



Nourishing the Nexus: A Feminist Analysis of Gender, Nutrition and Agri-food Development Policies and Practices

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Abstract

This article applies feminist critiques to investigate how agri-food and nutritional development policy and interventions address gender inequality. Based on the analysis presented of global policies and examples of project experiences from Haiti, Benin, Ghana, and Tanzania, we find that the widespread emphasis on gender equality in policy and practice generally ascribes to a gender narrative that includes static, homogenized conceptualizations of food provisioning and marketing. These narratives tend to translate to interventions that instrumentalize women's labor by funding their income generating activities and care responsibilities for other benefits like household food and nutrition security without addressing underlying structures that cause their vulnerability, such as disproportionate work burdens, land access challenges, among many others. We argue that policy and interventions must prioritize locally contextualized social norms and environmental conditions, and consider further the way wider policies and development assistance shape social dynamics to address the structural causes of gender and intersecting inequalities.

Keywords Gender · Feminism · Agriculture · Food · Nutrition · Development

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Résumé

Cet article se sert des critiques féministes pour étudier la façon dont les politiques et les interventions de développement agroalimentaire et nutritionnel traitent l'inégalité entre les sexes. Sur la base de l'analyse présentée des politiques mondiales et des exemples d'expériences de projets en Haïti, au Bénin, au Ghana et en Tanzanie, nous constatons que l'accent généralisé sur l'égalité des sexes dans les politiques et les pratiques attribue généralement à un récit de genre qui comprend des conceptualisations statiques et homogénéisées de l'approvisionnement et de la commercialisation des denrées alimentaires. Ces récits ont tendance à se traduire par des interventions qui instrumentalisent le travail des femmes en finançant leurs activités génératrices de revenus et leurs responsabilités de soins à fins telles que la sécurité alimentaire et nutritionnelle des ménages, sans pour autant s'attaquer aux structures sous-jacentes qui causent leur vulnérabilité, telles que les charges de travail disproportionnées, les difficultés d'accès à la terre, parmi tant d'autres. Nous soutenons que les politiques et les interventions doivent donner la priorité aux normes sociales et aux conditions environnementales contextualisées localement, et mieux prendre en compte la manière dont les politiques publiques en général et l'aide au développement façonnent la dynamique sociale pour s'attaquer aux causes structurelles des inégalités de genre et croisées.

Introduction

Gender inequality is an essential contributor to food and nutrition insecurity globally (Boserup 1970; Quisumbing et al. 2014). Since the 2007/08 world food price crisis, renewed policy attention and official development assistance (ODA) for mitigating food insecurity and malnutrition have been increasingly focused on reducing gender inequalities in farming and food. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) declared 2011 the year for 'Women in Agriculture', estimating that 'closing the gender gap' in farming and food could decrease the number of hungry people by 100–150 million (FAO 2011, 2013). Scholars of critical agrarian and food studies explain, however, that the gendering of global policy responses to the persistent and deepening hunger crisis in the Global South is inadequately framed and applied. This inadequacy results in continued uneven socioeconomic and spatial vulnerabilities to stressors, shocks and disasters, like that of COVID-19 where we have seen a steep rise in hunger, particularly for women (Clapp et al. 2020; FAO 2022; Gengenbach et al. 2018). Further feminist analysis of how policy narratives inform interventions and shape people's daily lives are also essential for transforming gender disparities (Kanenberg and Leal 2020; McPhail 2003).

In this article, we assess global agri-food and nutritional development policy using critical feminist analysis to reveal the underlying gaps within global–national policy structures and large-scale responses to transform uneven gendered power relations across agri-food systems within varied contexts. Our article begins by outlining a feminist analysis of gender and development framings, which we then apply to a review of global gender, agri-food and nutritional development policy to show the opportunities, gaps and inconsistencies in narratives and intervention strategies.



We apply McPhail (2003)'s principles of feminist policy analysis by asking, how are diverse women and men (and their intersecting identities) included and excluded in aims across major global agri-food and nutritional development policies? What are the assumptions and values about gendered roles and resource access underlying these goals? We further ask how these policies translate to diverse practices and contexts, asking what are the potential contradictions in outcomes, including how do interventions address the structural processes that cause these vulnerabilities? We answer these questions by using mini-case studies, where we compare this policy analysis with four large-scale donor interventions aimed at addressing gender equality in agri-food and nutritional development based in Haiti, Benin, Ghana, and Tanzania. These examples reveal both the complexity and the limitations of narrowly defined approaches to gender equality in agri-food and nutritional development policy and interventions based on context-specific experiences of implementation. The authors' positionality and professional feminist research experiences inform the policy and case study selection and analysis. Illustrating the way global gender, agri-food and nutritional development policy agendas are put into practice demonstrates the policy limitations and exclusions when applied to specific contexts, and the repercussions for people's everyday food and nutrition conditions.

Feminist Approaches to Gender and Development

Early liberal feminists of the 1970s advocated for the inclusion of women within existing research methodologies, policy approaches and ODA that were delivered uniformly across the Global South in ways that failed to respond to underlying power relations between men and women, such as discriminatory norms, labor burdens and land inheritance regimes (Jerneck 2015). These critiques were demonstrated largely by critical feminists like Marxist/socialist, radical and post-colonial who argued that women were already integrated into policy and ODA through their income generation and care labor, yet their inclusion was 'double burdened', serving to sustain existing exploitative structures across scales (Fraser 1989; Mies 1998; Struckmann 2018). The 1980s saw the promotion of frameworks to address these exploitative structures, and many feminists advocated for integrating grassroots women's organizations into policymaking processes that privileged women's and other minorities' experiences from the Global South, recognizing them further as agents of change, instead of simply as passive recipients of ODA (Rathgeber 1990; Struckmann 2018). Development practitioners also popularized 'gender mainstreaming' during the 1990s as a pragmatic approach to transforming gender equality across sectors and institutions, however, this has generally maintained a narrow focus on women (Daly 2005). An intersectional feminist approach to development gained prominence in the 2000s, parallel but separate from gender mainstreaming (Bose 2012). Considerations around race, class, sexual orientation, ableism and ethnicity, among other social identities, inform the challenges underlying systemic conditions that reinforce social, economic and spatial inequalities. Intersectionality also highlights women's and



other minorities' agency in their contribution to structural changes to political representation, market engagement, and access to and control over resources, including land and labor (Crenshaw 1990; Yuval-Davis 2006).

Critical Feminism over Liberal Feminism

We choose to build from the evolution in thinking about gender and development from a focus on an individual woman's legal and political rights to diverse gendered and intersectional power relations across scales by adhering to critical feminist approaches, including intersecting identities and not one based on predefined gendered hierarchies. The power relations between women and men are dynamic and context-specific. In some circumstances, gendered roles and resource access may be complementary and in others conflictual. Critical feminists have scrutinized liberal feminist approaches and development patterns of narrowly predefined conceptualization of women's identities and gendered power dynamics because they are applied discursively and materially in contradictory ways: women are portrayed as both victims of exclusion in political, economic and social activities and norms, while also narrated as 'agents of change' more capable of promoting the wellbeing of their families and communities than men (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). This focus on both women's vulnerability and their virtuousness distracts from the institutions that deepen gender inequalities and women's exclusion from positions of authority and resource access (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Jerneck 2015). Critical feminist theory goes beyond recognizing the power relations between an individual woman and man to also consider wider social, political, economic and ecological structural dimensions that shape gender and intersecting dimensions across scales. For example, critical feminists show how the targeting of women in development processes by freeing up their constraints so that they are equal to men also often serves to sustain existing exploitative structures globally, including the Global South's dependence on the Global North.

Another reason for adhering to critical feminist framings is to build off the critiques of the liberal feminist thinking underlying mainstream gender and development policy (Chant and Sweetman 2012; Cornwall and Rivas 2015). This policy approach has been premised upon women's instrumentality in furthering development goals that often deepen the disproportionate burdens vulnerable women face with additional labor, contributing to a "feminization of responsibility".

Principles of Feminist Policy Analysis

While there is no single feminist framework for examining policy, McPhail (2003) outlines several useful principles of feminist policy analysis that we adapt and apply to our review of global agri-food and nutritional development policy. These principles are outlined in Table 1.



Table 1 Critical feminist policy analysis principles as adapted from McPhail (2003)

Principle Number	Theme	Description	Application to Agri-Food and Nutrition
1	Mainstreams feminist ideas across policies	Considers gendered relations and power dynamics across all policies not just those targeting women	Considers gendered labor and decision-making around food production, provision, preparation and sales
2	Interrogates policy goals for feminist aims	Assesses how diverse women and other socioeconomic groups may be included or excluded from policy Describes the processes that lead to vulnerability and transformation, as well as policy outcomes via action or interventions Interrogates how diverse groups are treated and the underlying stereotypes or assumptions about gendered roles, knowledge and values embedded in policy	Assesses context specific socio-economic and biophysical environmental conditions related to agri-food and nutrition Describes how these conditions intersect with national political instruments that support or hinder efforts toward equality Interrogates gendered roles and responsibilities around food and nutrition within and beyond the household, community, market, etc.
3	Incorporates feminist values by eliminating dichotomous analysis	Includes gendered and intersecting realities as opposed to a focus on women and men only with commitment to social justice of all people Acknowledges the personal is also political in investigations or the researcher's own positionality	Inclusion of diverse perspectives and roles throughout food systems (beyond just production and provisioning), shifting labor trends, increasing climatic or environmental drivers of dietary changes etc. Inclusion of men and gender diverse people, and moving beyond binary framings of gender in relation to agri-food and the environment
4	Recognizes diverse feminist perspectives	Illuminates contradictions inherent in all policy and the ongoing debates within feminism Explains how policies operate across diverse socio-economic and historically specific contexts and time periods	Applies diverse scholarship, empirical evidence of agri-food system-wide changes from places where research and analysis are based



Critical Feminism in Existing Global Foreign Policies

Recent iterations of intersectional feminist development framings that are premised on critical feminist theory inform progressive global policymaking that we also wish to highlight. These policies include the fifth United Nations' 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, Feminist Foreign Policies in Mexico, Luxembourg, France, and in Canada—the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP; Thompson 2020). In spite of the shortcomings emerging from these efforts (such as narrowly defining feminism, weak integration of intersectionality), these policy formations offer opportunities to align agri-food and nutritional health policies with a critical feminist framing (Rao and Tiessen 2020). This alignment is particularly useful for shaping organizations' progressive engagement with gender equality and for supporting feminist organizations. For example, the Canadian FIAP facilitated the establishment of the Equality Fund, which is dedicated to providing flexible, abundant and unrestricted funding to feminist movements and leaders globally.

In the next section, we apply this feminist policy analysis framework to global agri-food and nutritional development policy narratives. Our feminist analysis exposes the opportunities, gaps, and biases in global agri-food and nutritional policy goals, before showing how these policy approaches are put into practice.

Global Gender, Agri-food and Nutritional Development Policy Landscape

Gender and Food Production Policy

One of the most prominent global policy narratives is that improved hunger, food security and nutritional health depend upon increasing food production in the Global South, both through the amount of land used and in yields per acre, which is in line with a Green Revolution model of agricultural development. This logic is also predicated on a belief that markets and technology can sufficiently feed the world (Moseley et al. 2015; Rao and Huggins 2017). The contemporary major pathway to the Green Revolution is via the subsidization of private sector actors working across the agricultural supply chain, and to support their integration into increasingly global markets (Gengenbach et al. 2018; Vercillo et al. 2020).

The narrative that hunger is predicated on increasing the scale of production and global market integration has been promoted primarily by an interrelated set of powerful development actors and research institutes who wield large amounts of funding and influence in global policy arenas like the United Nations' World Food Systems Summit. ODA includes: bilateral donors (United States, Canada, Britain, Germany and other European Union donors); multilateral donors, such as the World Bank, FAO, and World Food Programme; and big philanthropy, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Research institutes such as CGIAR partnership, and its affiliates who operationalize ODA. These actors have been functioning under similar policy agendas within the different country contexts that the authors' have worked and lived within across the Global South, demonstrating



further their centrality in policy influence and practice. These actors also work closely with global food corporations, and regional and national governments to develop products, regulations, standards and incentives primarily for profit maximization or cost efficiency across the agri-food supply chain, frequently at the expense of social, biophysical and biomedical factors. Farmers and food system workers are integrated across the agri-food supply chain to varying degrees, predominantly through subsidies and contracts and/or credit schemes with various-sized private actors (Gengenbach et al. 2018; Vercillo et al. 2020). Limited consultation and buy-in from civil society and farmer groups on the terms of this integration has resulted in policy formation that is generally removed from everyday localized experiences, knowledge and goals of food production, provision, consumption and sales (Vansteenkiste 2017, 2022). The boycotting of and controversy around the 2021 United Nations' Food Systems Summit illustrates the exclusion of civil society, farmer groups and human rights approaches in global agri-food policy formation, where corporate voices and interests were privileged, representing the deepening of large corporate power and influence in global food systems that focus on technologies, cost efficiency and profit-driven or business solutions to food insecurity (Clapp et al. 2021).

All of the development actors mentioned incorporate gender in their agri-food policies, oftentimes in ways that primarily emphasize raising women's yield productivity and integration into markets in highly gendered ways. One domineering goal of gender and food security policy is to 'close the gender gap' in agriculture, which was a predominant focus in the wave of literature, reports and policy frameworks published in the 2010s (FAO 2011, 2013; Quisumbing et al. 2014; World Bank 2009). While some global development actors' have updated their policies (e.g., FAO 2020) our critiques largely remain unaddressed. As part of the first feminist policy analysis principle by McPhail (2003) on gender mainstreaming, we recognize that these policy guidelines and reports are all focused on agri-food efficiency by providing mainly individual women greater access to the productive resources needed, such as agri-inputs and mechanization to produce, process, sell and/or provide more food, especially to their household, which is thought to reduce food insecurity.

Gender features prominently in USAID's foreign policy for food security, and they are one of the largest donors in gender and agriculture globally, featuring prominently in many of the communities where we, the authors, have lived and worked in various roles related to agriculture, food and nutrition research and development practice. USAID's (2015a) main food security initiative focuses on empowering women to be more productive by, (a) promoting their leadership in agriculture; (b) fostering policy changes that increase their land ownership; and (c) strengthening their access to financial services. Women farmers are also provided training and technologies to increase their productivity, reduce unpaid work and improve their households' nutrition. This productivity, efficiency, and technical policy approach to gender equality for other aims, like household food security are also evident in recent progress around feminist foreign policies by countries who invest heavily in gender and development in the Global South. In Canada's FIAP, for example, the approach to nutritional health, agricultural development and food insecurity are only



implied under the sub-strategy priority of ‘growth that works for everyone’, which aims to alleviate precarious, insecure and unsafe employment.

In contrast to feminist policy analysis principles, we find that these global policy approaches are typically dichotomous, narrowly equating gender with women by focusing on intensifying food production and provisioning through their labor. Under feminist analysis principle two, we also find that while intersectionality is mentioned in some of the policies, women are also generally presented primarily as homogeneous informal food producers and providers who are unable to increase the scale of their production or adequately feed their families because their resource access and daily activities are constrained by socio-cultural norms and rules that limit their movements and resource use. Investing in women’s food production and provisioning is the solution to the complex and persistent issue of poor dietary health and malnutrition. However, underlying social norms, political and economic structural barriers, such as unequal care burdens, disproportionate challenges with accessing land, education, adequate sanitation and free movement for women remain largely unaddressed in these narratives in ways that go beyond technical changes.

Recognizing the diversity of feminisms as part of principle four, we see that social disparities of production, food security and nutrition are largely recognized, yet understood as a problem of socio-cultural discrimination by household and community members, contractors, middlemen, agro-input dealers and service providers rather than in relation to how patriarchal and capitalist systems function. As more resource-poor smallholders face increasingly competitive markets, their vulnerability to land dispossession deepens. Working towards changing policies that would permit women’s ownership of land, for example, is inadequate in most contexts where very few men own or control land (Doss et al. 2018). As O’Laughlin (2007) suggests, redistributing productive resources from men to women in agriculture would just give women, ‘a bigger piece of a very small pie’ because of existing inequitable power dynamics where the vast majority of small to medium-sized farmers cannot access the means of agricultural production. The predominant policy narrative also places some of the blame of poverty and hunger on inefficient farmers and food providers, particularly women, rather than focusing attention on power dynamics at multiple scales. When women successfully increase the scale of production, it often leads to men taking over control of their livelihoods and land or shifting other burdens such as food provisioning onto them (Carney 1992; Schroeder 1997). The integration of gender into global agri-food policies is reflective of the wider liberal feminist ideal of integrating women into existing patriarchal and capitalist institutions, which serve to exploit their resources and labor, as well as that of others across social and spatial lines.

Meeting Nutrition Through Agriculture

As part of principle one, mainstreaming feminist analysis beyond food production, our analysis also finds a similar focus of global agri-food policy on deficiencies in yields and market integration in nutritional development policy, which has historically emphasized dietary, and more recently, micronutrient deficiencies. These



discussions have been mostly void of the inherent gendered conditions of meeting dietary health objectives, and the heightened labour inequities directly related to food production and provisioning. The hidden hunger agenda, launched in the early 2000s, coincided with growing interest in meeting nutritional health objectives through agricultural development agendas. Major donors, including philanthropic foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as bilateral donors like USAID and Global Affairs Canada, prioritize the market-led production, processing and selling of nutrient-rich food (either via crop production or in processing) for addressing food insecurity in their latest strategies to reach 'scale' or the ever-growing populations in the Global South, particularly in cities. The emphasis on a specific set of nutrients and calories distracts from other priority nutritional health concerns, such as dietary diversity, water, sanitation and soil health. This emphasis also distracts from structural constraints, like unequal distribution of supplements, poor land, labor and agri-input and extension availability, unpredictable climatic conditions and nutrient-poor dietary practice dependent on starchy staple crops (Lang 2007).

Contrary to focusing narrowly on dietary deficiencies, the UN Decade on Nutrition (2016–2025) policy aims to address 'all forms of malnutrition, maximizing participation by all actors and ensuring the needs of all people (particularly women and youth)' which are generally inclusive of gender dynamics. One goal of the CGIAR's 2030 Research and Innovation Strategy also aims to transform water, land and food systems for gender equality, youth and social inclusion by focusing on productive resources, rights and services. Several global initiatives, such as The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement also affirm that 'gender equality is both a cause and an effect of malnutrition, hunger and poverty, but also disperses the responsibility across global and national policy' (SUN 2014a, b). Recommendations made towards the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 emphasized agri-food systems delivery of safe, healthy, sustainable diets, through prioritizing biodiversity, ecosystems, and the challenges of climate. In spite of recognizing the need to consider women and youth and wider political economic and climatic/environmental factors, there is also little mention of the gendered conditions of growing and preparing food, access and availability of diverse dietary options and the labour divisions across supply chains and household food work.

As part of feminist policy analysis principle two on assessing the assumptions underlying policy aims, we find that meeting dietary health objectives are often through developing 'gender sensitive' or inclusive agricultural supply chains for women based on the assumption that female family members prepare the majority of meals for their households. Targeted funding has been largely geared toward women food producers, through, for example, increasing vegetable, bean and legume production, integrating biofortified crops and/or diversifying food production (Maestre et al. 2017; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2012; Rao 2020). Nutritional health is also often equated with maternal and newborn health, where the responsibility of female caregivers for children in the family ensures that females are also responsible for the quality and quantity of food available (WHO 2017). The pervasive emphasis on women's roles in motherhood reinforces normative, static, gender roles, where women as wives and mothers take greater care of children and the health of their



families than their husbands. We recognize the contradictions inherent in feminist policy framings as part of principle four because there is a need to recognize the value of these gendered roles by showing their contributions to the well-being of others, while also challenging them for building greater agency of vulnerable people so roles are not performed in an exploitative manner. The WHO's Decade for Nutrition—2016–2025 report, for example, emphasizes inequities within the food system but also fails to demonstrate how these inequities are formed and perpetuated by systemic inequalities. Unequal care labor and inequities within food access, water and sanitation conditions restrict the diversity, quality and safety of food prepared in daily meals (Dixon 2016). These policies reveal the misstep in reinforcing normative, gendered roles in food production and provision; undermining responsive efforts towards public health services, water and sanitation, agrobiodiversity, environmental conservation and the interconnections between diverse food accessibility, availability and quality. The policies are also dichotomous, which is necessary to consider under feminist policy analysis principle three. There is little to no recognition or plan for representation and redistribution of resources based on intersectional differences in the experiences of motherhood and food provisioning across places and other socioeconomic factors.

In the next section, a consideration for the implementation of the global gender and agri-food and nutritional development policies are presented through case studies of interventions from Haiti, Benin, Ghana and Tanzania, as part of a critical feminist policy analysis principle two and three that investigate policy effects and outcomes.

(Dis)connecting Praxis with Global and National Policies on Gender, Agri-food and Nutritional Development

Feminist policy analysis considers the varied interpretations of policy formation, implementation (principle four) and outcomes for women and marginalized people (principles two and three) (McPhail 2003; Thompson 2020). As a result, we describe four cases of large-scale interventions from a critical feminist framing by paying close attention to the degree to which gender equality is considered in intervention design and implementation, and some resultant outcomes in specific contexts. The foundational feminist principle one of mainstreaming, alongside the feminist value of the 'personal is political' (principle three), serves as the basis for the case-study selection. Consequently, the particular policies and interventions considered in our analysis are based on each of the co-authors' professional consultancy and academic experience in agricultural development and food security globally, which has afforded us a type of 'insider' position that is described in each case study (Alcoff 1991; Mohanty 2003). Each case is analyzed using reflexive and situated feminist inquiry (Woodiwiss et al. 2017), which is integral to both situate ourselves within the analysis and to avoid universalities in describing women's realities, particularly of those in the Global South. Since each case study was pursued by different feminist research projects conducted by each author, the research methods generally



Table 2 Summary of methods pursued in each case study intervention

	AVANSE in Haiti	AMSANA in Benin	RING in Ghana	SPHI in Tanza- nia
Interviews with project beneficiaries	X		X	X
Focus groups with project beneficiaries	X		X	X
Interviews with project staff, policymakers and/or key informants	X	X	X	X
Ethnographic immersion	X	X	X	X
Document analysis	X	X	X	X

differ across places. Table 2 summarizes some of the methods that were used to assess each project, which will be described in more depth within each case.

Since the study contexts, policies and interventions illustrated are based on each of our own experiences with them, they are bound by time and place, and not necessarily representative of wider policies and practices underway. One way we strove to minimize sample bias was by selecting interventions based on our analysis of global development actors' policies to ensure major donors, principles and themes found were represented in practice. All of the projects illustrated focus on gender equality and women's empowerment in food security and/or nutrition in different ways and to varying degrees, which are summarized in Table 3. While the interventions described operated across different contexts, we show the similar characteristics of the development actors and interventions across different places in relation to national and global policy. Despite these considerations, the projects illustrated are limited to the author's positionality and experience.

Case 1: Promoting Agri-food Sector Growth in AVANSE, Haiti

In Haiti, USAID's AVANSE project claimed to mainstream gender in all its agricultural commercialization activities yet relied on efficiency-based models when engaging Haitian women's organizations, ultimately failing to transform gendered power relations in food production, consumption and market integration.

Critical analysis of the Haiti AVANSE project is based on fieldwork conducted by Dr. Jennifer Vansteenkiste, a feminist researcher and development practitioner, who has worked in Haiti since 2000 on numerous community-based, foreign-charitable, and International Development Research Centre development projects. Jennifer acknowledges her privileged position as a white, educated, Canadian, which informs her perspectives, and, thereby insistence on decolonizing methodologies to allow Haitian interviewees power over the research process to express their worldview and the culturally relevant moral economy of caring (Vansteenkiste 2017). During fieldwork, with the help of a Haitian research team, Jennifer conducted more than 500 in-depth, open, structured and semi-structured interviews, and focus



Table 3 Summary of projects' aims, gender and nutrition integration

Project name and donor	Location	Project aims
Appui à la Valorisation du Potentiel Agricole du Nord, pour la Sécurité Economique et Environnementale (AVANSE), USAID	Northern Haiti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smallholder integration into agriculture value chains for export • Limited gender mainstreaming or differentiation between women and men • No nutrition aims
Programme d'Appui Multisectoriel à la Sécurité Alimentaire et Nutritionnelle dans l'Atacora (AMSANA), European organizations, Enabel	Northwestern Benin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase production, processing and consumption of subsistence crops • Targeting vulnerable women and involving men • Nutrition is one goal among others
Resiliency in Northern Ghana Project (RING), USAID	Northern Ghana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve production livelihoods and consumption of nutrient dense foods; water and sanitation improvement; good governance for nutrition • Nutrition is the primary goal • Targeting vulnerable women only
Sweet Potato for Security and Health Initiative (SPHI)	Western Tanzania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving household production and consumption of biofortified crops • Nutrition is the primary goal • Targeting women only



groups with female and male smallholder farmers, marginalized urban women, food marketeers, Madan Sara, local Ministry representatives, non-governmental organizations and development professionals, including those working for AVANSE. The research regarding AVANSE was part of a wider gender-focused food security and nutrition analysis of the country's internationally influenced post-earthquake recovery upon Haitian community-based efforts. The interviewees lived in northern Haiti in the AVANSE project area and were either directly impacted or were employees of the project.

The context of national policy and AVANSE's intervention-specific aims are summarized in Table 4. AVANSE claims to have engaged 43,500 smallholder farmers in banana and cacao production for export, as well as rice, corn and beans for local markets to promote growth in the agrarian sector and household incomes. In line with a productivity policy narrative, under AVANSE, food insecurity is a matter of limited economic growth and poverty, which can be rectified by growth across the agriculture supply chain and rural livelihood development, particularly for smallholders. AVANSE promoted a voucher system for chemical fertilizer and farm tools, as well as grafting, plowing and nursery stock services, which were provided freely in year one of the project with training available through farmer field schools. AVANSE then charged an increasing amount for these agri-inputs, tools and services in subsequent years, eventually leading farmers to the open market system (AVANSE CoP interview, 2014).

In response to a failing mid-project evaluation, AVANSE reset targets and dropped support for important local food security crops of beans and corn, and only provided farms 1500 ha or above with irrigation, which excluded smallholders who generally own 2 ha or less (AVANSE 2015). The result deepened inequality in production by prioritizing male large farmers export production and overproduction by small farmers for local markets. Despite these limitations, banana,¹ rice and cacao yields dramatically increased with cacao doubling in price (DIA 2020). Unfortunately, the final USAID audit neither reports household nutrition data nor sex-disaggregated data in any form, indicating that gender mainstreaming was not a priority outcome or goal of AVANSE. This likely means long standing disparities in food production based on gendered access to land and resources persist, alongside class divisions based on farm size. Furthermore, women were largely excluded from the design and decision phase of the project and they were mainly relegated to traditional roles of soil and water conservation and marketing (Anglade et al. 2018). As a direct gender outcome, AVANSE supported 35 female-owned and/or led production and processing agribusinesses by providing material goods and training (AVANSE 2015–2016). Women were also included in Water User Associations, but the project had difficulty putting them in leadership positions (AVANSE 2015–2016). Overall, women reportedly made up 40% of participants, mostly in soil and water conservation activities and less so in crop production, with the 2015–2016 Chief of Party recognizing gender accomplishments as “embarrassing” (Anglade et al. 2018, p. 19).

¹ The DIA (2020) mistakenly reports banana crops as plantain. The error was clarified in a 2021 interview with DIA staff.



Table 4 Summary of national policy and USAID's AVANSE project in northern, Haiti

National policy	Key policy aims	Gendering of policy	Intervention—AVANSE	Intervention—AVANSE aims
Action Plan for National Recovery and Development	Respond to a massive earthquake and multiple hurricanes Macroeconomic growth through incentivizing private investment in export production, repair of water catchment areas, centralized foodstuff storage networks, and job creation to reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition	Stated as a cross-cutting theme (mainstreaming) Specified in terms of violence against women prevention strategies	US\$87 million agricultural supply chain development project From 2013 to 2018 USAID's Feed the Future North Initiative Contracted by Development Alternatives, Inc., which is a for profit company to implement the initiative	Provide productivity-enhancing technologies Ensure access to stable water-sheds Subsidize private processors Enhance farming and supply chain organizations' management and information for securing a more regular and higher supply of good quality food to local and global markets in Haiti (USAID 2015b) USAID's Feed the Future was called WINNER in Haiti's west and AVANSE in the north



Interviews conducted found that funding from AVANSE for production equipment for the women's organization RAFAVAL's cacao processing facility in Limonade had progressive outcomes for women (AVANSE employee, 2022). Pre-AVANSE, RAFAVAL developed programming to help women in production by building strong female-oriented social networks on which women rely (Vansteenkiste and Schuller 2018). Women serve as leaders within the women's organization, managing the cacao manufacturing facility, working with foreign funders, and engaging political leaders. They also improved social relations through community outreach to offer guidance on respectful sexual relations, legal protections for women and girls, and then overall support for single mothers. Women's efforts were executed with the acknowledgement that they "could not start a war with men". Although AVANSE prioritized the economic imperative of production and income generation of women's organizations to meet their gender quota, the income earned was overtly used to empower RAFAVAL to continue their pre-AVANSE gender work to destabilize unequal social relations.

In return for material resources and training, AVANSE was able to include women's organizations as project beneficiaries, without engaging gender mainstreaming in its fullest sense. The temporary economic support of processing facilities like RAFAVAL, and similar women's organizations, provided a limited window for women to tackle the more systemic issues of gender relations and women's political, economic and social position within Haitian society. This outcome is representative of previous critiques of efficiency-based approaches as missing critical aspects of gender equality, political status, and social relations, and which instrumentalize women for development's goal of economic effectiveness (Chant & Sweetman 2012; Chant 2008; Rathgeber 1990). Women's organizations, like RAFAVAL, took what Fraser calls the moral-cultural dimension of a capitalist economic system and utilized their temporary advantage to transform social relations through their organizational work.

Case 2: Addressing Nutrition Through Gender Mainstreaming in Subsistence Production in Benin's AMSANA

In Benin, AMSANA superficially mainstreamed gender, focusing primarily on the inclusion of women without acknowledging or addressing the structures that bind their agency with respect to farming, food security and nutrition.

The following analysis of the AMSANA project is based on a textual analysis of secondary data, specifically, AMSANA's mid-term and final project reports, which are contextualized based on the author Dr. Rosalind Ragetlie's experience conducting qualitative research on gender and food insecurity in northwestern Benin in 2017 and 2019. During her doctoral research, Rosalind worked closely with several AMSANA staff and attended several project events held by AMSANA, including strategic meetings and community interventions. This analysis is further shaped by her positionality as a white, Canadian woman with dual Benin citizenship and more than a decade of personal experience in Benin.



Table 5 Summary of national policy and AMSANA project in northwestern, Benin

National policy	Key policy aims	Gendering of policy	Intervention—AMSANA	Intervention—AMSANA aims
Benin's Strategic Plan for Strengthening the Agricultural Sector	Improve agricultural production (through increased yields and decreased losses)	Strengthen gender mainstreaming in all sectors of development (Ministry of Family and National Solidarity: Republic of Benin 2009a, b)	€12.6 Million food security and nutrition project From 2015 to 2020 The Belgian Development Agency (Enabel), Louvain cooperation, Protos (Join for Water), Iles des Paix and the Belgian Red Cross	Improve food security and nutrition by increasing subsistence production of maize, fonio, and vegetable gardens, and improving the profitability and sustainability of livelihoods for women within the Atacora region in northwestern Benin (Belgian Development Agency 2018)
National Agricultural Investment and Food and Nutritional Security Plan	Improve local processing of agricultural products			
National Gender Promotion Policy	Increase commercialization, and employment throughout agricultural supply chains (MAEP, 2017) Achieve gender equality in Benin by 2025 and strengthen gender mainstreaming in all sectors of development (Ministry of Family and National Solidarity: Republic of Benin 2009a, b)			



The context of national policy and AMSANA's intervention specific aims are summarized in Table 5. Differently from AVANSE in Haiti, AMSANA focused on supporting the production of income-generating, environmentally sustainable and nutritious foods for household consumption, as well as for local markets that are grown, processed and sold largely by women. Fonio, for example, grows well in the region without the use of chemical fertilizer, making it more affordable and environmentally sustainable to produce. Fonio is also nutritious and culturally significant (Dansi et al. 2010). Conversely, the other crop of focus, maize, is primarily grown by men (Lutz et al. 2007; Tovihoudji 2018). Amidst growing demand for export, maize was identified nationally as a strategic crop, however, it has had unsatisfactory yields without prohibitively expensive and time-sensitive chemical fertilizer in the northwestern parts of the country (Belgian Development Agency 2020; Tovihoudji 2017).

With respect to gender, AMSANA's strategy was to ensure 'women are considered in all project actions' (Belgian Development Agency 2018, p. 13, Belgian Development Agency 2020). For example, ENABEL's mid-program evaluation provides a score of 'B+' for gender mainstreaming, which solely reflects the percentage of women beneficiaries included (47%) (Belgian Development Agency 2018, p. 52). Due to the limitations of secondary research, we cannot speak to the way that specific women benefited from the project, but this type of reporting reflects a limited engagement with gender mainstreaming beyond 'adding women'. Rather than challenging gender norms, women's inclusion in the project reflects existing norms that dictate the gendered division of labor. For example, women made up 49% of beneficiaries in the maize-focused components of the project, compared to 85% of women beneficiaries in the vegetable gardening project. Meanwhile, there is also a marked absence of women within the project implementation teams, and no gender focal point on staff, which further points to a weak mainstreaming of gender and a more general focus on women as beneficiaries only (Belgian Development Agency 2018).

A major aim of AMSANA was to increase women's involvement in commercial farming through rural livelihood development to improve their financial autonomy for household food security, which reflects an efficiency-based approach (Belgian Development Agency 2018; Doss 2013). While income generation is a legitimate need for many women and improved income can indeed be of great benefit (Fraser 1989; Kabeer 2001), the narrow focus on income generation, reliance on the utility of women to improve development effectiveness, and failure to advocate for societal shifts in gender relations has been critiqued for decades (Chant and Sweetman 2012; Rathgeber 1990). When gendered hierarchies of power and structural constraints for women remain unaddressed, for example by failing to ensure more equitable workloads and improved control over their income, potential benefits women may experience from increased income are substantially undermined.

Differently from many other livelihood development projects, AMSANA also included the provision of hulling machines to reduce women's labor burdens, and the formation of cooperatives to support large-scale commercial production (Belgian Development Agency 2018). Though these initiatives are important, they do not go far enough to consider household, community and market gender dynamics that are influenced by wider political economic systems. Giving women technology



and access to markets through cooperatives does little to counteract the conditions under which women farmers have been systematically undermined with respect to land and labor, such as in both tenure law and because of patrilineal inheritance rights (Dijoux 2002; Kinkinginhoun-Médagbé et al. 2010; Sohinto 2001). Moreover, Beninese women are overworked and under-recognized for their contributions to the household (Falade 2016).

One progressive, though underdeveloped, aspect of AMSANA that did work to address gendered relations and power dynamics was their ‘husband’s school’ initiative, which brought together men in community groups to discuss supporting their wives regarding ‘women’s issues’, notably the disproportionate burden of domestic labour that women shoulder (Belgian Development Agency 2018, p. 36). This project component was unfortunately limited to the project’s nutrition activities and not their other important roles beyond the household. Here, men were included in conversations around food and nutrition, focusing on “women’s issues” or women’s disadvantage. This must be greatly expanded to challenge men’s own roles in upholding labor burdens and discriminatory resource access and control practices, including patrilineal land inheritance systems, holding men and other leaders accountable for upholding discriminatory norms and practices, and challenging the status quo (Daly 2005). The nutritional components of AMSANA were also focused narrowly on providing nutrition education, and with the exception of the ‘husband’s school’ initiative, focused primarily on women (Belgian Development Agency 2020). Education, while useful for building nutrition capacity, does little to address the structural conditions that have led to poor nutrition, such as norms and divisions of labor that restrict women’s time, movement and resource access and control. The assumption that women in this context need to be ‘taught’ how to prepare nutritious meals, ignores the material need required to improve ongoing dietary deficiencies.

While certain aspects of the AMSANA program are laudable, there is an overwhelming focus on gender mainstreaming through the simple inclusion of women, which is reflected in project reporting. Overall, our analysis indicates that the degree to which gender mainstreaming is effectively implemented is nuanced and can be varied, even within the same project, and demonstrates how structural constraints facing women remain largely unaddressed in practice.

Case 3: Targeting Vulnerable Women’s Food Production and Utilization Roles for Household Nutrition in RING, Ghana

In Northern Ghana, RING supports vulnerable women’s production, selling and preparation of nutritious foods without accounting for context-specific gendered division of food responsibilities, potentially intensifying women’s food burdens and household tensions.

The following analysis of the RING project is based on Dr. Siera Vercillo’s research, who led a mid-term, 6-month study that examined how participants and staff perceived the gendered outcomes of the project as part of a wider study conducted in the region. While a white-Canadian woman, Siera has been working closely with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture regional policymakers and district



agricultural extension staff, including women-focused officers for the past 10 years to investigate community-level farming and food disparities, including for her doctoral research. Between 2015 and 2016, she spent six months within two communities supported by RING, where she conducted over a hundred interviews and over a dozen focus groups with different types of farmers (big, small, youth, women, men, ethnic minorities, etc.), government, NGO and other actors working across the agri-food supply chain, including RING project staff.

The context of national policy and intervention-specific aims of RING are summarized in Table 6. Commendably, RING tackles household food and nutrition security through a multi-sectoral (e.g., agriculture, water, sanitation, health) and multi-dimensional approach (economic, biological, hygiene, governance), which differs from AVANSE in Haiti and AMSANA in Benin that approach food and nutrition security as primarily a production and economic issue related to growing agri-food sectors and livelihoods. Supporting alternative income streams and increasing savings and loans for women are only one set of components of the project intended to improve the availability and access to good quality food. RING claims that over 96,000 households were supported to grow diverse, nutritious foods, such as leafy green vegetables, soy and orange-fleshed sweet potato (OFSP). Over US\$4.8 million was reportedly saved and US\$1.23 million in small loans were provided to vulnerable women through over 2868 village savings and loans associations that comprise 79,000 women (USAID 2019). RING also provides outreach and training on positive nutrition, sanitation and hygiene behaviors, especially amongst women and children, as well as the building of household latrines and hand washing stations, which are understood to improve the utilization of diverse and nutritious foods. The project also focuses on establishing and strengthening regional and district governments, NGOs and community groups, particularly those aimed at supporting mothers to share best nutrition practices, such as complementary feeding, weaning and disease control and prevention. Almost 3600 health workers, 1000 non-health staff, and 6800 community health volunteers were reportedly trained to promote household nutrition and address acute malnutrition in local health facilities. Finally, RING also provided comprehensive monitoring and evaluation technical support to local governments, like WIAD staff, to improve their gender mainstreaming or data quality for evidence-based decision-making.

In the communities where Siera was immersed, research participants explained that RING focused mainly on supporting soy production, initially through free-provision, (and in subsequent seasons, on loan) one acres worth of tractor services, chemical fertilizer and certified, high-yielding, open-pollinating varieties of seed to women, similar to the AVANSE project in Haiti. Women in the communities were offered training on improving the quality of meals using the soy produced. Numerous RING staff explained that there were several benefits to promoting soy within communities: (a) progress in protein consumption for families producing soy; (b) improve nutrition through promoting soy in markets either through soy-based foods (e.g. soy kebabs) or other foods fortified with soy (e.g. flour, formula, porridge); (c) develop rural and urban livelihoods by creating a market for both raw soy and processed soy; (d) replenish nitrogen depleted soils and reduce the reliance on costly chemical fertilizer. Project staff also reported that the project targeted the most



Table 6 Summary of the national policy and USAID's RING project in northern, Ghana

National policy	Key policy aims	Gendering of policy	Intervention—RING	Intervention—RING aims
2009–2017 Medium-Term Agriculture Sector Investment Plan	Increasing productivity, farmer incomes and global market integration as major agricultural development and food security objectives	Ministry of Food and Agriculture's Women in Agricultural Development Directorate (WIAD)	US\$60 million From 2014 to 2019 USAID's Feed the Future Initiative	Decrease stunting, wasting, underweight and anemia among children under age five and others in the Northern Region of Ghana
2017 Planting for Food and Jobs—A Campaign for Rapid Growth		Providing technical support for using gender sensitive data and analysis about the production and processing of nutritious food	Contracted by Global Communities, an international non-profit organization to implement the project	



‘vulnerable’ women, meaning those in poorer households and with children under age five.

Several women participants involved in RING described that they would likely sell the soy produced (and/or process it for sale), as opposed to saving it for household consumption. Some of these women mentioned that they only agreed to produce soy because of the support they received from the project and the high market value at the time. They indicated that they would likely stop growing soy when market prices dropped. This points to the discrepancies between the nutrition project’s assumption about women’s food production as being oriented towards household nutrition and consumption and most women’s priorities of soy production for cash generation.

A key informant also expressed concerns about expecting women to increase their production of labour-intensive crops like soy without considering their other responsibilities and their dependence on men: ‘So, you are not telling the men how they should react [to the project]; you are not giving them channels for how they can support [women involved in the project]’. RING did not protect some women who reported experiencing backlash for receiving this support. Some women’s food provisioning responsibilities reportedly increased, without increasing access to key household resources like land or labor. One key project staff informant described the tension between some women who feel entitled to control their own benefits from production and their husbands who insist that the harvests resulting from RING support go to the household budget to feed the family: ‘RING supported them with soya bean production and when it was time for harvesting the [husband] farmer called me saying, “this soybean I am going to seize it from the woman, you gave it to her, she does not respect me”, you see. ... I told them right now the thing belongs to the household.’ In this case, the woman who received the assistance viewed it as part of her own farming activities and decided to sell the harvest for cash, which ran against what her husband and the project implementer required and demanded.

RING can offer new opportunities for women to earn cash and use it in ways that they see fit, despite the backlash and tension from others. Yet, by supporting women to produce for the household, without considering the gendered divisions of labor, relations and power dynamics, there is a risk that women can lose control over their harvests, while potentially adding to their work burdens and food responsibilities.

Case 4: Utilizing Biofortification and Gendered Food Labor Practices for Mitigating Nutritional Deficiencies Through SPHI in Tanzania

In Tanzania, biofortified crop distribution aims to improve nutritional health and relies on narrowed normative gender roles for food production, distribution and sales. Prioritizing the technological solution of biofortification overshadows the complexity of dietary practices, seasonal differences and gendered market engagement.

Biofortified sweet potato promotion is widely cited as successful in improving malnutrition rates, increasing vitamin A intake, and for providing income for women (Low 2017; Saltzman 2013). However, these ‘success’ stories emphasize the benefits



of adopting the crop when asset allocation, such, as land, labour, and time is readily available, and when markets are identified and secured. The following analysis of the SPHI project (implemented by the International Potato Centre) is based on Dr. Sheila Rao's research. Data was collected in 2015 and 2016 in the Mwanza region of Tanzania and focused on how investments in OFSP through the Gates Foundation and USAID integrated the crop into existing sweet potato cropping systems. Nine months of fieldwork focused on the everyday lives of sweet potato farmers living in the Mwanza region and who were engaged in the SPHI project. Semi-structured interviews of farmers and participant observation of the agricultural development engagement at the regional, national and global levels informed this case and were based on 56 seasonal and ongoing interviews in the Mwanza and Ukerewe regions in western Tanzania along with several interviews with NGO staff, scientists and technicians associated with the intervention (Table 7).

Sweet potato is widely considered a subsistence crop in parts of the SSA region. Project implementers targeted women farmers to lead the cultivation of OFSP and to also potentially benefit from commercial production and sales. SPHI project objectives assumed that women food producers of OFSP would demonstrate a 'win-win' scenario of improved nutritional outcomes and income generation (Rao and Huggins 2017). These market-oriented approaches to nutritional health through biofortification disregarded the underlying structural barriers to production, such as limited access to land expansion for commercial purposes, credit loans, education and training opportunities. Normative labor roles (e.g., household maintenance and care of children and elderly) also limited women farmers engagement with commercial production, resulting in minimal, short-term income increases and ongoing labour investments in subsistence farming by women.

In western Tanzania, a predominantly female-membered farmer group became a long-term receiver of biofortified sweet potato investment. Group members who had access to land for additional crops, labor, and time to engage with project activities participated and benefited from large-scale projects. Interviews with group members revealed that those who benefited from biofortified crops were also engaged in other on and off-farm businesses—selling produce, processed food products, housing, restaurants, and formal employment, such as teaching. Farmers required additional assets to dedicate to OFSP beyond subsistence and small-scale operations. In one particular study of a district's experience with commercial uptake, those with enough land and access to transportation for distributing their sales, benefited from large-scale commercial production, and were mostly men and only a few women-land holders (Rao 2020).

Tracing the expansion and implementation of large-scale biofortification projects revealed two significant blind spots with respect to gendered food systems. First, promoting biofortified crops with an emphasis on targeting female producers disregarded the diverse labor investments in local food systems, narrowly enlisting rural women as food producers only. Outcomes from the SPHI initiative pointed to an increase in the number of varieties available and the specific technologies developed that supported investment expansion beyond production. Gendered labour, dietary considerations and women's direct involvement from these outcomes were not mentioned. Second, food producers factored nutritional value of OFSP alongside other



Table 7 Summary of national policy and SPHI project in Tanzania

National policy	Key policy aims	Gendering of policy	Intervention—SPHI	Intervention—SPHI aims
Tanzania's National Nutrition Strategy (2011–2016) National Multisectoral Nutrition Action Plan (NMNAP) (2016–2021) Member of the SUN Movement National Strategy for Biofortification	Address micronutrient deficiency through supplementation, biofortification and dietary improvement	Reduce inequities between men and women in their access and use of productive resources	US\$75 million From 2010 to 2019 Second phase of Sweet Potato for Security and Health (SASHA) aimed to integrate biofortified sweet potato into cropping systems across 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa to reduce vitamin A deficiency	Improve the nutritional outcomes of producers and consumer, through the scale up of the production and consumption of orange flesh sweet potato without altering dietary and cropping practices and sweet potato producing regions in Tanzania Develop opportunities to expand the production of OFSP through new products such as flour and other baked and dried products



considerations including consumer preferences, preparation needs of OFSP, alongside other factors including consumer and family preferences, anticipated yields relative to other crops and time and labor investments required for growing, selling and preparing biofortified crops. This resulted in only selected producers benefiting from expanded production and others resorting back to more traditional varieties that were more favoured by family members and market buyers.

Biofortification strategies are currently expanding globally and will continue to demonstrate positive impacts on nutritional health. At the same time, without complementary considerations of the inherently gendered nature of food labour investments (production and provision practices and preferences, opportunities for market expansion for further processing) national biofortification strategies will result in a limited positive impact on women farmers in Tanzania.

Discussion of Intervention Cases

We offer four case-studies of agri-food and nutritional development interventions to show how global policies that mainstream gender based on liberal feminist ideals translate to practice. The policy strategy of including women within existing socioeconomic systems focused primarily on them as food producers for household food security generally translates to interventions that instrumentalize their labor. Interventions that fund women's income-generating activities and care responsibilities for broader goals like household food security and nutrition can have negative consequences for their work burdens and exacerbate tensions/conflict because it does not consider the wider socioeconomic and biophysical environmental context. Moreover, very limited intersectional considerations are considered and addressed in these interventions, nor working beyond individuals more generally, such as by developing feminist, rights-based organizations needed for making structural changes to socially unjust land and labor dynamics across scales. We summarize how we came to this conclusion in Table 8 which outlines the feminist indicators discerned. These indicators are based on both McPhail (2003)'s principles, as well as our wider reading of the case studies using critical feminist framings.

Gender Mainstreaming, Differentiation and Targeting Women

All of the projects addressed gender dynamics to varying degrees. The case of the AVANSE project in Haiti did not recognize women and men as gendered based on norms and power dynamics, which would make progressively addressing those differences unlikely. It is a useful project to highlight the extreme (but typical) agri-food development project that has little if any consideration for gendered dynamics, women or social disparities more generally. In contrast, the other projects either had gender mainstreaming as an explicit goal like the AMSANA project in Benin or they differentiated between women and men, recognizing gendered norms and power dynamics across their project activities. Yet, this recognition translated largely to the targeting of women in practice, with the RING project being the most extreme



Table 8 Summary of gender-responsive actions and indicators of each project

Feminist analysis principles	Gender indicators	AVANSE in Haiti	AMSANA in Benin	RING in Ghana	SPHI in Tanzania
1	Mainstreams gender across all project activities		X	X	X
1, 2	Differentiates between women and men or incorporates gender goals		X	X	X
3	Focuses not just on women but also includes men and gender relations	X	X		X
3	Incorporates intersectional dimensions and other socioeconomic groupings				
2, 4	Goes beyond a focus on individuals and also includes wider institutions beyond the household	X		X	
4	Based on context-specific gender norms and power dynamics				
2, 4	Addresses processes, not just outcomes			X	



version by targeting women only and not including men at all. Prioritizing women as food producers and providers in interventions offer additional opportunities to gain social, financial and agricultural resources, however, this focus also risks alienating men, causing tension, conflict and potential backlash around the benefits of development project support (Vercillo 2020). In Ghana, RING's support has meant that some men perceived women's increasing contributions to soy production as challenges to their power within the home and food provisioning responsibilities. Alienating men was a concern in the context of RING as the onus for change is on individual women. From a critical feminist perspective, the focus should be on structural changes and institutions, including at the community level, as well as ODA, government and markets themselves.

Intersectional Dimensions

Without considering the question of 'which women' are included in and excluded from development projects and/or how they are affected differently by these interventions and wider socioeconomic structures, practice may fail to reach certain vulnerable groups or worse, exploit them, deepening their intersectional vulnerabilities (Nightingale 2006). Many studies have shown how there are intensifying intersecting inequalities beyond gender, like ethnicity in northern Ghana which Vercillo (2022) shows exist in relation to agri-food development projects aimed at efficiency and growth in production. Focusing on the poor does not also address the class dynamics and deepening inequality related to land, seed, water and other resource dispossession that are caused by wider power dynamics in development, including the role of the wealthy elite and other institutions like the state and multilateral actors. The nutrition component of projects such as RING in Ghana and AMSANA in Benin did aim to target the most 'vulnerable' women, meaning those in poor households with young children, but this targeting made assumptions and reinforced normative inequitable gender roles.

Context-Specific Gender Dynamics

The widespread emphasis on gender equality in global and national agri-food and nutritional development policy, as well as in context-specific practice generally ascribes to a gender narrative that includes static, homogenized conceptualizations of food provisioning and marketing, which may not reflect local realities. In Benin, the AMSANA project included men's participation in the discussion of 'women's issues', reinforcing the normative, binary interpretation of gender norms. In the context of Ghana, some RING project implementers justified targeting women in interventions and excluding men by reinforcing narratives of women as more caring, resourceful and responsible than men, who would waste any support or earnings or invest in non-household activities. In the case of SPHI in Tanzania, promoting biofortified sweet potato production assumed that women would seamlessly adopt the new varieties since they were already growing food for household consumption. While in Haiti, AVANSE reinforced the division of men's role in lucrative export



production, leaving women encapsulated in the homestead and less lucrative local markets, thereby reinforcing women's dependence on men's land and income. The interventions described above reinforce the essentialist notion that women care for the household and the community more than men because of their inherent qualities, justifying why they are the main recipients of assistance, which is a trope that has existed in wider gender and development efforts (Whitehead 2000; Chant and Sweetman 2012). Women are typically portrayed in contradictory ways, as victims and 'heroes' or as 'agents of change', insofar as it suits the development narrative (Cornwall and Rivas 2015), ignoring men's important contributions to subsistence-oriented production (Whitehead 2000; Vercillo 2020).

Global policy narratives focused on tropes of women's knowledge, roles and responsibilities as being more catered to the household translate to interventions that instrumentalize their labor by funding their income-generating activities and care responsibilities for other benefits like household food security and nutrition, without addressing their work burdens, disproportionate land access challenges, and vulnerabilities more broadly. This focus on women is also evident in broader feminist foreign policies globally like Canada's FIAP and in many interventions. The AVANSE project in Haiti, for example, describes the role of women in food production 'as catalysts for job creation and economic growth, transforming their communities and countries' (USAID 2020, p. 1). Similarly, AMSANA focused on increasing women beneficiaries, reporting on the percentage of women integrated into their projects in Benin. Such approaches tend to increase women's workloads while failing to address household dynamics of power and control around finances and spending. Targeting women in food and agriculture interventions to address gender inequality contributes to the 'feminization of responsibility' (Chant and Sweetman 2012, p. 521). This 'double burden' has been critiqued for decades (Mies 1998), yet evidently persists in practice.

Policies should emphasize the context-specific food and nutrition strategies already in place within communities and households, as well as women food producers' and providers' efforts, values and goals critical for mitigating unpredictable market and biophysical environmental conditions. For the RING project in Ghana, some women preferred to sell soy rather than consume it themselves, which shows that program and policy agendas undermine the decision-making processes, and cash needs to be embedded in gender relations in place-based settings. Agri-food and nutritional development policy and practice could strengthen gender equality by moving beyond efforts aimed at increasing production and integration in markets to include values like dietary diversity and agrobiodiversity, which help to mitigate risks and shocks, as well as gender equality (Kerr 2021).

Processes and Institutions Beyond the Household

By focusing on targeting individual women based on their primary roles as mothers and carers within households, our research shows that they are fitting women within existing socioeconomic systems focused on increasing food production and minimizing costs, rather than facilitating structural changes that redress gender and



intersectional inequality. Where men were intentionally engaged to redress unequal gender norms, this was also focused narrowly on women's roles in nutrition at the household level. AMSANA project in Benin 'husband's school' initiative focused on discussing women's disadvantage with men without challenging their own roles and wider leadership and institutions in upholding labor burdens and discriminatory resource access and control practices, including patrilineal land inheritance systems. Similarly, focusing on individual empowerment, while an important endeavour and a focus in global policy, is limited in changing the structures that cause vulnerability.

There were some instances in projects where wider processes that undermine gender mainstreaming were being addressed. One major activity of the RING project in Ghana was to invest in strengthening local nutrition governance by financially investing in specialized local and regional governance units and staff already designated by the government and building their capacity to mainstream gender. Normally these gender officers and units would have little to no budget to do their work. Whether this investment leads to future budgeting for their activities beyond the scope of the project remains unclear, however. The RING project also targeted women mainly by establishing, supporting and strengthening women's self-help, savings and loan's groups at the community level. Similarly, AVANSE in Haiti, while gender blind, did invest in wider women's processing facilities and cooperatives and built governance, leadership and capacity which has major implications for their inclusion in regional and export markets. Investing in these bigger marketing groups also strengthened their ability to represent and advocate for women's interests while engaging leaders.

Women's production is not simply constrained by socio-cultural norms and traditions, but also political and economic barriers, such as unequal care burdens, disproportionate challenges with accessing land, education, adequate sanitation and physical movement across spaces. The vast majority of small to medium farmers across the world are vulnerable to dispossession because of increasingly competitive markets. Women are disproportionately vulnerable, a disadvantage that cannot be resolved by a few acres worth of assistance and training provided to individuals or households. This productivity and efficiency model for agri-food and nutritional development also places some of the blame for hunger and malnutrition on inefficient female farmers and food providers, rather than the way larger businesses serve to exploit people and environments across social and spatial lines for cost efficiency, profit maximization and growth (Carney 1992; Farhall and Rickards 2021; Schroeder 1997; Struckmann 2018; Vercillo 2020).

There is a broader imperative of participatory decision-making and inclusion in global and national policymaking and practice, as well as investing in wider institutions beyond households to redress structural inequalities. Feminist policy analysis requires movement building and/or an alignment with other initiatives that are pushing for feminist policy formation—that address unequal power relations and structural barriers impeding gender equality (Blackwell et al. 2015). This would include support to women's organizations based in the Global South in ways that feminist foreign assistance policies both related and unrelated to agri-food and nutrition can address intersectional categories of marginalization (including sex, race, ethnicity, disability, etc.) across global, regional, and local scales (Rao and Tiessen 2020).



Conclusion

In this paper, we draw upon the main concerns of critical feminist analysis to expose the dominant approaches underlying global agri-food and nutritional development policy narratives. Critical feminist analysis is also useful for assessing how, and to what degree these policy narratives alleviate gender inequality in food and nutrition security, especially for when they are translated to practice. The cases of large-scale donor interventions operating across different places (Haiti, Benin, Ghana and Tanzania) illustrate the outcomes of global and national policies that integrate gender in differing, but generally tangential ways. We find that there is a widespread emphasis on gender equality in agri-food and nutritional development policy and practice both globally and across different contexts of the Global South. This emphasis ascribes to a narrative that includes static, homogenized conceptualizations of food provisioning and marketing with women doing most of the food related work for their households. These narratives translate to interventions that instrumentalize women's labor by funding their income-generating activities and care responsibilities for other benefits like household food security and nutrition without addressing their work burdens, disproportionate land access challenges, and vulnerabilities more broadly. Global policy framings and interventions aimed at gender equality and women's empowerment in agri-food and nutrition focus largely on the liberal feminist ideals of including women within existing patriarchal and capitalist agri-food and nutrition systems, which serve to exploit their resources and labor, as well as that of others across social and spatial lines. Conversely, social disparities in production, food security and nutrition go beyond social norms and discrimination and include underlying structural conditions based on principles of efficiency that exploit others for profit.

We argue for shifting the emphasis of agri-food and nutritional development from productivity and efficiency to insist on a more open and flexible approach that accommodates for the diverse experiences, interests and relations of men and women alongside intersectional factors of class, sexuality, race, class, age, and disability. Feminist policies and practice striving for gender equality need to be informed by the diversity of local knowledge, strategies and language and fully owned by the communities it seeks to support. The inclusion of feminist engagement derived from the Global South enables the necessary power shifting required for the reconfiguration of policy formation and development praxis. With this approach, we may create responsive, rather than instructive and instrumental policy measures, able to enhance women's capacity to do the things they deem necessary to improve food and nutrition in their specific context and households, which may not be efficient or nutritious according to global standards.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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