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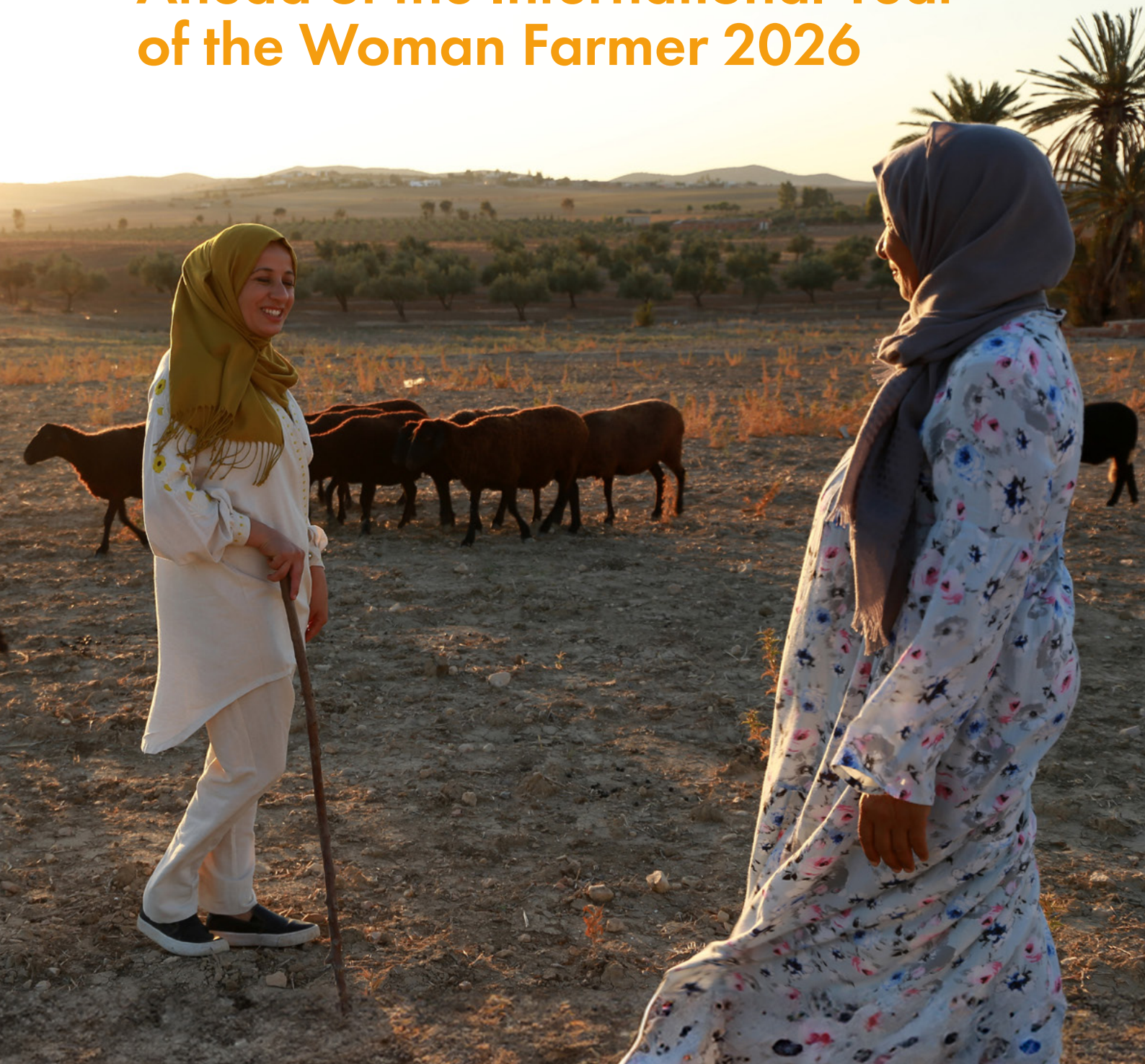
YOUNG SCIENTISTS GROUP



INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE
WOMAN FARMER
2026

Elevating young women's visibility in agrifood systems:

Ahead of the International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026



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of the Woman Farmer 2026

World Food Forum

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About the World Food Forum

The World Food Forum (WFF) was launched in 2021 as an independent network of partners hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. It serves as the premier global platform to actively shape agrifood systems for a better food future, accelerating the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Through youth action, science and innovation, and investment, the WFF forges new paths of action and multi-sector partnerships for agrifood impact at the local, regional and global levels to achieve a more sustainable, resilient, inclusive and hunger-free food future for all.

Within this framework, the WFF Global Youth Action Initiative was established to harness the passion and power of youth, and to incite positive action for agrifood systems through youth empowerment. It acts as a catalytic movement and driver of youth engagement in food governance and serves as a knowledge centre and innovation lab, fostering and inspiring youth-led solutions. It thus actively contributes to the implementation of the UN Youth 2030 Strategy and enhances youth engagement in the follow-up to the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit.

The WFF Global Youth Action Initiative is implemented through a set of thematic programmes that leverage intergenerational and cross-sectoral collaboration around policy, innovation, education, culture and local action.

About the Young Scientists Group and its report

The mission of the World Food Forum (WFF) Young Scientists Group (YSG) is to provide scientific evidence and technical knowledge to the various initiatives of the WFF, and to develop research on topics of concern to youth related to agrifood systems transformation. Established in 2022, the YSG has completed two cohorts. Its third cohort began activities in May 2025 as part of a two-year tenure (2025–2027).

The composition of the YSG reflects the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation's four betters: better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life, leaving no one behind. The diversity of YSG members' expertise mirrors the diversity of challenges and solutions associated with achieving agrifood systems transformations and the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Abbreviations

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GAD	gender and development
GSMA	Global System for Mobile Communications Association
NGO	non-governmental organization
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
IYWF	International Year of the Woman Farmer
LMIC	low- and middle-income countries
NEET	not in education, employment or training
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
YLA	Youth Leadership for Agriculture
WFF	World Food Forum
YSG	World Food Forum Young Scientists Group
YPB	World Food Forum Youth Policy Board
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development

Abstract

Young women remain significantly underrepresented in agrifood systems research, policy and programming, despite their vital contributions to food production, local food security and community resilience. Their leadership and innovation capacities are often overlooked, resulting in missed opportunities for gender-responsive and youth-inclusive development. This report explores how Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) can be leveraged to elevate the visibility, agency and leadership of young women in agrifood systems, particularly in the lead-up to the International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF) in 2026.

Despite comprising about 38 percent of the agrifood workforce, women, especially young women, face systemic barriers including restrictive gender norms, limited access to land and capital, technology, education and services, and a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations/FAO, 2023a). These intersecting barriers are exacerbated by climate change, political instability and economic vulnerability. This report adopts a qualitative approach by combining literature review, secondary research, narrative inquiry, and the analysis of youth storytelling and awareness campaigns to explore key themes. Case examples from youth-led initiatives further illustrate the challenges and enabling pathways linked to SDGs 4 and 8.

The analysis focuses on two main areas: (1) the status and challenges faced by young women in agrifood systems, and (2) the enabling pathways for their empowerment through education, decent work, digital inclusion and care support. These dimensions are deeply interconnected, as they contribute to young women's full participation and leadership in agrifood systems. This report also integrates relevant dimensions of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), highlighting how structural inequalities limit the agency of young women and how targeted, intersectional interventions can unlock their potential.

With increasing climate shocks, challenges and stressors marked by desertification, flooding and natural resource depletion, this research foregrounds the knowledge systems and lived experiences of young women farmers as a foundation for envisioning sustainable and just agrifood systems. By amplifying their voices and agency, the report aims to inform policymakers, development practitioners and youth networks committed to building more inclusive and equitable agrifood systems. The findings underscore the importance of integrated, youth-led strategies to advance gender equality. The upcoming IYWF in 2026 offers a timely opportunity to mainstream these approaches and reposition young women as key actors in agrifood systems transformation.

Keywords: *young women, girls, agrifood system, SDG 4, SDG 8, visibility, empowerment*

1. Introduction

Agrifood systems are essential to sustain life, ensure food security and support economic development globally. While they are especially critical for livelihoods in low- and middle-income countries, they play a key role in all regions. These systems go beyond agricultural production to include processing, distribution, marketing, consumption and food waste management, and other segments such as input supply, advisory services and governance. As defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in recent reports on the status of women and youth in agrifood systems, these systems encompass all activities and actors involved in the production, transformation and delivery of food, as well as the enabling environment that supports them. Within this broad and vital structure, women play key roles as workers, leaders, decision-makers and knowledge holders, including in production, processing, marketing and governance.

According to FAO, agrifood systems employ 36 percent of working women globally, yet significant inequalities persist (FAO, 2023a). Women, and particularly young women and girls, face persistent barriers to accessing both productive resources and support services. These include natural resources such as land and water; financial resources like credit and savings; physical resources such as tools, infrastructure and technology; and social capital, including networks and mentorship. In addition, they often lack access to essential support services such as agricultural extension, advisory services and vocational training. They are also often underrepresented in decision-making at all levels, and much of their work remains invisible and/or unpaid.

Young women in agrifood systems face a unique set of challenges at the intersection of gender, age, class, ethnicity and geography. While development agendas have begun to acknowledge both women and youth, these groups are frequently addressed separately. This division has created a gap in research, public policies and programming, leaving the specific needs and potential of young women largely overlooked.

Many young women and girls are excluded from agricultural extension services, innovation networks and investment opportunities. Furthermore, they face a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, which limits their time, mobility and access to education, employment and entrepreneurship. This invisibility is not merely symbolic: it has tangible effects on communities and economies. According to FAO (2023a), closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agrifood systems could increase global gross domestic product by 1 percentage point (nearly USD 1 trillion) and reduce global food insecurity by about 2 percentage points, equivalent to lifting 45 million people out of food insecurity.

In this context, the commemoration of the International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF) in 2026 represents a historic opportunity to make young women visible in agrifood systems and to transform the narratives that have perpetuated their exclusion. To the best of our knowledge, this global campaign can and should be a catalyst for structural change, not just a symbolic celebration. To achieve this, it is necessary to adopt deliberate strategies that amplify the voices of young women farmers, recognize their leadership, challenge harmful gender stereotypes, and promote more inclusive and equitable agrifood systems policies.

One of the most powerful tools for achieving this change is storytelling. Communication strategies and awareness-raising campaigns based on real testimonies can help transform public discourse, generate empathy, strengthen intergenerational solidarity and mobilize resources and political will (European Commission, 2024). This report explores how strategic communication and storytelling can be used to increase the visibility of young women in agrifood systems ahead of the 2026 campaign. The analysis

focuses on two main areas: (1) the current status and challenges faced by young women in agrifood systems, including structural barriers and intersecting forms of discrimination; and (2) the enabling pathways for their empowerment through education, access to decent work, digital inclusion and care support. By examining these dimensions, the study aims to identify how narrative-based strategies can amplify young women farmers' voices, promote inclusive development and inform more equitable agrifood systems policies.

Through a qualitative, youth-informed approach that combines literature review, secondary research, narrative inquiry, and the analysis of youth storytelling and awareness campaigns, this study seeks to identify good practices, persistent barriers, and factors that facilitate visibility. The goal is to generate concrete recommendations for governments, development agencies, youth groups, women farmers' organizations and media actors preparing for the 2026 campaign. By centering the lived experiences of young women, this work contributes to a more inclusive, equitable and resilient vision of agrifood development.

2. Conceptual framework

As part of the World Food Forum (WFF) Youth Assembly's year-long process, a global consultation gathered youth perspectives on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 (Zero Hunger) and its interlinkages with SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Insights were drawn from United Nations (UN) forums, WFF assemblies, a global survey and intergenerational dialogues. The WFF Young Scientists Group (YSG) provided the research base, while the WFF Youth Policy Board (YPB) translated it into policy priorities, ensuring recommendations remain evidence-driven and impactful.

Building on this process, the YSG continues to focus its research on enabling pathways, particularly around education and decent work, to strengthen youth advocacy on crucial topics. With 2026 declared the IYWF, this is a timely moment to amplify youth voices, support young women in agrifood systems and advance inclusive, evidence-based policymaking.

To focus this study, this report first identifies the status and challenges faced by young women in agrifood systems. Then, we highlight four key approaches of enabling pathways. First, leadership and economic participation can enhance bargaining power and resource allocation (Springer *et al.*, 2022), but cultural norms and self-esteem may limit the impact of leadership roles, especially among rural women and youth. Second, consistent evidence shows a positive association between women's empowerment and food and nutrition security (Tsiboe *et al.*, 2018; Wei *et al.*, 2021; Aziz *et al.*, 2021; Quisumbing *et al.*, 2023). Empowerment in domains such as decision-making, resource control, and mobility is linked to improved dietary diversity and reduced food insecurity for women and their families (Malapit & Quisumbing, 2015; Alaofè *et al.*, 2017; Tsiboe *et al.*, 2018; Galiè *et al.*, 2019; Aziz *et al.*, 2022; Ishfaq *et al.*, 2022). Third, effective policies must address these disparities, promote digital protection, and encourage collaboration with technology companies to ensure women's full participation in innovation and leadership (FAO & WFF, 2024). Fourth, programs aiming to empower women must consider potential trade-offs between income generation and time burden, and involve men and community leaders to achieve gender-transformative change (Quisumbing *et al.*, 2023; Ayamga, Ayawine & Ayentimi, 2023).

Shifts in social norms, such as men's increased participation in domestic work, have shown promise in supporting women's empowerment and work-life balance (Ayamga, Ayawine & Ayentimi, 2023). Similarly, the four key enabling pathways highlighted in this report are designed to influence social

norms and create environments where young women can thrive in agrifood systems. By examining the challenges young women currently face and the pathways that address them, this report seeks to raise the profile of young women ahead of the 2026 International Year of Women Farmers (IYWF) and contribute to broader efforts to advance their empowerment in agrifood systems, in line with SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of this report



2.1. Barriers confronting young women and girls in agrifood systems

For young women and girls, engaging in agrifood systems marks a pivotal stage that shapes their opportunities, empowerment and future livelihoods. As defined by FAO (2025a), this vibrant period between childhood and adulthood is marked by significant life transitions. Transitions from childhood to adulthood in agrifood systems are shaped by education (Maini *et al.*, 2021), gender identity, socioeconomic class, financial resources, health status, geographic context and intergenerational dynamics (Glover & Sumberg, 2020), all of which are crucial for sustainable and just development.

In addition to facing social stigma and inequality (McCammon *et al.*, 2020; Hebert *et al.*, 2019), young women in agrifood systems encounter several key challenges, namely: (1) limited access to resources and credit (Fani *et al.*, 2021; Makate *et al.*, 2019; Cherotich, Sibiko & Ayuya, 2021; Balana *et al.*, 2022), (2) limited access to opportunities (Fani *et al.*, 2021) and (3) hidden leadership and care work (Qanti *et al.*, 2021). These challenges hinder women's empowerment to access decent work. With limited support, young women have little bargaining power and are often burdened with multiple household roles, including caregiving, childbearing and domestic chores (Carmichael *et al.*, 2022; Mulumeoderhwa, 2021; Akuffo, 2024). In addition to these responsibilities, they often have limited access to opportunities such as quality education (Akuffo, 2024; Momsen, 2021), skills development and decent work (Carmichael *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, limited access to resources, especially credit, restricts young women's economic opportunities, leaving many in agrifood systems vulnerable to informal and insecure employment (Coleman *et al.*, 2019; Bongomin *et al.*, 2024; Porter *et al.*, 2025; Bryan *et al.*, 2024; Heckert *et al.*, 2020).

The burden of care work in particular often remains undervalued and invisible in economic and leadership discussions (Bossenbroek *et al.*, 2015). In general, women in agrifood systems often juggle both paid farm/labour work and unpaid care work at home, leading to excessive total working hours (FAO, 2023a). Despite working long hours, much of the care work is unpaid and undervalued, meaning young women may still be categorized as "underemployed" in labour statistics (FAO, 2023a). This form of "hidden leadership" in managing households and communities, while vital, can limit their time, mobility and opportunities for formal leadership roles (Fernández-Giménez, Oteros-Rozas, E., & Ravera, F, 2021; Morgan, Bryan, & Elias, 2024).

2.2. Capability approach and empowerment theory

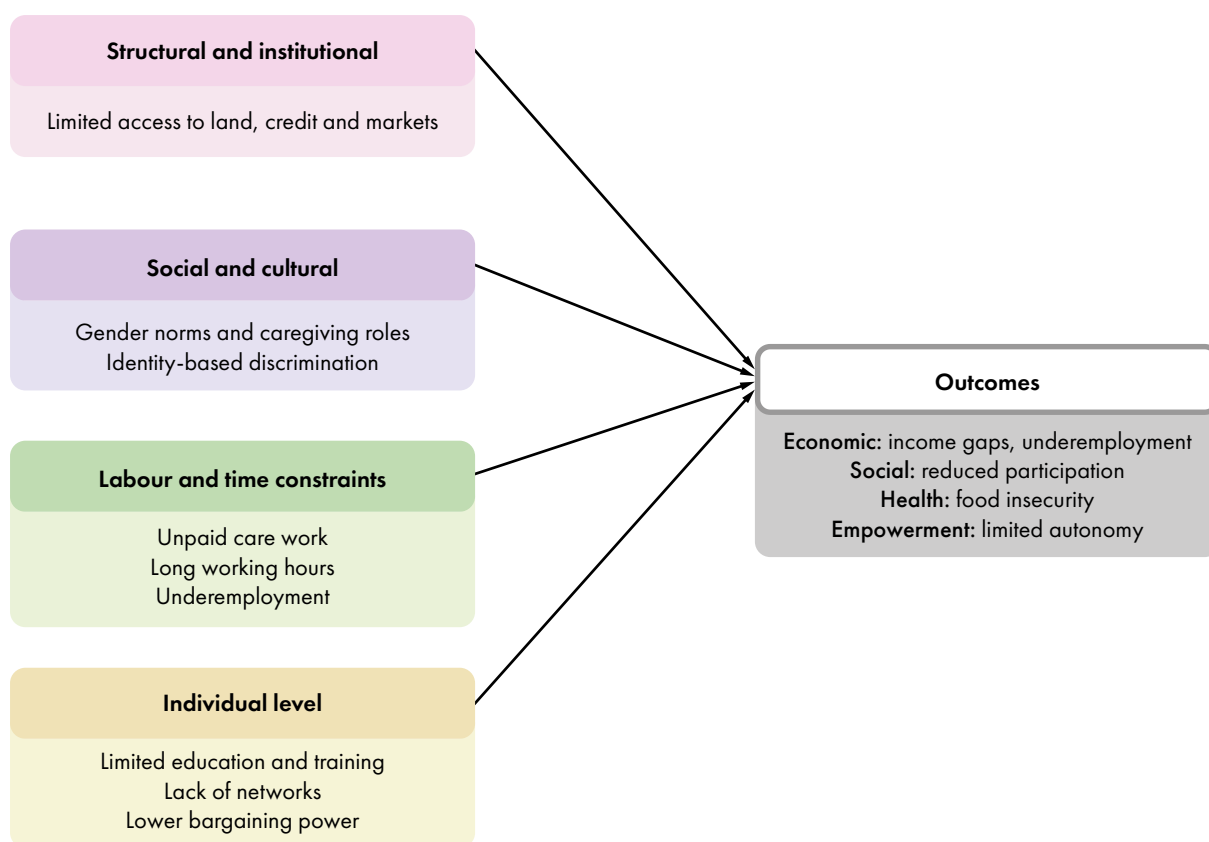
This study employs two theories which are the capability approach and empowerment theory. First, the capability approach underscores the importance of addressing these barriers, recognizing that equality in resources alone does not translate into equality in real freedoms or life choices. Nobel laureate economist and philosopher, Amartya Sen, authored the first Human Development Report, applying the capability approach he had previously developed, which has since become highly influential in subsequent United Nations Development Programme reports. Second, economist Naila Kabeer's theory of empowerment approaches empowerment as an ongoing process that links access to resources, the ability to exercise agency and the achievement of desired outcomes, all shaped by wider structural conditions. This perspective continues to be a cornerstone in gender and development studies.

Gender equality is not only about giving women and men access to the same resources. FAO defines it as a state where women and men have the same rights, opportunities and ability to access resources, services and decision-making. Even when resources are distributed equally, women and men may have different capabilities due to persistent structural and social barriers. In agrifood systems, such barriers influence who has access to, owns and controls productive resources; the division of labour by gender;

participation in decision-making; freedom of movement and proper treatment; bodily autonomy and protection from violence; and involvement in leadership, representation and community participation.

Social norms may restrict women's mobility or confine them to certain roles, while unequal access to education, healthcare and political participation can limit their development and influence (Pyburn & Hallin, 2023). Care responsibilities, which fall disproportionately on women, reduce the time and energy available for paid work or leadership roles (see Figure 2). Additionally, violence and safety concerns can severely constrain women's freedom of movement and decision-making (Pyburn & Hallin, 2023). Thus, tailored empowerment strategies sensitive to the needs of young women are needed to address their unique circumstances and challenges.

Figure 2. Key challenges of young women in agrifood systems

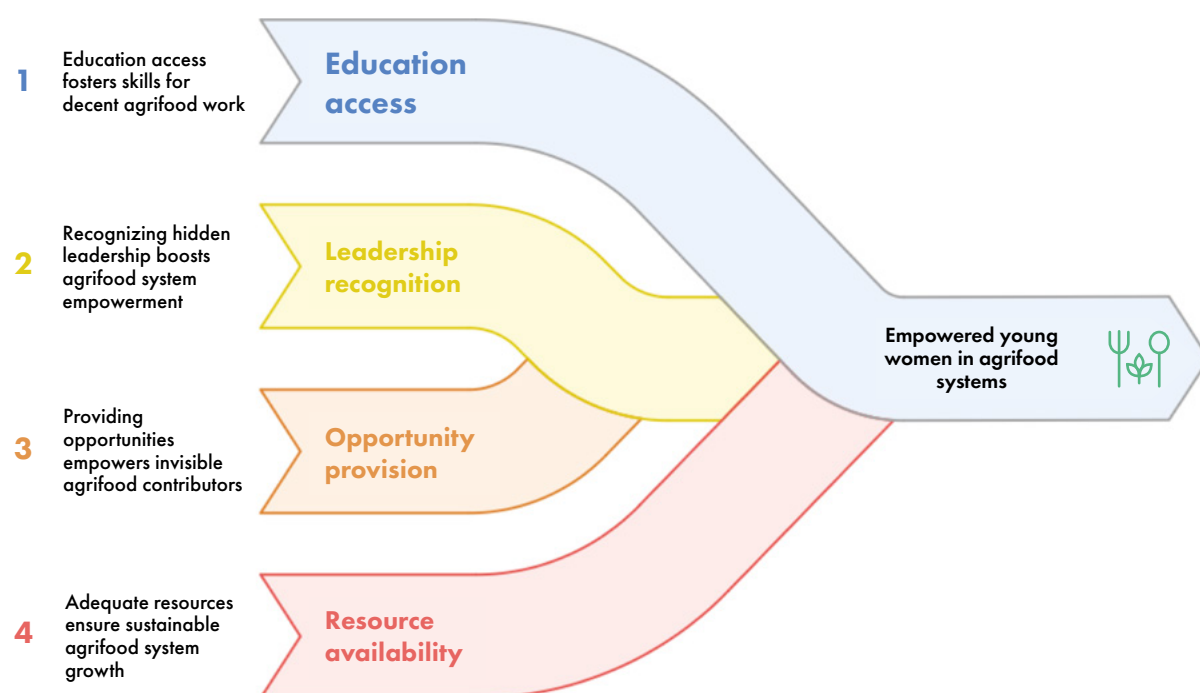


2.3. How these factors can serve as enabling pathways to the empowerment and visibility of young women

Recognizing young women's leadership in agrifood systems is essential to expanding their economic opportunities and fostering empowerment. Central to this empowerment is ensuring food and nutrition security, which provides the necessary foundation for young women to fully participate and thrive in their communities and workplaces. Equally important is advancing digital inclusion and access to innovation, which can open new avenues for education, entrepreneurship and market access.

These gains are supported by improved access to (1) quality education, training and decent work; (2) resources and capital, including access to land, credit and markets that enable young women to build sustainable livelihoods and invest in their futures; and (3) supportive environments that enable leadership and reduce care burdens (see Figure 3). However, to sustain these advances, addressing the burden of care responsibilities and promoting work-life balance remain critical, as unpaid care work often limits young women's time and capacity to engage fully in leadership and economic activities (Musyoka *et al.*, 2025). These interconnected dimensions, supported by access to opportunities and resources, enable young women to lead, innovate and achieve economic independence.

Figure 3. Pathways to empowering young women in agrifood systems



2.4. Definitions of young women adopted in this report

Table 1. Definitions of young women

Definitions of young women adopted in this report				
Age	0-14	15-17	18-24	25-34
	child	youth		adult
FAO and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	child	younger youth	older youth	younger adult
Terminologies in the report	child	young women		younger adult women

According to FAO (2025a), children are defined as those aged 0–14 years, while youth are divided into younger youth (15–17 years) and older youth (18–24 years). Adults are further classified, with younger adults ranging from 25–34 years old. These definitions are based on age and rely on legal frameworks especially from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this report, women are understood within the broader concept of gender. We adopt this definition by viewing “women” through the lens of socially and culturally constructed roles. As defined by FAO (2023a), gender roles refer to the behaviours, tasks and responsibilities that a society considers appropriate for women, men, boys and girls.

3. Status and challenges of young women

Women play a critical role throughout agrifood systems, participating across the value chain as farmers, consumers, entrepreneurs and traders. Globally, agrifood systems serve as a major source of employment for women, amounting to 36 percent of working women (FAO, 2023a). According to FAO (2025a), agrifood systems are especially integral for young women, with 44 percent of global working youth dependent on it as a livelihood source. Agrifood systems are especially important in the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), which have a large youth population with significant potential and thus serve as critical loci for the future of agrifood (Christiaensen, Rutledge, & Taylor, 2021). Beyond livelihood security, women often obtain and create food in the household, ensuring food security in their domestic units. Despite this, the gender gap in food insecurity between women and men increased to 4.3 percent by 2021 (FAO, 2023a). This is particularly important for LMICs with significantly high youth populations, where global food demand is projected to increase between 35 and 56 percent between 2010 and 2050 (FAO, 2025a).

Moreover, how women and girls participate and are compensated for their labour and knowledge in agrifood systems compared to men remains highly unequal. Limited access to markets, formal education and high expectations of unpaid domestic duties often prevent women and girls from pursuing or securing other livelihood means (FAO, 2023a). Social norms that place the burden of unpaid care and domestic work entirely on women, such as child rearing, cleaning and cooking, exacerbates inequities in women's participation in the labour market and securing livelihood alternatives (FAO, 2023a). For young women, this can be complicated by expectations for early marriage and patriarchal norms which often transfer land inheritance to men. Moreover, of the 20 percent of youth who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), young women are twice as likely to be in this classification (FAO, 2025a).

Additionally, women's opportunities in agrifood systems are heavily curtailed by limited access to land, digital technology and services, curbing their full participation in rural economies (FAO, 2023b). Women often lack secure land tenure and legal protection of land rights, access to irrigation, livestock, seeds and fertilizers. For instance, of the countries who reported on SDG Indicator 5.a.2, 50 percent of them have poor legal protections for women's land rights (FAO, 2023a). Access to technological innovations in agriculture are often gendered, with women having limited access to fertilizers, seeds, mechanized equipment and extension services, and gendered knowledge is rarely integrated into technologies for agrarian techniques (FAO, 2023a; Pyburn & Hallin, 2023). Agricultural education is rarely institutionalized in educational curricula, which prevents young people from developing technical know-how on how to engage in agricultural activities (Pyburn *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, gender norms and expectations in agrifood systems easily change with political shifts, war, natural disasters, male out-migration into cities and public health crises, which can shift responsibilities in agrifood supply chains to women (Pyburn & Hallin, 2023). During periods of compounded crises, such as conflict or natural disasters, both which drive food insecurity, women have lower resilience capacities due to increased work burdens, decreased mobility and reduced access to extension services (FAO, 2023a).

Even when women and girls are visibly represented in the supply chain, their contributions in agrifood systems are often undervalued. This is because agriculture is often painted as a masculine activity, while women are positioned as helpers and not farmers in their own right. Frequently, women's work along the production line is often perceived as less intensive or valuable (Pyburn & Hallin, 2023). Rural women are fundamental in primary production, and they are less likely to participate in activities which are perceived or labelled as physically demanding or are profitable (Pyburn, Slavchevska, & Kruijssen, 2023). Economically valuable crops like cocoa in Ghana or palm oil in Indonesia are highly male-dominated in smallholder production (Pyburn & Hallin, 2023). For this reason, women are often relegated to working in casual or unpaid agricultural work to harvest less lucrative crops, and on

average earn 18.4 percent less than men in wage employment in agriculture (FAO, 2023a). While women are often critical and dominant in processing agricultural commodities, from packaging, fixing and preparing (Pyburn, Slavchevska, & Kruijsen, 2023), such roles are overlooked, poorly paid and underrecognized even though the total production could not exist without them.

There have been significant efforts amongst policymakers and development organizations to reimagine the future of agrifood systems by leveraging the knowledge, agency and capabilities of women and youth. However, these efforts are constrained by the dominance of agribusinesses, political processes and states who regulate what to produce, how to consume and where to eat (Glover & Sumberg, 2020). Moreover, young people and women in rural areas have limited social capital and access to policy making spaces to inform equitable and sustainable agrifood systems (FAO, 2025a; Glover & Sumberg, 2020). While national policies are increasingly addressing gendered biases and gaps in access to land, finance, technology, services and capital, these rights remain poorly enforced or highlighted (FAO, 2023a). Yet, multiple case studies reinforce the benefits of agrifood systems and their value chains in improving the participation of women and marginalized communities in the labour force, their safety, working conditions and income (Christiaensen, Rutledge, & Taylor, 2021). Equally, empowering women in agrifood systems is shown to have a positive impact on nutrition, food security and agricultural production (FAO, 2023a). Although women and young girls are pivotal in agrifood systems, their labour, investments, land access, rights, education, high-value commodities, policies, and technologies require greater recognition and support.

4. Enabling pathways through SDG 4 and SDG 8

4.1. Recognizing young women's leadership and expanding economic opportunities

Empowering young women involves providing them with the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 1999). According to Kabeer (1999), the concept of empowerment encompasses three inter-related dimensions: resources (including material, human and social resources); agency ("the ability to define one's goals and act upon them"); and accomplishments which refers to outcomes that are of value to people – with food security and agricultural productivity being examples of such wellbeing outcomes within the context of agrifood systems (FAO, 2023a).

Education is central to achieving young women's empowerment. Quality education liberates the mind and produces the self-awareness and critical thinking needed to understand what is truly valuable to an individual (Nassbaum, 2011). It also promotes self-efficacy which is a foundational mechanism for human agency (Bandura, 2001) and it increases one's knowledge of the options and opportunities available to them. Furthermore, interdisciplinary education and training specific to agrifood systems is key in enhancing one's technical capacity for production, market intelligence, risk management and/or regulatory compliance, among other skills needed to engage effectively and efficiently in the sector (Babu, Manvatkar & Kolavalli, 2015). Thus, investing in young women's continuous learning about themselves, their work and their environment strengthens their agency, resource building and ability to make strategic life choices.

Given the fast-paced nature of social and technological change, constantly updating one's knowledge and technical skills is not only beneficial, but virtually essential in remaining relevant (Bandura, 2001).

It is therefore critical to tackle the formal and informal structures that may act as barriers to young women's educational attainment in some societies and to institutionalize their education such as providing vocational training programs tailored to them. Furthermore, there is a need to integrate curricula that provide non-technical or soft skills that could potentially promote more equitable remuneration and opportunities across genders. For instance, gender differences have been observed in the likelihood of workers initiating negotiation in professional settings (Kugler *et al.*, 2018; Fischer & Bajaj, 2017). Strengthening young women's capacity for negotiation could contribute to closing existing gaps in wages across activities in agrifood value-chains.

Globally, agrifood systems remain key entry points for youth with about 44 percent of working youth employed in the sector in 2021 (FAO, 2025a). However, some regional variations in the share of farm and off-farm employment exist. For example, in higher-income countries a greater proportion of youth working in agrifood systems are engaged in off-farm activities. Disaggregated data further reveals gender gaps in some of the most lucrative off-farm activities in the sector (FAO, 2025a). For example, in 2021 the share of young women to all workers in food processing and services, manufacture of non-agricultural products, trade and transportation were 6.6 percent, 5.9 percent, 4.8 percent and 0.7 percent respectively, whereas the share of young men to all workers in those sub-sectors were 10.4 percent, 9.7 percent, 9.9 percent and 9.5 percent for young men (FAO, 2025a).

Equipping young women with the technical and business skills needed to engage profitably in these more lucrative sub-sectors or to successfully transition to other entry-points along the value-chain is needed to bridge such gender gaps. Additionally, addressing the structural reasons for this disparity (e.g., reduced access to and control over resources), is also critical.

Notably, younger women may often be disproportionately affected by unfavorable social norms (Tavener & Crane, 2019). It has been suggested that older women are typically more likely to pioneer the move against community norms surrounding economic participation and agency (Williams *et al.*, 2025). This may be due to an increase in decision-making power for reasons such as being perceived as "elders" or them gaining new statuses like wives, mothers, or mothers-in-law (Galiè *et al.*, 2022). Although these "vanguard women" (i.e., older women leading change) often operate out of economic necessity and not necessarily due to increased enlightenment (Williams *et al.*, 2025), there is the tendency for their accomplishments to create a "role-model effect," and such an effect has been found to significantly shape young women's aspirations (Beaman *et al.*, 2012). Hence, shining the spotlight on these local changemakers could be critical in bringing about a normative shift towards greater economic participation of younger women in more lucrative activities in agrifood systems.

One of the potential strategies for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in agrifood systems is by means of collective approaches (FAO, 2023a), which could range from informal movements to formal organizations (Alonso-Población and Siar, 2018). These networks create opportunities for knowledge-sharing, peer support and mentoring, and could also have positive aspirational effects since young women may draw inspiration from the lives and achievements of their peers. Such groups also provide direct economic benefits including improved access to credit, expanded marketing channels and fairer prices. For example, the Manyakabi Area Cooperative Enterprise in Uganda, which predominantly serves women, assists its members in purchasing production inputs, marketing their produce and obtaining loans (Adlam, 2023).

In addition to increasing young women's access to information and resources, group-based interventions serve as a vehicle to increase the agency of women (Bryan *et al.*, 2024). Women-led cooperatives help achieve social and economic integration by establishing solidarity and challenging patriarchal structures (FAO, 2024a). These organizations afford young women the opportunity to gain valuable leadership experience. These cooperatives offer women management roles and can transform them into

community leaders by fostering a collective female identity, as observed in some Turkish communities (FAO, 2024a).

It should however be noted that young women's leadership is not unidimensional. Focus on women leadership is often directed to the relatively more visible indicators (e.g., the number or proportion of women in certain positions), thereby failing to capture the variety of ways in which women exert influence in their families and communities (Morgan, Bryan, & Elias, 2024). Reserving quotas for women in governance roles, which is one of the common policy approaches of elevating women's leadership, may sometimes result in superficial representation and not genuine empowerment if it is not combined with other interventions and changes to socio-cultural systems (Mohammed, Najjar, & Bryan, 2025).

4.1.1. Case study: Leading change in the Philippines

Louise Mabulo, 27, was just 18 years old when super typhoon Nock-Ten ravaged 80 percent of agricultural lands in her region of San Fernando, in the Philippines. The typhoon ushered in flash floods, displaced entire communities and razed lands critical for food production, testing the resilience of crops and the people dependent on them. As a budding farmer, environmentalist and chef, Mabulo shortly thereafter founded The Cacao Project to improve existing agrifood systems in the region to withstand increasing risks and conditions spurred by climate change, drawing upon the lessons of the typhoon.

Since then, The Cacao Project has flourished under Mabulo's leadership. Her organization builds sustainable, regenerative and resilient agrifood systems and has supported over 200 farmers, planted 300 000 trees and restored over 760 hectares of collective land in Camarines Sur. She introduced cacao to smallholders to grow in addition to their staple crops, as cacao is robust and climate-resilient, while still a high-value crop to support farmers' livelihoods.

"They say the best thing you can do is to plant trees whose shade you'll never sit under – and I used to believe that meant you'd never see the results. But in the years I've worked alongside our local communities, I've watched forest canopies stitch themselves back together, hard, lifeless soil awaken and teem with worms and tiny critters, and brown, degraded land turn lush and green, moving again with the rhythms of nature. I've seen streams and water sources – once thought long gone – flow back to life. Most importantly, I've seen how this has helped our farmers rebuild after storms, grow beyond survival and step into prosperity. To witness that transformation has been the greatest reward," said Mabulo.



Tree planting programme with 400 youth under the One Pledge One Tree Project implemented with Young Activists Summit and UN Geneva.

Mabulo's work has transcended the Philippines and has been platformed on an international stage. Countless times, she has relayed the stories of her farmers and communities globally to drive important lessons on agrifood systems. Through The Cacao Project, she has challenged tropes which have depicted farmers as uneducated or poor, and has instead centred their knowledge and stewardship of the land as a central tenet of how agroforestry can be cultivated sustainably through and with the community.



Mr. and Mrs. Batanes, two farmers under the programme and who completed the Farmer Field Schools, photographed at their farm.

While Mabulo's leadership reflects how young women are increasingly exercising agency to ensure community resilience, food security and livelihoods, her own ethos can be attributed to a long legacy of matrilineal relationships to the land and food. Mabulo grew up watching her grandmother harvest cacao from a young age and saw its strong capabilities to regenerate. And to this day, she believes that cacao continues to fulfill its potential. "Cacao holds more than the promise of chocolate. It carries the blueprint for resilience," remarked Mabulo. "Every tree we plant is a living pact between people and planet, restoring soils, cooling our climate and weaving prosperity into the roots of our communities. If we can transform entire landscapes starting with something as small as a cacao bean, imagine what we can grow when we all take part."



Tree planting programme with 400 youth under the One Pledge One Tree Project implemented with Young Activists Summit and UN Geneva.

4.2. Food security and nutrition as a foundation for empowerment

Between 2021 and 2023, 24.4 percent of youth experienced food insecurity, an increase from 16.7 percent between 2014 and 2016 (FAO, 2025a). Overall, youth face higher rates of food insecurity compared to non-youth. Gender norms and inequities limit women's access to education, land and finances, hindering food literacy, even though adequate nutrition during young women's development is vital for health, cognition and future opportunities (FAO, 2025a).

Nutrition is multifaceted, challenged with enabling determinants (governance, resources and norms), underlying determinants (food, practices and services) and immediate determinants (diets and care), yet equitable education and labour-force participation alone have the potential to close approximately 52 percent of the gender gap in food insecurity (Mane *et al.*, 2025; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund/UNICEF, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial that the interconnections between SDG 4 and SDG 8 are fully considered when addressing the gender gap in global food security and addressing SDG 5.

Integrated agriculture and education campaigns improve nutrition and gender equality. Women in rural areas prioritize household food spending and meal preparation, greatly influencing household and intergenerational nutrition outcomes (Deering *et al.*, 2020).

While domestic and caregiving roles are crucial for the success of agrifood systems, this dynamic demonstrates the triple burden women often face: productive, reproductive and community labour. The combined overlapping demands of labour often inhibit women from receiving proper access to education (WFF, 2025). Therefore, it is crucial for nutritional campaigns to have a gender sensitive approach in achieving intergenerational food security.

The first 1000 days continuum brings awareness to the first two years of a child's life where adequate nutritional intake is essential for long-term health and success, directing nutrition education towards adolescent girls and young women as a strategy to break generational malnutrition (Hamner *et al.*, 2022). Educated mothers and caregivers are better equipped to advocate for proper care through improved access to resources, advocacy and community engagement. This approach not only supports maternal health and wellbeing but also promotes optimal growth and cognitive development for children, improving education outcomes for future generations of women (Hamner *et al.*, 2022). The 1000 Days Campaign, and similar approaches, highlights the benefits of a gender-sensitive nutrition education as outlined in SDG 4.

Improved access to quality education, commonly achieved through food and nutrition security, well-positions women with essential knowledge and skillsets upon entering the workforce, enhancing their participation in market activity and economic opportunities in the formal work sector (FAO, 2025a). Better educated women and girls are more informed about their nutrition choices, marry later in life, have fewer and healthier children and are more likely to earn higher incomes (World Bank Group, 2018). These outcomes have a tendency to have an intergenerational impact; however due to young women's more limited access to resources compared to young men, they are less likely to experience intergenerational mobility outside of agrifood systems (FAO, 2025a).

Early nutrition and education are foundational for greater gender equality, specifically in the agricultural sector. Women account for nearly half of the global agricultural workforce yet still face workplace barriers such as inequitable access to markets, credit, decision-making power and land, hindering their opportunities to enter formal markets and employment outside of agriculture (WFF, 2025).

These challenges are further amplified as women farmers are disproportionately impacted by the

burdens of climate change (FAO, 2024b). Approximately 395 million rural youth are predicted to experience agricultural productivity declines due to climate change (FAO, 2025a). However, in the face of climate adversity, women with access to quality education and decent work are more prone to embrace climate resilient agriculture strategies, which in turn enhance both their adaptability and agricultural productivity (WFF, 2025). Addressing education and work inequities is therefore foundational for gender empowerment, but also essential in advancing sustainable agriculture practices.

The benefits of gender sensitive approaches to SDG 4 and SDG 8 are both mutual and reinforcing in achieving SDG 5. As women gain food and nutrition security, their access and performance to quality education increases. Educated young women are more likely to access decent work, boosting food security and education for future generations. Both genders share responsibility, requiring a multidisciplinary approach to sustainably empower young women farmers.

4.3. Digital inclusion and innovation access

Empowering young women and girls in agrifood systems requires an integrated approach that connects SDG 4 and SDG 8. Education equips young women with technical, financial and leadership skills, while access to decent work ensures these skills lead to dignified employment and economic independence (FAO, 2025a).

Digital technologies offer an opportunity for young women and girls to improve their access to quality education (both formal and non-formal) as well as dignified employment and economic independence. In turn, this can improve their agency to make informed decisions, participate meaningfully in agrifood systems and enhance their overall competitiveness (FAO & WFF, 2024). For instance, digital financial literacy training in local languages, facilitation of access to mobile devices and provision of access to financial services, have the potential to translate to empowered young women with the capacity to elevate their income and standard of living through decent work (Loaba *et al.*, 2024; Mishra *et al.*, 2024).

Foremost, it is critical to recognize and address the barriers that exclude young women from access and use of digital technologies. Hernandez, *et al.* (2024) categorizes these barriers into three broad categories. The first category looks at basic access challenges such as gaps in usage and ownership as well as barriers to gaining access such as awareness, affordability, basic infrastructure, electricity and identification. Despite global growth in mobile and internet access over the past five years, digital gaps persist between countries, genders and rural versus urban areas.

For instance, 98.2 percent of youth in industrial agrifood systems use the internet compared to 33.9 percent of their counterparts in traditional systems (FAO, 2025a). Further, while the world is said to be slowly approaching gender parity in access to internet and mobile phone ownership, the gap between young women and young men still persists in some LMICs. There is mention of what is called the “triple divide” where rural women in developing economies are at the most disadvantage considering that they face the most challenges in accessing basic internet services, with lower overall access rates and more pronounced gender gaps in rural settings (Hernandez *et al.*, 2024).

The second category of challenges is associated with lower quality of access and the existence of after-access barriers such as lack of digital skills, usage patterns, internet speed, (un)limited data, continuous access, skills, user autonomy, reliance on others, device quality, safety and security. For instance, while rural residents and women from lower income countries may have access to internet and mobile devices, data shows that they often use it less and for less activities than urban residents and men. Further, girls and young women are more likely to only have access through borrowing

devices which may lead to them engaging in less online activities than boys and young men (Girl Effect & Vodafone Foundation, 2018). Data also indicate that people living in rural areas who are able to engage in digital activities, engage in them less frequently than urban residents (Global System for Mobile Communications Association/GSMA, 2021).

The third tier of challenges relate to economic resources, social norms, policy frameworks, civic and political influence, local institutional capacity and functioning of local markets, among others. For instance, rural residents are more likely to live in extreme poverty and are thus less likely to leverage economic resources online (Hernandez *et al.*, 2024). Further, local markets are more likely to be dysfunctional in rural areas. This limits the uptake success of digital agriculture apps and other related digital solutions in rural areas.

Overcoming these barriers requires an intersectional approach using digital technologies and farm innovations to empower young women and girls in agrifood systems through education and decent work.

The importance of understanding the diverse, complex and intersectional contexts of young women and girls before the design of a digital intervention cannot be underscored enough. In order to provide young women and girls with meaningful education and/or employment opportunities through digital technologies, there is a need to conduct in-depth research into what their everyday interaction with digital technologies looks like. It is also important to understand their access to and usage of digital technologies as well as the wider digital infrastructure of their local communities. This can be done through participatory approaches such as focus groups, individual interviews and workshops.

Taking into account the above, efforts should then be made to co-design solutions that will address existent barriers and allow young women to derive the most benefits. This includes jointly exploring what optimal digital options are available and suitable for the diverse contexts of young women and girls, as well as using clear and simple language, providing visual aids and ensuring compatibility with different types of devices. Also, there is a need to provide information that can be accessed and used by those living with disabilities (Nchanji, Ouko, & Lutomia., 2024). Availability of offline and basic alternatives should also be explored.

Investing in digital literacy equips young women to overcome structural barriers, access local markets and generate meaningful income. Capacity should also be built for them to use these digital technologies to amplify their voices on specific topics such as- fair wages, social protection and safe working conditions, as these also serve as powerful enablers of young women's economic empowerment. National duty bearers should address structural barriers – affordable internet, mobile access, rural electrification – and create policies supporting women-, youth-, and marginalized group-led agricultural businesses and innovations.

Digital technologies can empower young women and girls via SDG 4 and 8, and a collaborative, intersectional approach ensures sustainable benefits for education, decent work and agrifood systems.

4.4. Addressing care responsibilities and work-life balance

Despite the importance of agrifood systems for women's livelihoods and the welfare of their families, women's roles tend to be marginalized and their working conditions are likely to be worse than men's. The labour of women is more likely to be irregular, informal, part-time, low-skilled and labour intensive, and thus more vulnerable (FAO, 2023a). Women also have higher burdens of unpaid care, limiting their opportunities for quality education and decent employment.

Young women's disproportionate unpaid domestic and care work limits their participation in agrifood systems and the labour market, confines them to poor employment, and negatively impacts girls' education and school attendance.

Plan International (2024) argues that the issue of unpaid care work stems less from the nature of the work itself, but from the amount of this work and from its unequal gendered division – and the impact that this inequality has on women and girls' ability to spend time on other pursuits.

In order to address care work and work-life balance, UN Women (2022) recommends the 5R Framework which emphasizes the need to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, and reward and represent paid care work.

First, it should be recognized that care is a universal right and responsibility and essential for families, societies and economies to function and thrive. Thus, the significant amount of unpaid care work performed by young women and girls must be recognized and valued for its critical importance to individuals, families and society. This recognition must happen at household, community and policy levels. Practical pathways include providing decent care jobs, investing in the professionalization of the care sector and implementing care policies that further gender equality in the workplace – such as paid maternity, paternity and shared parental leave. Community leaders should create local and contextually specific social awareness campaigns and encourage discussions about the value of care work in society, the necessity of gender-equal divisions of labour and active male involvement in all forms of care work (Plan International, 2024).

Intersectional approaches that improve young women's access to technology and resources can help reduce their disproportionate care workload and better manage their time. Examples are improved cooking and water solutions, as well as low wattage appliances like solar powered energy systems. Investing in educational facilities to ensure children are in school will also reduce their involvement in unpaid care work at an early age, when they should be building skills for the future. Investing in informal education infrastructure for adult education and instituting adult education programs will promote a more equitable division of unpaid care duties and can help to close the gender gap. Access to childcare, adequate sanitation and flexible schedules also have a large positive effect on young pregnant and young mothers' education and employment.

Sharing care responsibilities between genders allows women more time for work, education and community engagement, while men gain stronger family bonds and a balanced lifestyle. Ultimately, this creates a ripple effect, enhancing household incomes, fostering social cohesion and building a more inclusive and equitable society (Musyoka *et al.*, 2025). Promoting positive masculinity is crucial in fostering gender equality. Integrating this into various formal and informal educational and community-based initiatives can be highly effective. By educating men on gender-equitable behaviours and featuring positive male role models, these interventions can challenge conventional stereotypes. For example, showcasing successful male farmers who actively participate in care work can inspire others. Linking these discussions with practical skills training can further enhance the effect of these initiatives and create more equitable societies.

Furthermore, there is a need to create opportunities and spaces where young women and girls are able to represent their interests and demands in their own voices and participate in decision-making at all levels. Schools can provide opportunities for girls to develop their leadership skills through after school clubs, debating teams and other similar activities. They can also consult with young women and girls about their care work and how they can be supported. Moreover, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should involve young women in decision-making and reward their care work through bursaries, capital, cash transfers, paid leave and other innovative mechanisms.

5. Role of the International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026 as a catalyst for change

5.1. Why 2026 is a strategic moment for policy influence

The IYWF 2026 offers a timely opportunity to advance gender equity in agrifood systems, with young women's empowerment critical amid post-COVID recovery, climate change, food insecurity and rural poverty.

Coinciding with global milestones like the UN Decade of Family Farming mid-term review and the 2030 Agenda, IYWF 2026 can amplify young women farmers' voices, promote gender-responsive policies and attract investment in rural services, education and innovation, catalyzing long-term commitments (FAO, 2023b). Moreover, the momentum generated by IYWF 2026 can also support the integration of gender equity into national agrifood strategies, climate adaptation plans and youth employment programs, especially in regions where women still lack access to land, credit, training and decision-making spaces (International Fund for Agricultural Development/IFAD, 2022).

IYWF 2026 is a policy window, uniting political will, public attention and institutional support to drive meaningful change for young women in agrifood systems.

5.2. How SDG-aligned frameworks can be mainstreamed during International Year of the Woman Farmer campaigns

To generate a lasting impact, it is critical that the IYWF campaigns are aligned with the SDGs and translated into actionable national and local policies. This integration goes beyond mentioning global goals; concrete programs must be designed to meet the specific challenges young women face in agrifood systems.

Localizing SDG targets is key, especially those related to gender equality, food security and decent work. This can be done through participatory policy dialogues that include young women, youth organizations and civil society. These dialogues should be based on gender- and age-disaggregated data and monitored using inclusive indicators that capture participation, representation and impact, ensuring that young women's voices are not only heard but are also meaningfully reflected in policy outcomes.

IYWF 2026 provides an opportunity to showcase programs empowering young women in agrifood systems, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo/DRC's ÉLAN program promoting market inclusion (BEAM Exchange, n.d.) and Uganda's Youth Leadership for Agriculture project, enhancing youth participation, productivity and gender equity (Khatiwada & Waitkuweit, 2021).

Furthermore, FAO has documented cases of young agrifood leaders who have used digital technologies, sustainable practices and traditional knowledge to drive change in their communities. For example, in Rwanda, FAO supported youth and women through mobile apps and digital skills training to improve farm operations and market access, as part of a broader initiative to foster agri-preneurship and innovation. Platforms like the WFF have allowed young farmers to share innovations and shape policy (FAO, 2025a).

Additionally, the Rural Women in Action campaign has demonstrated how advocacy can spotlight rural women's roles in food systems while linking their actions to the SDGs (FAO, 2025b; FAO, 2025c).

Such campaigns can be adapted and scaled during IYWF to strengthen accountability and systemic transformation. Strategic partnerships with UN agencies, governments, and development organizations can integrate SDG principles into extension services, education and digital access while establishing monitoring to ensure IYWF drives lasting structural change.

Finally, IYWF 2026 communications strategies should explicitly link campaign messages to the SDGs. By using storytelling, media and advocacy tools, the campaign can raise awareness about how young women's empowerment drives sustainable development.

5.3. Advocacy, accountability and youth leadership

The transformation of agrifood systems toward more inclusive and sustainable models requires not only technical and economic changes, but also a profound renewal of governance, participation and accountability frameworks. In this process, political advocacy and youth leadership, especially that of young women, play a crucial role. However, the active participation of young women in policymaking, decision-making and monitoring mechanisms remains limited and, in many cases, symbolic.

Young women in agrifood systems face structural barriers and exclusion from decision-making bodies, limiting their influence on policies, perpetuating inequality and constraining the transformative impact of their contributions. Strengthening young women's advocacy, providing safe participation spaces and ensuring accountable, intersectional approaches can integrate diverse rural female youth perspectives into agrifood governance.

Youth leadership must be understood not only as a matter of representation, but as an opportunity to renew ways of thinking and doing politics in the agrifood sector. Young women bring innovative visions, local knowledge, environmental awareness and community commitment that can profoundly enrich rural development strategies. To achieve this, it is necessary to invest in training, mentoring, support networks and platforms for dialogue that enable young women to exercise their leadership effectively and sustainably.

Accountability should reflect the real impact of policies on young women through participatory monitoring, transparency and feedback. IYWF 2026 offers a strategic opportunity to advance young female leadership, demand commitments, showcase best practices, and build multisectoral alliances for gender equity and sustainable agrifood systems.

6. Policy recommendations

IYWF 2026 provides an opportunity to highlight women's roles in agrifood systems. This report offers multiscale recommendations, urging national policies to enhance young women's access, representation and opportunities across the value chain. Countries should collect gender- and age-disaggregated data on food security, agricultural education, and access to agrifood technologies for Nationally Determined Contributions reporting. Integrating gender-responsive education and supporting women-led initiatives can enhance young women's skills, value-chain participation and recognition of their contributions.

To address care responsibilities, policies can strive to compensate unpaid or poorly paid labour, often held by women, with economic capital or in the form of social services. Moreover, intersectional and bottom-up approaches should guide the development of strategies to address integration of digital solutions. Governments should address structural issues associated with access and use of digital solutions such as broadband connectivity in rural areas, electricity, solar powered energy and integration of digital skilling in institutional curricula. Ministries should roll out efforts to improve digital connectivity, access and skills for women and girls so they have formalized access to employment opportunities and up-to-date technologies in agrifood supply chains.

Regionally, national policies can be evaluated and measured by regional coordination channels to ensure and support the implementation, analysis and enforcement of country-level gender priorities and policies. Regional mechanisms should coordinate and build capacity of government officials, civil society and NGOs to enforce and implement gender priorities and policies locally and at the country level. At this scale, it is important to promote UN accountability at the country level of women's rights and recognition in agrifood systems. Partnerships among national institutions, NGOs, research centres, and civil society organizations can foster collaboration, while regional policies monitor gender- and age-disaggregated data on pay, labour, nutrition, digital access and education in agrifood supply chains.

Lastly, establishing a global framework that enshrines gender equality as a human right is essential for sustainable agrifood systems. A global commitment unites governments, UN agencies, civil society, the private sector, and the public to raise awareness of young women's roles and take concrete steps toward gender-responsive, inclusive and resilient agrifood systems. Enforceable policies, young women's inclusion in decision-making and multisectoral collaboration can enhance leadership, recognition, and opportunities for women of all ages.

7. Conclusion

IYWF 2026 offers a timely opportunity to catalyze structural change in agrifood systems by centring young women, challenging gender norms, promoting inclusive policies and mobilizing resources for transformative impact. By integrating storytelling, participatory communication and intergenerational dialogue into the campaign, stakeholders can amplify young women's leadership and foster community solidarity. For the IYWF to fulfill its transformative potential, it must be guided by evidence-based strategies that address the intersectional barriers young women face and invest in enabling pathways such as education, decent work, digital inclusion and caregiving support. Through this, it can become a turning point toward a more equitable and resilient agrifood future.

The relationship between SDG 4 and SDG 8 highlights the interconnected social and structural challenges young women face in agrifood systems. Therefore, in the commemoration of the IYWF 2026, policy recommendations must consider the structural challenges in enabling pathways for their empowerment through education, access to decent work, digital inclusion and care support. Essentially, the reinforcing nature of SDG 4 and SDG 8 is crucial in achieving long-term, sustainable, gender equitable transformation in agrifood systems.

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