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EVIDENCE EXPLAINER

Gender stereotypes must be overturned to improve women's opportunities as food system entrepreneurs

authored by

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Key messages

- Both men and women in low- and middle-income countries face barriers to owning and growing food-systems enterprises, but those faced by women are generally higher. These barriers include poor access to finance, networks and mentors; lower literacy and numeracy; limited business skills; gender stereotypes; limited mobility; and dual work burdens.
- These issues can be partially overcome by providing training, business development services and financing and by fostering networks, but gender-transformative approaches to address root causes will also be needed.

- Negative stereotypes about women-owned businesses can be self-fulfilling, making it essential to recognize and accommodate the unique challenges women entrepreneurs face without reinforcing such stereotypes.

Micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises are active throughout the food systems of low- and middle-income countries, from production to retail. Handling more than 60 percent of food consumed in many settings (see e.g., Reardon et al. 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-021-01224-1>), Demmler 2020 (<https://doi.org/10.36072/wp.2>)), these businesses play a critical role in ensuring that consumers have access to safe, nutritious foods at affordable prices and in desirable forms. Supporting micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises in low- and middle-income countries' food systems to produce more (and better) foods is thus central to improving nutrition. For most consumers, especially in low-income settings, micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises comprise the backbone of the food systems on which they rely.

However, these small businesses are not neutral, impersonal entities—they are made up of people and shaped by social norms, including those related to gender. As a result, women-owned food system firms in low- and middle-income countries face certain unique challenges and opportunities. By understanding these, programs and policies can be adapted to better meet their needs. This benefits not only nutrition, but also gender equity, as there are numerous potential advantages to women engaging in business, including increased income, agency and social status.

Challenges and opportunities for supporting women-led food system businesses

To better define the challenges and improve understanding of how a focus on gender equity can help advance nutrition and food security, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) (<https://www.gainhealth.org/>) recently reviewed research (<https://doi.org/10.36072/wp.11>) on gender and micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises in low- and middle-income countries, with an emphasis on the experience of women entrepreneurs in food system enterprises.

Our review found that while women's participation in entrepreneurship is generally lower than for men, women tend to be over-represented in the agri-food sector compared to other sectors. In addition, both men and women entrepreneurs in low- and middle-income countries face considerable challenges in growing their businesses, but these are greater for women. Specifically, we identified eight areas of potential barriers, which are mostly not specific to the agri-food sector:

- **Knowledge, skills and information:** Women in low- and middle-income countries often have lower education, literacy and numeracy levels; less knowledge of specific business topics and financial/legal regulations; and less access to information, technology and business development services.
- **Access to financial capital:** Capital is crucial for business growth, but there is a global gender gap in finance access, with just 7–11 percent of investment in emerging markets going to women entrepreneurs due to the factors noted above as well as discriminatory gender norms and legal structures and stereotypes about women’s enterprises being low-growth.
- **Home responsibilities:** Women often have larger burdens of unpaid domestic or social work, which can give them less time and flexibility to engage in entrepreneurship; they may also be pressured by household members or social norms to use profits for household expenses, not business ones.
- **Mobility:** Some women in low- and middle-income countries also face restrictions on their freedom of movement (e.g., due to social norms, risk of violence, poor transport access), which can limit their ability to source inputs and equipment, meet partners, sell products, attend trade fairs and similar events, and access urban and export markets.
- **Social norms and attitudes:** Restrictive social norms and attitudes can result in women being unable to access resources, own assets or enter into contracts; having limited opportunities to gain management experience; being restricted in terms of how and where they can work; or facing increased risk of harassment or bribe requests.
- **Psychological barriers:** Ingrained social norms that place women in a lower social position may give rise to psychological barriers, such as lower confidence when promoting their business to potential investors.
- **Networks and mentors:** Many women entrepreneurs lack access to mentors and networks of other business owners, particularly women.
- **Laws, policies and infrastructure:** Poor infrastructure and government services and unsupportive policies constrain the growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, and many countries have at least one law specifically impeding women’s participation in the economy.

At the same time, there are many examples of successful women-led food system businesses. Moreover, women’s enterprises tend to suffer from being stereotyped as low growth, marginal, micro and locally focused—which can lower the interest of investors and others in supporting them, creating a self-fulfilling cycle. It is thus essential to recognize and accommodate the unique challenges that women entrepreneurs face without reinforcing such stereotypes.

How to better support women-led businesses going forward

Several of the gaps noted above can be addressed by providing women entrepreneurs with access to coaching, mentoring, financing, business networks and business development services (i.e., non-financial support with product development, strategy, diversification or growth). While much of this is applicable across sectors, some services are particularly relevant to the food sector, such as training in quality assurance and regulations related to food safety. There are, however, few such programs tailored to women in low- and middle-income countries; where existing, they are often geared at traditionally 'feminine' industries and focused on basic financial management, neglecting other key aspects of growing a business, such as marketing.

More initiatives to support women-led micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises in food systems in these more substantive ways would thus likely help these businesses to thrive. To succeed, such initiatives should be built on an understanding of local gender dynamics and norms. Services provided, such as technical assistance, training and financing, should not be one-size-fits-all but rather based on detailed needs assessments to ensure that support is tailored to the needs of each entrepreneur, without assuming women-owned firms have different needs—but allowing them to.

In the long run, however, gender-transformative approaches will be needed to address structural barriers to women's entrepreneurship and to work with men and women to address stereotypes around gender roles and women in business.

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