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INTERNATIONAL

## EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH NUTRITION-SENSITIVE AGRICULTURE

### HOW IS WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT RELATED TO NUTRITION AND AGRICULTURE?

**E**mpowering women is central to enabling them to live a fulfilling life. It is also critical to improving household education, healthcare, and nutrition. Gender norms within a society strongly influence decision-making within households, particularly with respect to division of labor and resources—for example, who gets to decide what land is used to grow which crops. These choices can significantly impact the availability of nutrient-rich foods. Gender norms also affect whether the products produced by a household are consumed or sold and who within a household eats certain foods.<sup>1</sup> When women have greater influence over decisions, spending, and time use, their own nutrition and that of their families tends to improve. Empowerment thus can strengthen women's contributions to food and nutrition security as food producers, income earners, and caregivers.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, in many parts of Africa most women have limited power to make decisions, have less access to resources, and earn less from their labor than men. They also undertake considerable unpaid work caring for their families. They may be nutritionally disadvantaged, such as when men are given the largest pieces of meat in a communal meal or when taboos restrict women from consuming certain foods. When women lack the power to spend household income, it can be a struggle to ensure their own or their children's optimal health and nutrition. Addressing malnutrition thus requires explicit effort to empower women and to encourage men to play an active role in caring for children and supporting household health.



## HKI'S APPROACH TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AGRICULTURE

At HKI, we recognize that empowerment is a process in which women are key actors, claiming their right to make choices – but that men are also central, as they may need to relinquish some power in return. Our work is based on context-specific gender assessments, incorporates explicit strategies to address gender-related barriers, and uses gender-relevant metrics to assess how interventions impact women. We seek to avoid unintended consequences of our projects for gender equity by ensuring that activities do not place an excess burden on women's time or reinforce their role as children's sole caregivers.

Through our nutrition-sensitive agriculture (NSA) projects, women are given training and inputs. As extension services have limited reach and rarely target women, this can offer participating women a rare chance to increase their knowledge, productivity, and earnings – and therefore their status within the household. Our projects typically negotiate with village leaders for access to high-quality land for women, ensuring they have the most fundamental asset needed for agricultural production.

Such approaches have had real impacts on women's lives across several African countries. For example, one

project in Burkina Faso was rigorously evaluated by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), with a focus on gender issues. The results showed that women owned more assets at the end of the project than at the beginning, with a significantly larger increase in agricultural assets and small animals in villages receiving the intervention. This narrowed the gap in asset ownership between men and women. Moreover, women were more likely to make decisions about the use of their gardens' produce and any associated revenue than men; their decision-making power regarding chickens and goats also increased, and both men and women became more open to the idea of women owning and controlling certain assets.<sup>3</sup>

An explicit focus on gender issues has helped improve HKI's ability to support women's empowerment through agriculture. In Tanzania, for example, early experiences in an NSA project (implemented 2011–2014 with the support of Irish Aid) showed that a focus solely on women could be a short-term success but could also engender longer-term conflict and resentment within the household and risk men taking over gardens once they became productive. The project thus chose to shift focus to the family, not the individual: while targeting women with training, messaging focused on the good of gardens and poultry for the family as a whole. This helped avoid backlash and reaped rewards in terms of women's control of assets and their role in decision-making.



## NURTURING CONNECTIONS: A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH

Encouraged by these findings, HKI was eager to explore how to make ‘empowerment’ more explicit within NSA projects—that is, to directly address the underlying social norms constraining women’s choices. The CHANGE (2013-2016) project, funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented in Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Senegal, and Tanzania, proved to be the perfect chance to test novel approaches.

In Senegal and Cote d’Ivoire, CHANGE aimed to be ‘gender transformative’: to alter the social norms, attitudes, behaviors, and institutions that underlie or reinforce gender inequalities, and ultimately to overturn these power imbalances.<sup>4</sup> Gender-transformative interventions recognize that women alone are unable to change deeply held norms: social change requires the active participation of others in households, communities, and institutions<sup>5</sup> through interactive, participatory approaches. HKI developed a curriculum, Nurturing Connections, to promote such change in an earlier project in Bangladesh. Through CHANGE, HKI partnered with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) to adapt the approach to Senegal and Cote d’Ivoire and broaden its scope of topics. The four-month-long curriculum featured weekly sessions held within peer

groups (women, their partners/husbands, and community leaders/elders) as well as a monthly “community meeting” in which participants from all three groups came together to explore and debate the knowledge acquired in their peer groups. Sessions consisted of participatory exercises, including games and skits about communication, gender, and decision-making. In one exercise, for example, participants were paired, and male pairs were asked to act out a scene with a woman instructing a young girl on how to behave as a ‘good girl’—with both roles being played by adult men. Women did the same for ‘good boy’ behaviors. Watching and performing these simple skits usually set off uproarious laughter—but also opened a door to discuss how boys and girls are sensitized differently to assume their social roles and the ramifications of these norms.

A rigorous impact evaluation led by ICRW found that this curriculum led to significant increases in shared decision-making across several domains, including nutrition, domestic work, and livestock rearing, as well as smaller changes in intra-household communication and views on gender equity.<sup>6</sup> Improving women’s roles within these domains was an admirable achievement in and of itself, and it should help improve household nutrition in the longer term.

## LOCALIZATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Key to undertaking effective gender-transformative work is understanding the local context. Basing interventions on in-depth gender analysis is thus crucial. As such, the starting point for adapting Nurturing Connections for CHANGE was formative research in rural Côte d’Ivoire and urban Senegal. This process revealed that some key concerns in Bangladesh, such as restrictions on women’s mobility, were no longer relevant. There were also existing structures in Cote d’Ivoire, rooted in traditional governance, that placed women in positions of power, such as the chief’s wife. These offered useful precedents and entry points for discussions. However, there were also some cultural disadvantages in West Africa. For example, norms related to land ownership in northern Cote d’Ivoire made it impossible for some women to plant

trees, imposing a barrier to their expansion into higher-value crops like cashew.

Localization also required understanding and surmounting logistical issues, such as how to organize meetings in an urban context where space was limited, few people knew their neighbors, and work schedules varied widely among participants. Though challenging, implementation in this context reaped unexpected rewards: in evaluations of the curriculum, several participants noted that it had introduced them to neighbors whom they did not know and allowed them to create a long-term support network. One group of participants even decided to form a tontine, a type of mutual support group, after the project – based on the trust they had developed during it.

## ONGOING WORK AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

HKI continues to adapt Nurturing Connections to new contexts, such as community-based management of acute malnutrition in Mali. We are actively experimenting with other approaches to gender transformation, such as applying the UNFPA 'husband schools' approach within an NSA program in Burkina Faso and using community-developed videos to showcase 'gender champions' through the SPRING project in Senegal. In Mozambique and Burkina Faso, we are experimenting with ways to promote gender equity among adolescents to enhance their health and nutrition. By addressing these key issues with young people, whose ideas remain malleable and who have their futures ahead of them (potentially including childrearing), we anticipate having a multiplicative impact for generations to come.



Photo: Barte

1 World Bank, FAO, IFAD. (2008). Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook. Washington, DC: World Bank.

2 Golla A, et al. (2011). Understanding and Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment. Washington, DC: ICRW.

3 van den Bold M, et al. (2013). Can Integrated Agriculture-Nutrition Programs Change Gender Norms on Land and Asset Ownership? IFPRI Discussion Paper. Washington, DC: IFPRI.

4 Hillenbrand E, et al. (2015). Measuring Gender-Transformative Change. Atlanta, GA: CARE USA.

5 Okali, C. (2011). Achieving Transformative Change for Rural Women's Empowerment. Accra: UN Women.

6 Nordhagen, S, et al. (2017) Nurturing Connections? ICRW Working Paper. Washington, DC: ICRW.



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