are very persistent – for example deep-seated norms that view certain assets as “men’s assets” (Koning et al., 2021) to the extent that, even where women are the intended beneficiaries of a program, men still primarily or exclusively control those assets and make major decisions in relation to them (Johnson et al., 2016). This may include ownership or control over assets such as land, cattle, and farming equipment (Cole et al., 2014). As a counterbalance, explicit steps are needed to ensure women maintain or accumulate assets, including on norms related to women’s control and ownership (individually or jointly with others in the household (ibid.)). Addressing gender norms in AFS addresses a blind spot in the work on gender gaps in agriculture – that of getting at the long-overlooked factors underlying those gaps (Weeratunge et al., 2012; Cornwall and Edwards 2014).



Bean power in Tanzania.
Photo: © 2016CIAT/GeorginaSmith

Improving resilience to climate change and shaping adaptive capacity

Rural women are widely regarded and reported as being at high risk of negative impacts from climate change (Rao, 2017). Household responsibilities (e.g. childcare, collection of firewood and water) render women more vulnerable to the challenges created by climate change, especially when they play bigger roles in agricultural work owing to male out-migration for labor. Low-income women and women-headed households are particularly vulnerable (ibid.). Systemic inequities and gender bias are exacerbated by worsening ecological conditions owing to climate change. Importantly it is not women's sex (female) that makes them more sensitive to climate change challenges but rather the gendered roles, work, and responsibilities attributed to them and their related vulnerability as a result of gendered institutions like inheritance systems. Women and men have differentiated, but complementary roles, shaped by cultural values and social norms, which also shape adaptation responses to climatic stresses (Rao, 2017; Glazebrook et al., 2020). Women's diminished access to agricultural resources, combined with gendered social norms, can inhibit their adaptive capacity (Jost et al., 2016). Climate-smart agriculture (CSA) is an example of an adaptation response and a sound strategy for climate resilience. However, how CSA approaches perform in relation to gender equality and women's empowerment within households is not well understood.

Motivation and inspiration

Elias et al. (2018), in a large-scale qualitative study, found that gender norms that discriminate against women dissuade them from wanting to work in the sector: young women, unlike their male counterparts, expressed little interest in agriculture-related work. Others back this up, finding that limited rights and lack of land access and ownership act as a disincentive for women to practice (for example) CSA (Jost et al., 2016). Further, a set gender division of roles and responsibilities can limit (young) women's ability to learn new skills related to agriculture (Badstue et al., 2020a), and young women's marriage and childbearing from an early age - influenced by gender norms - can affect time available to engage in commercial farming, as well as capacities to do so (Leon-Himmelstine et al., 2021). These normative factors affect the future of the agriculture sector and women's potential and motivation to work in it.

“Women and men have differentiated, but complementary roles, shaped by cultural values and social norms, which also shape adaptation responses to climatic stresses.”

How gendered social norms work

While norms are just one aspect of gender relations – alongside the gender division of labor, gender roles, socialization, and gendered power relations – some consider them to be the social rules and expectations that keep the gender system intact (Heise et al., 2019; Cislighi and Heise, 2020). Gender norms shape the actions of women and men in a particular group or society to the point that they become a profound part of a person's sense of self (Cislighi et al., 2018). They are “nested in people's minds” as well as being institutionally embedded (ibid.). They are produced, reproduced, upheld, and reinforced through social interaction, via institutions, and by individuals (Marcus, 2018). Gender norms matter because they shape women and men's (often unequal) access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting voice, agency, and power (Cislighi et al., 2018). They also can exert powerful influence over economies and financial markets (Koning et al., 2021) and many spheres of social and political life (Marcus, 2018). They can be powerful forces in sustaining the status quo of existing hierarchies (Edström et al., 2015)

Gender norms apply to all gender categories; however, in practice, the main distinction tends to be between women and men (Pearse and Connell, 2016). They are generally understood as defining the expected behavior of people who identify (or are identified by others) as male or female (Harper et al., 2020). As social rules, they frame what is “typical and appropriate” for a woman or man to be and do in their society (Kruijssen et al., 2018; Badstue et al., 2020a; Harper et al., 2020). That is to say: “communities and societies create collective beliefs about what behaviors are appropriate for women and men and the relations between them” (Social Norms Learning Collaborative, 2021). Gender norms are a type of sociocultural regulation or social control mechanism that provide a sense of direction to men and women (Spencer et al., 2015 in Mangheni et al., 2019).

Gender norms often reflect and reinforce unequal gender relations, disadvantaging women and girls as well as men and boys who do not conform to the prevailing gender norms (Harper et al., 2020). Further, prevailing gender norms often overlook non-binary or gender-fluid identities (Harper et al., 2020). That said, some definitions of gender norms do explicitly include intersections like age and stage in life (Edström et al., 2015; van Eerdewijk et al., 2017; Marcus 2018;

Cislighi and Heise, 2020; Petesch, 2022), household position, marital status, socioeconomic category or class, education (Petesch, 2022), caste, ethnicity, religious affiliation (Badstue et al., 2020b), disability (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017), non-binary genders, sexual orientation, and gender identity (Burjorjee et al. 2017 in Koning et al., 2021; Harper et al., 2020; USAID, 2021).

Gendered social norms are powerful: they influence human behavior both in familiar situations where the rules are known and in unfamiliar situations where people try to learn the new rules and comply with them (Cislighi and Heise, 2016). They affect how we all act in our everyday lives, by determining the distribution of the benefits of social and work life (Knight and Ensminger 1998 in McDougall et al., 2021). Norms sometimes represent the interest of power-holders and, as such, instill unconscious biases to support the reproduction of the norm (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2013). However, they do not necessarily benefit anyone (Cislighi and Heise, 2020). Importantly, the driver behind the maintenance of gendered social norms is social influence (Stefanik and Hwang, 2017). Perceived approval and disapproval play a key role in maintaining norms, which includes both covert attitudes and overt rewards and sanctions (Mackie et al., 2015; Stefanik and Hwang, 2017).

Norms are enforced through rewards and punishment – through positive social rewards for adherence to a norm as well as social pressure and perceived negative consequences for deviation from a norm or failure to conform (Mackie et al., 2015). Social rewards can be wide-ranging and include enhanced social status, approval, inclusion, and enhanced standing in the community (Marcus et al., 2015; Cislighi et al., 2019; Harper et al., 2020). The negative consequences for not conforming to a norm are wide-ranging also, including ridicule, social pressure, public surveillance, exclusion, sanctions, intimidation, and stigma (Bicchieri and Mercier, 2014; Marcus, 2015; Marcus, 2018; Cislighi et al., 2019; UNDP, 2020). Beyond actual consequences from others, fear of social disapproval, embarrassment, gossip, violence, or ostracism (shunning) of individuals is a motivator to conform (Bicchieri and Mercier, 2014; Harper et al., 2020). The power and influence of social norms lies also in people's expectations of what may happen if they comply with or deviate from the norm in question (Cislighi et al., 2019).

Interlocking norms discriminatory across socioecological levels

Part of the power and complexity of norms is that they develop, are reproduced, fade, and transform across different socioecological levels, starting with the **individual** and extending to **household** (interpersonal), **community** (organizational), and **systemic**¹ (institutional) levels. Norms produce and reproduce norms across socioecological levels through a complex web of interactions (Morgan, 2014). A social norm is held in place by multiple levels and forces.

“... a gender discriminatory norm may be experienced primarily within the household but be held in place by local custom, perceptions of what is required by religious tradition, stereotyping in the media, certain group’s economic interests or the political interests of particular constituencies.”

(Marcus and Harper, 2014)

Individuals use gender norms to coordinate their behavior with others and carry meanings about gender into all social relations and into new social contexts that they engage in (Ridgeway, 2009; FAO et al., 2022; Petesch, 2022). Individual attitudes and beliefs contribute to the active construction of gender norms and their reproduction in gender hierarchies contrasting desirable masculinities and femininities with non-conforming or marginalized groups (Pearse and Connell, 2016). While norms are collectively held, they are “naturalized” within us (Harper et al., 2020). They have an implicit existence that is deeply embedded in our sense of who we are (Gammage et al., 2016) and in individual values (UNDP, 2020). Norms are absorbed, learned, accepted, and followed from a young age, both consciously and unconsciously (Learning Collaborative to Advance Normative Change, 2019; McDougall et al., 2021). Socialization throughout childhood and adolescence is so strong that the norms are often so internalized that the related ideas and actions are taken for granted and as beyond questioning (Harper and Marcus, 2018).

Norms playing out in a **household** create an unconscious gender bias for children to the point where parenting practices and behaviors are among the predictors of an individual’s gendered behaviors and expectations in life (UNDP, 2020), including young women and men’s educational and occupational aspirations (Elias et al., 2018). An intergenerational effect can be seen whereby gender norms are “passed down” through observation and repetition of behaviors: children learning the “right” behaviors for men and women from their parents (Fleming et al., 2013 in van Eerdewijk et al., 2017). But this is not a passive process: children actively reproduce and make norms, and enforce them, for instance by means of ridicule (Máirtín Mac and Ghail, 1994 in Pearse and Connell, 2016).

Within **communities**, systemic norms both tighten and relax to accommodate practices in the local context (Petesch, 2022; Lopez et al., 2022). Women and men navigate and shape gender norms through upholding, enforcing, complying with, resisting, negotiating, and withdrawing from specific norms in their daily activities and interactions within the household and community (Aregu et al., 2018; Petesch, 2022). Norms become subjects of negotiation and resistance when they constrain or are no longer relevant for people’s daily lives (Petesch et al., 2018b). Prevailing gender norms in a community – what Petesch (2022) refers to as the “local normative climate” and Lopez et al. (2022) refer to as the “gender climate” – interact with other dynamics in the context to differentially shape women and men’s sense of agency and the opportunities they have in their lives (Petesch et al., 2018b). In responding to norms, men and women carve out room for maneuver for their own life projects as individuals (Petesch, 2022) but are also part of an active and ongoing transformation process of the norms themselves. Importantly, the local normative context may encourage or discourage agency, and this will differ for different social categories of women and men (ibid.).

Norms influence how **institutions** take on, promote, or resist efforts to further gender equality (van Eerdewijk et al., 2017) through, for example, organizational procedures and rules, how policy is developed, how interventions are planned and executed, and, ultimately, who these instruments recognize and enable (McDougall et al., 2021). Social norms are thus reinforced through institutions that hold authority and in this way are embedded into religious or moral world views (Harper et al., 2020). Institutions reflect and shape how people behave and interact and thus it is important to understand the institutional (systemic) basis for gender inequality (Branisa et al., 2014) alongside individual, household, and community manifestations.

1. Systemic levels may include agroecological landscapes, market systems, the policy and legislative environments (Badstue et al., 2018b), organizational structures and practices, discursive systems, commercial transactions, and collective identities (Pearse and Connell, 2016).



Adaptation pioneers Kidane and Wilta demonstrating their innovative feed supplements in Ethiopia. Photo: @ Apollo Habtamu ILRI.

But institutions, much like households and communities, are a part of processes of negotiation or contestation of norms, which in turn likely affect the future development and shape of the institution itself (Pearse and Connell, 2016). Formal rules can also be contradicted by gender norms (Brikci, 2013 and Clinton Foundation, 2015 in van Eerdewijk et al., 2017), for example where a law becomes irrelevant as a result of common practice.

“Individual, household (interpersonal), and community (organizational) gender norms are in an iterative relationship with broader economic social and development contexts and processes: they both reflect and are affected by them.”

Systemic reinforcement of gendered social norms underpins, and is sometimes a condition for, norms at other socioecological levels. Individual, household (interpersonal), and community (organizational) gender norms are in an iterative relationship with broader economic social and development contexts and processes: they both reflect and are affected by them (Pearse and Connell, 2016; Harper and Marcus, 2018). Comprehensive societal, religious, or cultural institutions can shape and reinforce systemic norms, for example the practice of seclusion (purdah) in some parts of the world (Sultana, 2014); gender norms rooted in a patrilineal inheritance system and entwined with religious values and practices in Bangladesh (Aregu et al., 2018); and the expectation prevalent in numerous societies that women will engage in care and household work, supported in some cases by tax policies and regulations that define the man as the household head or national health policies requiring permission from a male partner when a woman seeks contraception (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2017). This interlocking nature of gender norms that are reinforced across socioecological levels is extraordinarily powerful.

Mapping the evidence

We map the 62 publications that fall at the intersection of the AFS and gender norms literature against the 6 most prevalent gendered social norm domains, at which socioecological level(s) and with which AFS components (see [full report](#)², Annex 2, for details).

Across norm domains

Access to, ownership of, and control over resources

This domain includes ownership of land, assets, and productive resources like farm machinery, seeds, and livestock; and control over, and access to resources, extension and financial services, and technical knowledge, among others. Norms related to access to, ownership of, and control over resources come up in the literature throughout the AFS. As one might expect, these norms come out strongly in relation to production and, to a marginally lesser extent, input supply. They are least covered in relation to processing and consumption. Access to, ownership, and control over resources is also referred to often with regard to trade and marketing as norms cross-cutting the AFS at the community and systemic levels.

Influence and decision-making

Influence and decision-making, whether about agricultural production or use of income generated, is a gender norm domain that is particularly important at the household (interpersonal) and community levels. Norms related to influence and decision-making are most prevalent in the literature in relation to value chain support and enabling environment actors as well as cross-cutting the AFS. The discussion on these norms comes out at the household, community, and systemic levels. The domain comes out strongly at the community level vis-à-vis norms related to (smallholder) production and more weakly at the household and systemic levels. At the processing node, a few references are made to influence and decision-making at the systemic level only. Interestingly, at the household and community levels, no reference is made to influence and decision-making norms related to (commercial) production, processing, trade, or consumption.

Gender division of labor

The gender division of labor related to care work and household chores is key to this norm domain, as is the often-implicit notion of who “is able to” and “should” carry out “productive” versus “reproductive” tasks. The gender division of labor norm domain is the most prevalent in the literature, especially at the production, processing, trade, and markets nodes, although it comes out at all value chain nodes and cross-cuts the AFS. The consumer level and support actor and enabling environment are the least referenced in the literature in relation to the gender division of labor norm domain.

Decorum and mobility

This norm domain refers to what is seen as appropriate in terms of presenting oneself publicly, as well as freedom of movement – covering the kinds of vehicles accepted, the time of day, and the need to have permission and/or a chaperone to enter certain spaces. Norms around decorum and mobility are most prevalent in the literature related to trade and markets, and cross-cut the AFS, at both the community and the systemic levels. Some reference is also made at the community level in discussions about (smallholder) production and processing. Norms related to decorum and mobility are better addressed in the literature higher up the value chain and at the community and systemic levels. No references are made at the household level, which is logical given that both aspects become important outside of the household.

Bodily autonomy and freedom from violence

Norms related to freedom from violence and to bodily autonomy include the right to choose how many children one will have or to use contraception. This can influence a woman’s agricultural productivity, engagement in certain activities within and across nodes of the value chain, and mobility. Intimate partner violence has debilitating impacts on women’s mental health, confidence, and, in relation to AFS, ability to innovate. This norm domain is core to gender equality and well covered in the gender literature, and should be included in discussions across all socioecological levels and AFS components as it significantly affects agricultural and non-agricultural dimensions of rural life. Despite this, and although these norms are cross-cutting, the literature on AFS and norms does not cover this norm domain in depth. Some references come out in relation to (commercial) production or as a cross-cutting issue across the AFS, and at the systemic level (with a few references at the community level for commercial production). There are a handful of references referring to the household level in relation to consumption and at the systemic level in relation to processing.

2. Pyburn, R. and Hallin, R. 2023. Gendered social norms in agrifood systems: A conceptual framework. Nairobi, Kenya: Gender Equality Initiative. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/135873>.



Bui Van Ben (left) and Dinh Thi Hong (right), Muong ethnic people grow rice and keep pigs, buffalos, chickens in their house to generate more incomes. Photo: © ILRI/Vu Ngoc Dung.

Participation, leadership, and representation

One would expect to see reference to norms related to participation, leadership, and representation at the community (organizational) level and throughout the AFS but in particular where women are more active (e.g. in production or processing). They might take the form of participation or leadership in (women's) groups or cooperatives for production or processing or in political advocacy. However, remarkably few references were made to norms related to participation, leadership, and representation in the literature at the intersection between AFS and norms. These norms come out most strongly as cross-cutting AFS at the community and systemic levels. They are also referred to at (commercial) production nodes, and among support services and the enabling environment, both only at the systemic level. Weak reference is made to norms related to participation, leadership, and representation at the systemic level for production.

Gender norm prevalence by socioecological level

At the **household level**, the norms most referred to across the AFS are those related to influence and decision-making. Access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources; and gender division of labor come up for smallholder production only, and the bodily autonomy and freedom from violence domain has a few references in relation to consumption.

At the **community level**, the access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources; gender division of labor; and influence and decision-making norms all come out strongly across the AFS at all value chain nodes and as cross-cutting the AFS. The norm domains gender division of labor; and access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources are more present throughout the value chain (except for in processing and consumption) and influence and decision-making comes out most strongly in the literature in relation to support services and the enabling environment, as well as cross-cutting the AFS and in (smallholder) production.

The literature referring to the **systemic level** has the most variation in terms of the norm domains referred to. Cross-cutting all AFS components, all six norm domains are represented. Gender division of labor is the most referred to norm domain at the systemic level across all value chain nodes and for support services and the enabling environment as well as for cross-cutting the AFS. Access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources follows gender division of labor in terms of references at the systemic level (only not referred to at the processing and consumption nodes). Influence and decision-making norms are referred to less in the literature in relation to value chain nodes, and more often regarding support services and the enabling environment, as well as being a systemic cross-cutting norm domain.



In Western Bengal, 70% of people depend on agriculture. This woman and her family make a living by selling vegetables, which she collects from her husband's field and sells at the market. Photo: © Krishnasis Ghosh.

Gender norm prevalence by agrifood system component

Importantly, publications at the intersection between AFS and norms overwhelmingly refer to production and primary processing. Studies on production most comprehensively cover the norm domain gender division of labor.

For **smallholder production**, gender division of labor; and access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources predominate across all three socioecological levels. Alongside those two most referenced norm domains, influence and decision-making also comes up at all three levels for (smallholder) production, most strongly at the community level. Decorum and mobility come up (weakly) only at the community level for (smallholder) production. Participation, leadership, and representation; and bodily autonomy and freedom from violence do not come up at all.

For **commercial production**, after gender division of labor, participation, leadership, and representation; and bodily autonomy and freedom from violence come out most strongly, both at the systemic level, with some mention of the latter also at the community level. Reference in the literature to influence and decision-making for commercial production is limited and only at the systemic level. Norms related to access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources come up to a limited extent at both the community level and the systemic level. Influence and decision-making does not come up at all in the studies of commercial production. No discussion on norms at the household level was found in the literature in relation to commercial production.

For **processing**, gender division of labor at the systemic level predominates in the literature. Some references also touch on influence and decision-

making at the community level as well as participation, leadership, and representation; and bodily autonomy and freedom from violence at the systemic level. No references address norms at the household level in relation to processing, and very few touch on the community level.

For **trade and markets**, access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources; gender division of labor; and influence and decision-making predominate at the community and systemic levels - gender division of labor particularly at the systemic level. No reference is made to norms at the household level in relation to trade and markets.

The least covered part of the AFS in our literature review related to **consumption**. Much has been studied on gendered food taboos; however, these did not come strongly out in the literature scan, likely because of the search criteria.

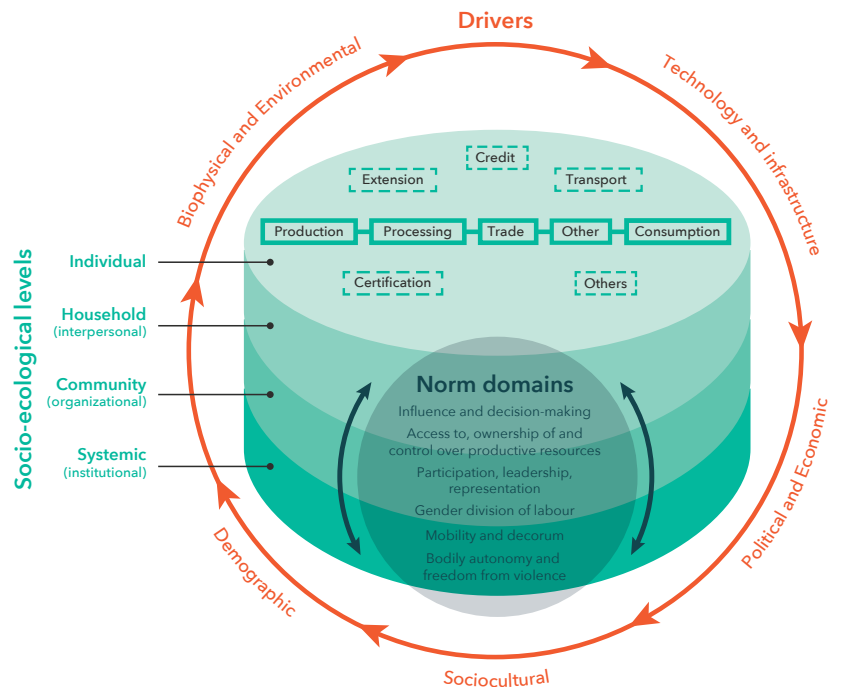
When it comes to **support services** and the enabling environment, influence and decision-making come up most strongly across the household, community, and systemic levels. Participation, leadership, and representation also come up at the systemic level. Fewer references are made to norms related to access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources (at the community and systemic levels) and gender division of labor at the systemic level.

For publications about an AFS as a whole - **cross-cutting** - influence and decision-making is the most referenced norm domain, showing up at all three levels. Norms related to access to, ownership of, and control over productive resources; participation, leadership, and representation; and influence and decision-making come out at both the community and the systemic levels, while gender division of labor; and bodily autonomy and freedom from violence come out only out at the systemic level.

Conceptual framework

The development of this conceptual framework was guided by the question: **Which social and gender norms manifest at different socioecological levels among AFS actors? And, how does this happen?** We prioritized gendered social norms that either hamper or support gender equality and women's economic resilience to climate change within AFS. To help in understanding these dynamics, the conceptual framework brings together four components: drivers of an AFS; AFS elements; socioecological levels; and key norm domains. We illustrate these four components and their relationships in Figure 1. The arrows from the norm domains up through the socioecological levels express the dynamic nature of norms: their fluidity in being contested, negotiated, maintained, and reproduced across and through socioecological levels.

Figure 1: Gendered social norms in agrifood systems



Drivers of an agrifood system that shape and are shaped by gendered social norms

This outer circle of the visual depicts the macro-level influences that characterize the context for an AFS (de Brauw et al., 2019; Njuki et al., 2021). These drivers may affect how and where norms manifest in an AFS. Many are beyond the remit of most AFS actors, meaning that while these drivers shape the AFS and characterize the context, actors cannot control them. These drivers shape and are shaped by gendered social norms.

Agrifood system elements

The top layer at the center of this visual presents the elements of an AFS. This includes the nodes of a generic agrifood chain – production, processing, trade, consumption and so on – which are in boxes along a central line denoting a value chain. Services supporting agrifood system functioning, such as extension and credit services, certification, financial services, or transportation services are denoted with a broken-lined box.

Socioecological levels where gender norms play out

The socioecological levels in the visual represent where gender norms are reproduced, shaped, negotiated, and so on – namely, household (interpersonal), community (organizational), and systemic (institutional). AFS actors comprise the individual level. Underneath this is the household, where individuals internalize and learn about acceptable social norms but also interact with others to maintain, reproduce, negotiate, contest, and adhere to them in interpersonal relationships. The next level – community – provides weight to the norms and with this the fear of consequences (sanctions) for non-conformity and rewards for compliance. Finally, the systemic level refers to gendered social norms that cut across societal levels and are embedded in other institutions like customary and national laws, cultural expectations, and religious beliefs.

Norm domains

The fourth and core component of this conceptual framework is the norm domains that operate at different socioecological levels and across different elements of AFS. We bring in six domains – or types – of norms relevant to AFS: influence and decision-making; access to, ownership of, and control over resources; gender division of labor (and workload); mobility and decorum; bodily autonomy and freedom from violence; and participation, leadership, and representation.



Farmers at Godilogo, Cross River State, Nigeria will increase their productivity through planting of improved cassava stems distributed by IITA/CTA. Photo: © International Institute of Tropical Agriculture/Flickr

Key messages

- Gender norms are fluid, contextual, time-bound, and dynamic; they are collective in nature and affect how people act.
- Gender norms have profound visible and invisible implications for agrifood systems.
- Gender norms manifest differently at different socioecological levels from individual extending to household (interpersonal), community (organizational), and systemic (institutional) levels.
- Gender norms are produced, reproduced, upheld, and reinforced through social interaction, via institutions and by individuals.
- The most persistent and powerful gender norms interlock and amplify across socioecological levels.
- Across all socioecological levels (household, community, and systemic), influence and decision-making; access to, ownership of, and control over resources; and gender division of labor are most visible in the literature.
- Production and processing are by far the most studied component of agrifood systems in relation to norms and gender division of labor is the most referred to norm domain at these nodes.
- The literature on support services (e.g. extension, input supply, credit services) and on the enabling environment (e.g. policy, financial services) covers influence and decision-making most strongly across all socioecological levels. Participation, leadership, and representation also comes up at the systemic level.
- Conceptualizing (and measuring) gender norms in AFS should not be a barrier for agricultural research and development actors to engage in transformative (normative) change processes. This challenge offers the opportunity for real advances towards greater gender equality and increased economic resilience to climate change.
- Delving into the complexity of gender norms holds promise for transformative change towards more equitable and resilient AFS.

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Harvesting WEMA maize trials at KALRO Kiboko Research Station, Makueni. Photo: © CIMMYT/ Peter Lowe.

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