



## **Agricultural Collectives' Impact on Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality**

# **Literature Review**



# Literature Review of Agricultural Collectives' Impact on Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

To better understand the potential for agricultural collectives to empower women, this literature review is conducted using the theoretical lenses of two key frameworks: **She Feeds the World** and the **Gender Equality Framework**, to answer the following evaluation questions:

- Generally, what is the current thinking about agricultural collectives as produced by relevant academics, international development organizations, practitioners, and communities?
- What does the contemporary evidence and thinking reveal about the ability for agricultural collectives to contribute to the She Feeds the World change areas?
- What are some significant gaps in the literature related to the understanding of agricultural collectives to create gender equality food systems as defined by the six She Feeds the World change areas: Supporting women's empowerment, Increasing women's access to and control of productive resources, Enabling women's access to inclusive markets, Improving nutrition, Promoting social protection, and Multiplying impact to enable change at scale?

## Supporting Women's Empowerment

Though women's empowerment is a broad area of change, it is defined in the SFTW and GEF as comprising three domains: building agency, changing relations, and transforming structures, which includes engaging men and boys. Building agency refers to the strengthening of women's capacity and skills, and can be measured by looking at specific indicators including women's participation in household decision-making, weekly hours women spend on unpaid domestic and care work, and reported feelings of confidence, aspiration and self-esteem. Agricultural collectives have provided significant improvements in such measurements of women's agency. An analysis of three large-scale CARE collectives projects found that 42% of the women participants reported improvements in women's equity in household decision-making.<sup>1</sup> Similar analyses have supported the idea that collectives have a key role to play in changing the household burdens of women, particularly when men and boys are engaged and supportive in addressing women's barriers to participation.<sup>2,3</sup> Evidence also supports the ability for collectives focused on promoting indigenous peoples' rights and creating partnerships with indigenous organizations to increase the inclusion and empowerment of indigenous women in collectives, markets, and decision-making spaces.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> CARE. (2016). The role of collectives in achieving women's empowerment: a cross-project analysis. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/care\\_crossproject\\_wee\\_revisedformat\\_june\\_2016.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/care_crossproject_wee_revisedformat_june_2016.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women's collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women's empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295–311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

<sup>3</sup> Bosc, P. (2018). Empowering through Collective Action, IFAD Research Series. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/research-series-issue-29-empowering-through-collective-action>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Increased access to resources can also be a significant enabler for women's empowerment, such as the case of CARE's Every Voice Counts program in Burundi, where women were able to use increased incomes "to hire labour for farm activities and domestic responsibilities so they could participate better in community life."<sup>5</sup> In addition to the reduction of women's time poverty from domestic responsibilities, increasing agency through improved confidence and capacities, and transforming structures through deeper linkages to networks of collectives and women's CSOs also facilitated the increased participation of women in local and political life.<sup>6,7</sup> However, even collectives specifically focused on women's empowerment can still fail to address barriers to women's agency. The Vietnam Women's Union, for example, works to improve women's participation in the workforce while simultaneously advocating for the traditional role of women as primary caregivers in households.<sup>8</sup>

Participation in collectives can also be a critical pathway for changing relations by creating safe spaces to discuss unequal power dynamics, re-envision harmful gender norms, and allow men and women to create solutions that enable more equal relationships. Harmful gender norms are often some of the most significant barriers to increasing women's empowerment, even within collectives.<sup>9</sup> Though agricultural collectives are not gender equality by default, studies have shown that collectives that employ strategies for re-envisioning harmful or discriminatory gender norms can create new perceptions of women that can shift intra-household and community gender dynamics.<sup>10</sup> In the Mata Masu Dubara (MMD) collectives in Niger, 56% - 90% of men in different towns reported that their beliefs about women's roles in decision-making changed since their wives joined the collectives.<sup>11</sup> However, it's important to note that these MMDs (or VSLAs) also included trainings and dialogues on topics such as gender-based violence (GBV), maternal health, and female leadership. Women in collectives who had safe spaces for dialogues and were able to increase their social capital and solidarity with other women were able to challenge norms around GBV and male promiscuity, and in some cases reported reduced levels of GBV.<sup>12,13,14</sup> Gender equality approaches such as these are often the key component to ensuring that collectives have the tools and resources available to meaningfully empower women.

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<sup>5</sup> CARE Nederland. (2020). Beyond Economic Empowerment. p. 15, Available at: <https://www.careevaluations.org/evaluation/beyond-economic-empowerment-the-influence-of-savings-groups-on-womens-public-participation-in-fragile-and-post-conflict-affected-settings-every-voice-counts/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women's empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 14. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Waibel, G. and Glück, S. 2013. More than 13 million: mass mobilisation and gender politics in the Vietnam Women's Union. *Gender and Development* 21 (2): 343-361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802148>

<sup>9</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women's empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 13. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Appelstrand, M. & Lidestav, G. (2015). Women entrepreneurship – a shortcut to a more competitive and equal forestry sector? *Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research* 30(3): 1–15.

<sup>11</sup> CARE Nederland. (2020). Beyond Economic Empowerment. p. 69, Available at: <https://www.careevaluations.org/evaluation/beyond-economic-empowerment-the-influence-of-savings-groups-on-womens-public-participation-in-fragile-and-post-conflict-affected-settings-every-voice-counts/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Bosc, P. (2018). Empowering through Collective Action, IFAD Research Series. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/research-series-issue-29-empowering-through-collective-action>

<sup>14</sup> CARE. (2019). Curiosity Collective: Evidence of Social Changes for Women in Savings Groups.

## Increasing Women's Access to and Control Over Productive Resources

One of the primary benefits of agricultural collectives is their potential to increase the access and ownership of critical resources, such as land, water, technologies and finance, information and extension services, and agricultural inputs. Yet for collectives to be gender equality and bridge gender gaps, there must be proactive targeting of resource access and control for women, which in turn reinforces changes in gender norms, increased agency, and sustained poverty reduction.<sup>15, 16, 17</sup> Collectives that allow women to “build the capacity to organize themselves – both within women-only and mixed organisations – for their political, civic and economic rights” are critical pre-conditions for ensuring equal access to resources for men and women.<sup>18</sup> Some of the pathways by which collectives facilitate greater resource access for women include access to loans and financial institutions; business skills training; greater access to markets, inputs, and technologies; policy advocacy; and greater support from men and boys.<sup>19,20,21</sup>

Increased income and on-farm productivity for women small-scale farmers can be one of the most powerful benefits for collectives' participants. An evaluation of women's participation in Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) groups, a cooperative membership organization in India, found consistent increases in incomes, particularly for landless women, who reported a 64% increase in farm income. This example also demonstrates the positive impact of improving multiple forms of resource access as these income increases were facilitated by a better awareness of credit through “better access to information (+40 per cent), increasing the likelihood of obtaining a loan (by 13 per cent) and having a bank account (by 10 per cent).”<sup>22</sup> In addition, SEWA members, particularly the poorest and landless, were able to improve productivity by 67% through training that allowed for a better utilization of plots.<sup>23</sup> In CARE's Pathways Program<sup>24</sup>, increase to credit and loans also facilitated greater access to agricultural inputs

<sup>15</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women's collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women's empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295-311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

<sup>16</sup> CARE. (2018). She Feeds the World: CARE's Programmatic Framework for Food and Nutrition Security. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/she\\_feeds\\_the\\_world\\_final\\_-\\_061318.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/she_feeds_the_world_final_-_061318.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women's empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 16. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> CARE Norway. (2020). GEWEP II: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Programme II. Available at: <http://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/NORAD-GEWEP-II-2019-Final-Report-with-annexes-1-6-ID-43617.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> CARE. (2016). CARE Pathways Final Evaluation: Global Report. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways\\_endline\\_global\\_report.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways_endline_global_report.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Bosc, P. (2018). Empowering through Collective Action, IFAD Research Series. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/research-series-issue-29-empowering-through-collective-action>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Desai, R. M. and Joshi S. 2013. Can producer associations improve rural livelihoods? Evidence from farmer centres in India. *The Journal of Development Studies* 50 (1): 64-80.

<sup>24</sup> Pathways was implemented in Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Mali, Malawi, Tanzania, and focused on improving the lives of poor women farmers by increasing their opportunities while addressing their social, economic and environmental constraints.

across all project countries “– at endline the percentage of female farmers with access to seeds, fertilizers, and other inputs ranged from 69% - 89%.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite promising evidence for the role of collectives in improving women’s access to resources, significant cultural and social barriers still exist for certain kinds of resources and for ensuring women can control how these resources are used. For example, there is mixed evidence regarding women’s increased access to land. Members of agricultural collectives that include savings groups for women, such as VSLAs and SHGs, have reported better access to land, but in other contexts norms such as patrilineal inheritance and control of land present significant barriers to women.<sup>26</sup> Even in countries such as Kenya, where women’s equal access to land is enshrined in law, significant gaps between men and women still persist, suggesting that collectives need support in advocating for the enforcement and strengthening of equitable land tenure policy.<sup>27, 28,29</sup> These legal barriers exacerbate the significant inequalities in land ownership between small-scale farmers and large agribusiness, in addition to the financialization of farmland, which makes it “difficult to hold investors to account for their economic, social, and environmental impacts when primary investors are unknown or geographically and institutionally remote from the land in question”.<sup>30</sup>

Similar gendered social norms limit women’s ability to control how resources are used. In CARE’s Pathways program, “women in male-headed households in nearly all countries where Pathways was implemented continue to lack access to borrowing and/or control of borrowed funds,” and even where greater access to land was facilitated, evidence suggested that loan proceeds were often turned over to husbands.<sup>31</sup> Increased access to financial resources is also not a guarantee of improving access to other critical resources including water – such was the case for an organization of Kenyan farmer groups focused on women’s empowerment who could not benefit from increased access to tree seedlings due to a lack of public water provision.<sup>32</sup>

## Enabling Women’s Access to Inclusive Markets

Market access is a critical success factor and challenge for small-scale farmers, which is in turn an even greater challenge for women farmers, who face discrimination throughout agricultural value chains. The potential for increasing women’s access to markets is often overlooked by research and evaluations that narrowly focus on economic benefits such as productivity and income, without considering the benefits

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<sup>25</sup> CARE. (2016). CARE Pathways Final Evaluation: Global Report. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways\\_endline\\_global\\_report.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways_endline_global_report.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women’s empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 78. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> CARE Nederland. (2020). Beyond Economic Empowerment. p. 32, Available at: <https://www.careevaluations.org/evaluation/beyond-economic-empowerment-the-influence-of-savings-groups-on-womens-public-participation-in-fragile-and-post-conflict-affected-settings-every-voice-counts/>

<sup>29</sup> International Land Coalition (2021). Uneven Ground: Land Inequality at the Hart of Unequal Societies. Available at: <https://www.landcoalition.org/en/uneven-ground/report-and-papers/>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> CARE. (2016). CARE Pathways Final Evaluation: Global Report. P. 40. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways\\_endline\\_global\\_report.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways_endline_global_report.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women’s empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 108. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

of improved market relations.<sup>33</sup> Some common barriers for women in accessing markets include time poverty and unpaid care burden, harmful and discriminatory gender norms held by market actors who often see men as the primary points of contact for information and negotiations, restricted mobility to travel to markets, and poor access to land.<sup>34, 35</sup> Despite these significant limitations, evidence suggests that participation in collectives can improve women's access to markets, particularly for members of collectives that are focused on solidarity and resource pooling among women, and marketing and networking with local markets. In Ethiopia and Mali, collectives that bought directly from villages "alleviated the challenge faced by women of getting goods to market, in other cases, instances were identified of women co-operating informally at a small scale to get goods to market through travelling together in groups for safety; pooling produce to give to one person to take to market (vegetables in Ethiopia); or using group savings to pay for transportation of Shea in Mali."<sup>36</sup>

### Increasing Access to Inclusive Markets in Collectives – SEWA's Rural Distribution (RUDI) Initiative

When SEWA asked its members "why do farmers remain hungry?", they consistently replied that inequities and inefficiencies in rural agricultural value chains, such as receiving unfair prices for their produce, were some of the greatest drivers of hunger among small-scale farmers. In response to this feedback, SEWA created the Rural Urban Distribution Initiative (RUDI) to establish a rural distribution network for SEWA members that seeks to provide "multiple employment opportunities and build up an integrated food value chain in order to enhance the efficiency of agricultural activities, to reduce the hardships by the producers, processors and to create a robust self-reliant agro producing company to ensure food security to rural members." Increasing market access for small-scale farmers by processing, packing, and marketing goods produced by SEWA members is one of RUDI's primary pathways to economic empowerment. RUDI creates these new entry points to markets through the establishment of District Associations, which are farmers' organizations that purchase produce from small-scale farmers, brand them as RUDI products, and then send them to be packaged and processed. This robust and innovative approach to improving value chains has increased wages, created new livelihood opportunities, improved the availability of SEWA members' goods, and guaranteed market prices for poor, rural SEWA members who were struggling to find employment opportunities and new market channels.

In CARE's Pathways Program, collectives participants in India also reported that women's increased

<sup>33</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women's collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women's empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295-311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Bosc, P. (2018). Empowering through Collective Action, IFAD Research Series. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/research-series-issue-29-empowering-through-collective-action>

<sup>36</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women's collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women's empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295-311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

mobility was positively correlated with market access.<sup>37</sup> Networks of local collectives can create new markets for women to sell their products, such as in the case of a dairy cooperative in India that allowed poor, landless, and women small-scale farmers to sell dairy milk through the village cooperative.<sup>38</sup> Collectives can also improve market access by overcoming harmful social and gender norms through solidarity, support from NGOs and organizational partners, and government advocacy. In Sudan, for example, self-help groups in CARE's Every Voice Counts were able to open a new market for women-led tea production by working with CARE staff and officials in the Ministry of Social Affairs to convince traditional leaders that tea-making is an appropriate activity for women.<sup>39</sup> Evidence from collectives in Tanzania and Mali also shows that women in collectives have better access to market information and more market outlets.<sup>40</sup> These cases illustrate the importance of understanding and directly addressing the specific socioeconomic, cultural, and legal barriers to women's access to markets, which are often unaddressed in the operations and evaluation of collectives.

## Promoting Social Protection

Social protection is a key pathway for women's empowerment as it encompasses access to critical resources such as food aid, school feeding, cash, vouchers, and safety nets through linkages to markets and governance systems.<sup>41</sup> Evidence suggests that there is a positive link between higher human development indicators and reductions in inequality, and public spending on social protection measures, though the causality of this relationship is not clear.<sup>42</sup> Social capital, recognition by government, and the ability to organize collectively are all preconditions for the expansion of social protection programs into underserved communities. Participation in agricultural collectives can be a powerful tool for collective action, particularly for women who often lack the time, resources, and recognition to organize for access to social protection services. In their review of SEWA groups, for example, Desai and Joshi note that, "SEWA's main effect appears to be to facilitate the organization of communities, provide them with information, motivate greater intra-group cooperation, and lower the costs of participating in collective decision-making. It may be that these 'indirect' behavioural effects on program participants outweigh the direct effects on income, consumption, and employment, at least in the short run."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> CARE. (2016). CARE Pathways Final Evaluation: Global Report. P. 53. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways\\_endline\\_global\\_report.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways_endline_global_report.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Bosc, P. (2018). Empowering through Collective Action, IFAD Research Series. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/research-series-issue-29-empowering-through-collective-action>

<sup>39</sup> CARE Nederland. (2020). Beyond Economic Empowerment. p. 34, Available at: <https://www.careevaluations.org/evaluation/beyond-economic-empowerment-the-influence-of-savings-groups-on-womens-public-participation-in-fragile-and-post-conflict-affected-settings-every-voice-counts/>

<sup>40</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women's collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women's empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295–311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

<sup>41</sup> CARE. (2018). She Feeds the World: CARE's Programmatic Framework for Food and Nutrition Security. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/she\\_feeds\\_the\\_world\\_final\\_-\\_061318.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/she_feeds_the_world_final_-_061318.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> IFAD. (2017). Social protection and inclusive rural transformation. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/documents/38714170/39318495/Research+Series+Issue+9+-+Social+protection+and+inclusive+rural+transformation.pdf/bc320b6b-46c3-49a3-be6a-1e15e5688d5b?eloutlink=imf2ifad>

<sup>43</sup> Desai, R. M. and Joshi S. (2014). Collective action and community development: evidence from self-help groups in rural India. *World Bank Economic Review* 28 (3): 492-524. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lht024>

Similar results were noted in the MMD collectives in Niger, where these groups spontaneously developed networks and federations to scale the ability for women to organize collectively, despite many of these women being poor, illiterate, and living in remote areas. Women participants in these MMD groups noted that they were more aware of their human rights and had begun working with “civil society and government bodies to make services more accessible and accountable to women, while, at the same time, offering remedial solutions where services are unavailable.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, this evaluation also noted that MMD groups showed evidence of fulfilling each of the seven capacity characteristics shared by successful movements for progressive social change such as having diverse leadership, a strong grassroots base, and a shared collective political agenda.<sup>45,46</sup> A review of Forest and Farm Producer Organizations (FFPOs) found that while the provision of social protection services by FFPOs was common, there was significant variation in the kinds of services offered. Common social protection benefits for FFPOs included building schools and clinics, but FFPOs with a majority of women were found to offer different types of care services such as social insurance for healthcare and “lobbying for the right to food sovereignty within territories.”<sup>47</sup>

While there is significant evidence for the role that collectives can play in increasing access to social protection services, the mechanisms by which this happens are not always clear. An evaluation of collectives in CARE’s Pathways program found that households increased their use of informal and formal social protection mechanisms, specifically those in India, Malawi, and Mali which increased their participation in food or cash-for-work programs. However, it’s not stated whether participation in collectives increased the service coverage of these programs or the willingness to participate in programs they already had access to.<sup>48</sup> Understanding these connections is also difficult as the relationship between social capital and access to social protection services is two-way – “connections with formal and informal support networks play a critical role in empowering existing social capital towards more inclusion.”<sup>49</sup>

Though more research is needed to understand the pathways for change between participation in agricultural collectives and social protection, it is clear that evaluations of collectives need to understand the social as well as economic benefits. Efforts to increase access to social protection services, such as health care, cannot rely on “material inputs alone, or simply through ‘technological fixes’, whether imposed or ‘magnanimously granted’ by those with superior resources.”<sup>50</sup> Collectives with the proper resources, connections, and mandates can also provide and advocate for the government provision of

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<sup>44</sup> CARE. (2017). Political consciousness, leadership, and collective action in the Mata Masu Dubara Structure in Niger. Available at: [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/Mata-Masu-Dubara-and-collective-actionZreport\\_Dec-2017.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/Mata-Masu-Dubara-and-collective-actionZreport_Dec-2017.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Global Fund for Women. (2018). Movement Capacity Assessment Tool. Available at: [https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2018/06/MCAT-Public-Version-English.pdf](https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2018/06/MCAT-Public-Version-English.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women’s empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 20. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> CARE. (2016). CARE Pathways Final Evaluation: Global Report. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways\\_endline\\_global\\_report.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways_endline_global_report.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> Bosc, P. (2018). Empowering through Collective Action, IFAD Research Series. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/research-series-issue-29-empowering-through-collective-action>

<sup>50</sup> Szreter, S. and Woolcock, M. (2004). Health by association? Social capital, social theory, and the political economy of public health. *International Journal of Epidemiology* 33: 650-667.



important childcare services to reduce care burdens and increase participation amongst women.<sup>51</sup> Certain types of collectives even have specific mechanisms for financing social support services, such as the social fund in VSLAs where a portion of shares contributed by members are pooled to cover emergencies like “illness, funeral expenses, house repairs, and other urgencies, or school fees for orphans of deceased relatives.”<sup>52</sup>

## Improving Nutrition

Nutrition is a prerequisite for good health and a necessary measure to prevent child stunting and wasting, anemia in women, and obesity. Women and children in particular suffer acutely from poor nutrition. In 2016, “32.8 percent (or 613 million) of women of reproductive age (15–49 years) globally were affected by anemia, practically unchanged since 2012,” while nearly 7 percent of children under 5 suffered from wasting in 2019.<sup>53</sup> The causes of poor nutrition are complex and varied, and are linked to structural barriers such as poor access to land, education, employment, income, and technology.<sup>54</sup> Evidence for the link between participation in agricultural collectives and improved nutrition for households, women, and children is mixed, and highly dependent on the type of collective and the local social and political context. Agricultural collectives in and of themselves don’t necessarily ensure benefits to nutrition, but there is a positive body of evidence supporting the link between collectives focused on women’s empowerment and improved nutrition.

Reviews of women’s groups, particularly Self-Help Groups, show that these forms of collective action offer multiple pathways for improving the nutrition for women and children. A study on women’s empowerment (as measured by the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index) and nutrition in Ghana revealed that group membership was one of the most significant contributors to a healthier Body Mass Index (BMI) and dietary diversity score for women.<sup>55</sup> In a literature review of nutrition and Self-Help Groups, this link between group membership in agriculture and improved nutrition was noted in many of the reviewed studies.<sup>56</sup> An article published by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) stated that this link between participation in women’s groups and improved nutrition outcomes could be explained through one or more pathways:

“increased savings and greater purchasing power; engagement in agriculture; behavior change communication to generate knowledge sharing around health and nutrition; and improved community engagement, resulting in social accountability and community demand for government programs focused on nutrition. Common to all these pathways are three elements:

<sup>51</sup> ILO & WIEGO. 2018. Cooperatives meeting informal economy workers’ child care needs: a joint ILO and WIEGO initiative. International Labour Organization (ILO) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). <http://bit.ly/2NjnpZS>

<sup>52</sup> CARE. (2021). VSLA 101. Available at: <https://www.care.org/our-work/education-and-work/microsavings/vsla-101/>

<sup>53</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2020. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9692en>

<sup>54</sup> Clarey, T., Venton, C.C. (2019). Nutrition Outcomes, Social Capacities and Self Help Groups. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b2110247c93271263b5073a/t/5cdad3f97817f7a375a6023c/1557845000>

<sup>55</sup> 4 Ross, Kara L, Yacob A. Zereyesus, Aleksan Shanoyan, and Vincent Amanor-Boadu (2015). “The Health Effects of Women Empowerment: Recent Evidence from Northern Ghana.” International Food and Agribusiness Management Review 18.1

<sup>56</sup> Clarey, T., Venton, C.C. (2019). Nutrition Outcomes, Social Capacities and Self Help Groups. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b2110247c93271263b5073a/t/5cdad3f97817f7a375a6023c/1557845000>

building social capital, acting collectively and empowering women themselves.”<sup>57</sup>

A case study of a dairy cooperative in India also revealed that increased income from technical improvements made available by participation in the cooperative improved family nutrition status.<sup>58</sup>

Other reviews of collectives that weren't focused on women's empowerment or nutrition, however, didn't reveal a similar relationship. CARE's Pathways Program reported that in Tanzania, the project was unable to reduce high rates of chronic malnutrition in children, and in Ghana, Mali, and Tanzania, women were found to be consuming less diverse diets than men. These results were linked to a lack of a nutritional education component, and an emphasis on food availability and access but not food utilization.<sup>59</sup> However, the results were different in India and Malawi where households reported an increase in dietary diversity, especially among female-headed households in India. In contrast, CARE's ECOFERME project in Mali, which linked VSLAs with conservation agriculture, helped more than 300 malnourished children get treatment. As opposed to increases in income, this finding was linked to trainings with the VSLAs to notice signs for malnutrition as well as creating connections with a different CARE project focused on nutrition.<sup>60</sup> These results suggest that improving nutrition through participation in collectives requires support for specific measures and resources that focus on malnutrition, such as trainings, networking with relevant NGO and governments programs, and an explicit focus on women's empowerment and solidarity.

## Multiplying Impact to Enabling Change at Scale

Creating an enabling environment for gender equality change requires advocacy and influence not only at the household and local levels, but among the structures and institutions that enforce and re-create inequalities among men and women. Likewise, the transformative potential of agricultural collectives to empower women needs to be realized at multiple scales of government and among different sectors including academia, NGOs and CSOs, government, and the private sector. Multiplying impact at these scales requires a broad array of approaches, including policy advocacy, partnerships and platforms for organizing and capacity building, innovation and research to develop and mainstream gender equality models, and resources for generating evidence and disseminating knowledge. Agricultural collectives are often able to scale change and provide benefits for members precisely because they are nested within larger networks of collectives that allow them to “take advantage of economies of scale.”<sup>61,62</sup> Yet these networks and partnerships can be realized for different ends (e.g. increasing market share, influencing policy) with different outcomes on women's empowerment.

~~In many instances, the ability~~ of collectives to provide and expand the economic and professional

<sup>57</sup> Kumar, Neha and Agnes Quisumbing. “International Women's Day: In the fight against malnutrition, empower women's groups first.” IFPRI Blog, March 6th, 2018 <http://www.ifpri.org/blog/international-womens-day-fight-against-malnutritionempower-womens-groups-first>

<sup>58</sup> Bosc, P. (2018). Empowering through Collective Action, IFAD Research Series. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/research-series-issue-29-empowering-through-collective-action>

<sup>59</sup> CARE. (2016). CARE Pathways Final Evaluation: Global Report. Available at: [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways\\_endline\\_global\\_report.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/pathways_endline_global_report.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> CARE. (2019). Curiosity Collective: Evidence of Social Changes for Women in Savings Groups.

<sup>61</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women's empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 20. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Evans, A., Divya, N. (2013). Collective Action and Women's Agency: A Background Paper. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/21032>

benefits offered to members is dependent on scaling partnerships and forming networks of collectives. In Ghana, the Kassena-Nankana Baobab Cooperative Union (KANBAOCU) comprises 42 registered cooperative societies, composed of over 12,000 women and 485 men. This scale of membership has allowed KANBAOCU to “pool enough capital resources among members... to develop systems and infrastructure that have both improved welfare and made entrepreneurship viable and sustainable.” Reaching a certain critical mass in membership also allows members to have greater market access through aggregating products, expanding marketing opportunities, and maximizing efficiency through resource pooling, such as in transport.<sup>63</sup>

In the Philippines, the People’s Alliance for Progress Multi-Purpose Cooperative (PAP-MPC), a network of coffee-producing cooperatives primarily led by women, has benefitted from being linked to organizations such as the International Women’s Coffee Alliance, which provides PAP-MPC with business coaching and mentorship opportunities.<sup>64</sup> Creating such organizational partnerships and alliances is also vital in expanding the professional opportunities offered to collective members. Similarly, KANBAOCU’s membership and geographic scale has facilitated linkages to NGOs, farmer and trade associations, and investment funds, which have provided members with access to valuable market information and professional development opportunities such as trainings and mentorship.<sup>65</sup> Yet the potential for greater economic benefits through upscaling can also be detrimental to women’s empowerment if group leadership is dominated by men, which can create inequalities in “in the distribution of marketing opportunities.”<sup>66</sup>

In addition to economic benefits, scaling membership, particularly for collectives focused on women’s empowerment, allows members to enjoy a wider variety of social benefits aimed at closing gender gaps. SEWA benefits from a larger membership (1.2 million members and more than 100 member-owned cooperatives), which has allowed for the creation of a sister cooperative known as VimoSEWA that is solely focused on providing members with social insurance services. In 2017, “VimoSEWA had over 80,000 members accessing comprehensive insurance policies for health, death, accident, property, and lost wages.”<sup>67</sup> SEWA’s significant member base has also enabled successful advocacy efforts with different state governments to channel resources for women’s empowerment and rural development through SHGs. Forming partnerships with other cooperatives and multi-sectoral partners creates new opportunities for the provision of social services, such as in the case of the Unidas Para Vivir Mejor in Guatemala, where members enjoy a discounted price for childcare services offered by local government.<sup>68</sup> Scaling also creates unprecedented access for women in collectives to influence local and national policy. The Mata Masu Dubara (MMD) collectives in Niger, for example, have made connections with influential advocacy groups including the Coordination of Nigerian Women Non-Governmental Organizations and Associations, the Association of Women Lawyers of Niger, and the Nigerian Association

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<sup>63</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women’s collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women’s empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295–311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

<sup>64</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women’s empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 98. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women’s collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women’s empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295–311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

<sup>67</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women’s empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 22. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

for the Defense of Human Rights. Collaborations with these CSO and NGO actors in addition to political parties, “has been essential for advancing gender equality in access to political rights, despite the instance of patriarchal attitudes and partisanship.”<sup>69</sup> However, there are still persistent barriers for the poorest women and those living in remote areas to enjoy these benefits due to membership fees and a lack of urban-rural linkages.<sup>70,71</sup>

## Gaps and Challenges

There is strong evidence that participation in agricultural collectives contributes to women’s empowerment via all six of the SFtW domains, but this review also reveals significant challenges that need to be addressed in order to facilitate gender equality change for members. These are some of the most consistent challenges reported in the literature:

### Participation of the most marginalized

Collectives, particularly savings groups and those focused on marketing, often exclude the poorest and most marginalized women due to restrictive financial requirements such as membership fees, initial investments requirements, and a need for land access and tenure.<sup>72</sup> Literacy skills are similarly key for encouraging women’s membership in collectives, which creates barriers for women without basic literacy and financial skills to join and effectively participate in collectives.<sup>73</sup> In addition, despite the stated principle of collectives to provide fair and open access for membership, there are still instances of discrimination based off of caste and ethnicity that need to be addressed.<sup>74</sup>

### Composition and structure of collectives

Though collectives that focus on women’s empowerment generally produce greater benefits for female members, there are important drawbacks to consider in both female-only and mixed gender groups. Collectives with both male and female members create spaces for men and boys to learn about and better support women’s needs, and benefit in instances where men have greater access to information and markets due to structural barriers for women (e.g. long-distance transportation of goods, making connections with new buyers). Though there are also instances where male leaders with significant land holdings have co-opted the mandate of collectives to their economic and social benefit.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> CARE. (2017). Political consciousness, leadership, and collective action in the Mata Masu Dubara Structure in Niger. Available at: [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/Mata-Masu-Dubara-and-collective-actionZreport\\_Dec-2017.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/Mata-Masu-Dubara-and-collective-actionZreport_Dec-2017.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women’s collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women’s empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295–311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

<sup>72</sup> CARE Nederland. (2020). Beyond Economic Empowerment. p. 16, Available at: <https://www.careevaluations.org/evaluation/beyond-economic-empowerment-the-influence-of-savings-groups-on-womens-public-participation-in-fragile-and-post-conflict-affected-settings-every-voice-counts/>

<sup>73</sup> Toronto Centre. (2019). “Removing the barriers to women’s financial inclusion”. Toronto Centre.

<sup>74</sup> Mosse, D. (2018). Caste and development: Contemporary perspectives on a structure of discrimination and advantage. *World Development*, 2018 Vol. 110, p. 422-436. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.06.003>

<sup>75</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women’s collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women’s empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295–311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

## Solidarity and political participation

The incentives and mandate of a collective can limit the levels of political participation and solidarity among women, particularly when they are primarily focused on economic or social gains. For example, women in collectives that focus on providing savings “are slightly less active in their communities and are more conservative in their beliefs about women’s public participation than women in other community groups (especially advocacy groups). This could be because many women in savings groups are focused primarily on improving their individual financial status whereas those participating in other groups such as advocacy groups are pre-dispositioned to be more active in the community by the nature of the group’s mandate.”<sup>76</sup>

## Upscaling through systems level changes

Reviews and evaluations of collectives consistently recommended that better outcomes for women’s empowerment require concerted efforts to re-envision harmful and discriminatory gender norms and barriers from the household to systems level (within government, private actors, and CSOs) in addition to forming partnerships with groups focused on women’s political and economic empowerment.<sup>77,78,79,80</sup> While re-envisioning harmful gender norms within collectives and at the household level is essential for gender equality change, “strategies that challenge existing gender roles and perceptions at different institutional levels (eg household, FFPO and policy) have proven to be more efficient than those that focus on individual capacity building of women entrepreneurs only.”<sup>81</sup>

## Geography and location

The proximity of collectives to other villages, towns, and especially cities can have a profound impact on their ability to empower women. Access to markets, platforms and institutions for advocacy and political participation, social services, and other collectives all play a role in determining the ability for collectives to provide benefits to its members and upscale any impacts on women’s empowerment. As a result, “geographic location may also act as both a barrier and enabler toward women’s public participation and community group membership.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> CARE Nederland. (2020). Beyond Economic Empowerment. p. 16, Available at: <https://www.careevaluations.org/evaluation/beyond-economic-empowerment-the-influence-of-savings-groups-on-womens-public-participation-in-fragile-and-post-conflict-affected-settings-every-voice-counts/>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Bosc, P. (2018). Empowering through Collective Action, IFAD Research Series. Available at: <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/-/publication/research-series-issue-29-empowering-through-collective-action>

<sup>79</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women’s empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 98. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>80</sup> Baden, S. (2013) Women’s collective action in African agricultural markets: the limits of current development practice for rural women’s empowerment. *Gender & Development*, 2013 Vol. 21, No. 2, 295–311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802882>

<sup>81</sup> Bolin, A. (2020). Women’s empowerment through collective action. IIED. P. 16. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8713en/ca8713en.pdf>

<sup>82</sup> CARE Nederland. (2020). Beyond Economic Empowerment. p. 33, Available at: <https://www.careevaluations.org/evaluation/beyond-economic-empowerment-the-influence-of-savings-groups-on-womens-public-participation-in-fragile-and-post-conflict-affected-settings-every-voice-counts/>

## Summary Table of Literature Review Findings

SfTW Change Area	Benefits	Potential Pathways of Change	Challenges
Women's empowerment	<p>More equity in women's household decision-making and participation in economic activities</p> <p>Reduced time poverty</p> <p>Engaging men and boys</p> <p>Re-envisioning harmful gender norms</p> <p>Reduced instances of GBV</p> <p>Inclusion of indigenous groups</p>	<p>Women's economic empowerment</p> <p>Professional development through trainings</p> <p>Spaces for discussing women's needs</p> <p>Increased leadership and participation of women</p>	<p>Lack of focus on women's empowerment</p> <p>Poor linkages with women's advocacy groups</p> <p>Lack of women leadership</p> <p>Lack of support among men and boys</p>
Access to resources	<p>Greater access to loans and financial institutions</p> <p>Access to new markets</p> <p>Increased income</p> <p>Access to information and technology</p> <p>Access to agricultural inputs</p>	<p>Savings groups</p> <p>Training on new agricultural techniques</p> <p>More support from men and boys</p> <p>Opportunity to pool resources</p>	<p>Lack of enforcement of gender inclusive policies</p> <p>Persisting harmful and discriminatory gender norms such as patrilineal inheritance</p> <p>Lack of basic government services such as water for domestic and productive uses</p> <p>Policies that facilitate consolidation of land</p>

			<p>by large corporate agribusinesses and financialization of farmland</p> <p>Poor access to land due to restrictive or poorly enforced land tenure policy and patriarchal forms of land ownership and control</p>
Access to Inclusive Markets	<p>Increased access to new markets</p> <p>Improved incomes</p> <p>Increased confidence and agency</p> <p>Improved access to market information</p>	<p>Pooling resources to improve mobility</p> <p>Linkages with other collectives</p> <p>Jointly marketing and aggregating products</p> <p>Linkages and solidarity with other collectives, NGOs, and government partners to re-envision discriminatory gender norms</p>	<p>Time poverty of women</p> <p>Persistent and harmful gender norms</p> <p>Gender-Based Violence, which limits the mobility of women to travel to markets</p> <p>Poor access to land due to restrictive or poorly enforced land tenure policy and patriarchal forms of land ownership and control</p>
Social protection	<p>Increased access to healthcare and social services</p> <p>Construction of schools and clinics</p> <p>Access to childcare services</p> <p>Increased participation in food</p>	<p>Increased social capital</p> <p>Linkages with collectives, NGOs, and CSOs focused on women's empowerment</p>	<p>Poor understanding of the causality of social capital and increased access to social services</p> <p>Economic barriers to entry for poor and landless women</p>

	and cash for work programs		
Nutrition	<p>Increased household dietary diversity</p> <p>Increased women' dietary diversity</p> <p>Improved family nutrition status</p> <p>Reduction in childhood malnutrition</p>	<p>Increased social capital</p> <p>Increased income and purchasing power</p> <p>Behavior change and education on malnutrition</p> <p>Improved access to nutrition-focused government programs</p>	<p>Emphasis on food availability instead of food utilization</p> <p>Persisting gender norms that prioritize nutrition and dietary diversity of men</p> <p>Poor linkages with government services and NGO programs focused on nutrition</p> <p>Lack of focus and training on nutrition among collectives</p>
Scaling impact	<p>Increasing market share and access</p> <p>Influencing gender inclusive government policies</p> <p>Expanding marketing opportunities and increasing income</p> <p>Increased social services</p>	<p>Linkages to other collectives, marketing organizations, human rights groups, political parties, and organizations focused on women's empowerment</p>	<p>Distance from villages, towns, and cities</p> <p>Financial barriers to membership for poor and landless women</p> <p>Harmful gender norms and lack of female leadership</p>