



# Intersectionality and Addressing Equity in Agriculture, Nutrition, and Health

Strategic Brief | October 2020

The UN Sustainable Development Goals were established to build a [better and more sustainable future for all](#). Progress toward development objectives has been uneven over time, and the disadvantaged tend to suffer disproportionately, particularly in times of severe shocks or crises like the COVID-19 global pandemic. The inclusion of the phrase “for all” is a good reminder that meeting our global goals will require paying particular attention to equity and ensuring no one is left behind.

To consider equity, one must acknowledge that not everyone starts from the same set of circumstances, and assess how [unfair, unjust, and exclusionary](#) social and political processes have created that situation. Addressing inequity involves being mindful of those processes and removing barriers that prevent people from participating fully in decisions that determine how goods, opportunities, or resources are distributed. It is subtly, yet importantly, different from equality, which involves ensuring those goods, opportunities, or resources are divided equally among a group. In order to work toward equality, one must ensure equity has been achieved.

Inequities have been pervasive in the agriculture, nutrition, and health spaces over time, impacting people’s livelihoods, diets, environments, and societies, signifying important societal losses owing to the exclusion of significant proportions of the population. The disadvantages people face arise because of how their gender, age, caste, or ethnicity are seen within their society, which often determines whether they live in areas well-served by institutions, and whether they live in poverty.

What is critical to note, yet often overlooked in research for development, is that people are usually disadvantaged in more than one way. For example, a young woman living in a rural area faces challenges on several fronts, as does an

## Key Equity Messages

- While malnutrition persists everywhere, across low- and middle-income and rich countries, those who face the greatest threat, those at the most risk of shocks with ripple effects impacting their nutritional outcomes, are usually those who are already disadvantaged.
- Disadvantages result from inequities, or the social and political processes which lead to unfair, unjust and exclusionary circumstances. Issues of equity can create disadvantages for people based on social attributes such as gender, age, caste, poverty, ethnic group, disability, or geographic location.
- People are often disadvantaged in multiple, overlapping ways: the source of their deprivation isn't just their gender or their age or their geographic location, but a combination of these unique to their particular set of circumstances. Understanding the intersectionality of the issues a particular person or group of people face is critical to truly address inequities.
- Very little ANH research addresses this intersectionality issue, understanding how disadvantage accumulates based on these attributes, and how these interact differently in different social and political contexts.
- To achieve impact in reducing malnutrition, especially among disadvantaged groups, equity must be addressed more explicitly, more clearly, and more logically. Gaps must be filled on understanding how and why different groups are disadvantaged in different contexts and testing social and policy responses to address inequity in agriculture and food systems.
- The Reach-Benefit-Empower framework provides a way to better approach equity in research moving forward, with an eye toward the appropriate use of indicators, determining goals, and measuring impact. Developed for use in studying gender and women's empowerment, its adaptability to other areas of equity offers promise for future efforts in studying a wider range of equity issues.

impoverished elderly man or a child from a minority group. These factors overlap and their compounding effects can pose daunting challenges for identifying pathways to overcoming them. For researchers, policymakers, project implementers, and others, understanding where and how these issues intersect to create a particular set of circumstances, or the intersectionality of a situation, is crucial to truly address inequities.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SCOPE OF EQUITY STUDY IN AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND HEALTH

The fields of agriculture, nutrition, and health (ANH) generate an enormous amount of research. Despite this, no organized inventory of equity research in ANH existed until 2019, when a team from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), led by Jody Harris, with support from A4NH, [undertook a scoping review of existing academic literature](#). They sought to identify not only how ANH research is addressing equity in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), but also how the focus has changed over time, and how the different disciplines understand and research equity. In doing so, the team identified gaps in the knowledge base preventing researchers, policy makers, program implementers, and others from effectively addressing issues of inequity in development.

The review covered publications from 2008 to 2019. Although the initial search found 26,000 candidate papers in the field of ANH, after distilling that list down to those that with a specific equity focus, the researchers were left with 243 papers, exposing just how under-researched this issue is. Further analysis provided a breakdown of the papers by discipline and approach, as well as what aspects of ANH and equity were addressed. Of note from this analysis:

- There was great variety among how frequently different aspects of equity were studied. Some, like gender, appeared frequently, while others, such as ethnicity, disability, and age, were studied much less frequently.
- Most papers addressed what the equity problem was, but fewer looked at reasons why the problem existed in the first place.
- Intersectionality, or where and how issues of equity intersect, was addressed very infrequently.

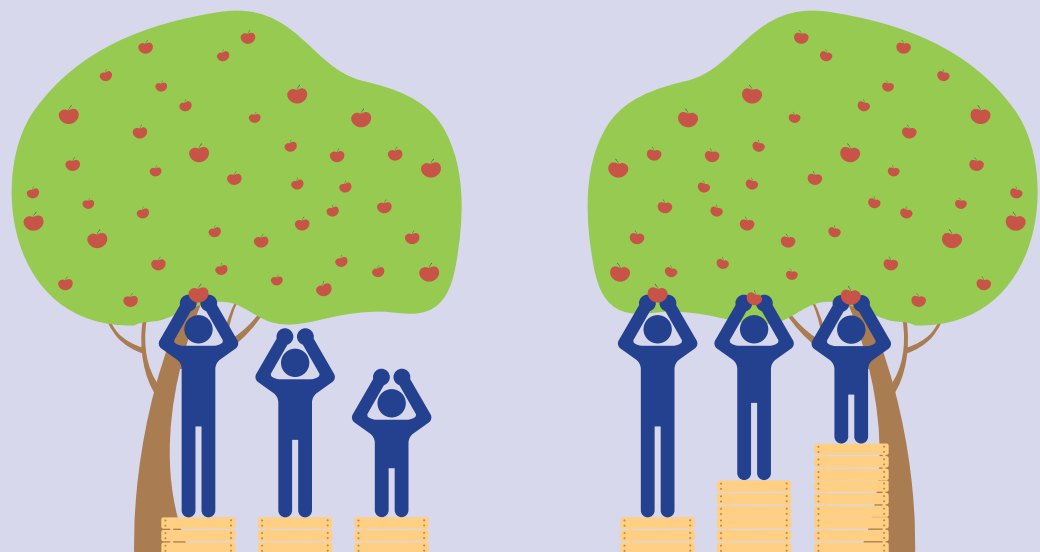
## EQUITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Better-understood aspects of equity can create a road map for addressing lesser-studied issues, and can open lines of questioning into how other aspects might factor in. The IDS review found gender to be one of the most studied equity issues in ANH literature to date. A4NH researchers from the International Food Policy Research Institute have contributed to this body of work with the development of a suite of tools that build on the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), which was created to measure empowerment, agency, and inclusion of women in agriculture - the sector that forms the basis of livelihoods for the majority of people in LMICs.

Equity and empowerment go hand-in-hand: equity being the processes by which advantages or disadvantages are distributed, and empowerment the ability to take action to improve those circumstances for oneself. While many measures of gender equality to date have simply looked at national-level statistics such as life expectancy or number of seats held by women in parliament, neither equity nor empowerment can truly be addressed without understanding why women lacked power over their lives in the first place.

## Equity and equality

Underpinned by moral equality: people should be treated as equals



Source: <https://www.sewallfoundation.org/new-gallery-1>

In the second phase of the Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project (GAAP2), A4NH researchers built on the WEAI to develop the project-level WEAI, or pro-WEAI, to enable project implementers to not only collect information at the individual level from men and women in a household on a variety of indicators, but also to tailor the project to particular equity goals and measure the impact of agricultural development projects on women's empowerment. In addition, projects that have nutrition-sensitive objectives may opt to add-on the pro-WEAI health and nutrition (pro-WEAI+HN) module which captures women's agency around health and nutrition decisions and can help unpack gender-related nutrition-sensitive pathways.

Setting deliberate goals to support women's ability to empower themselves in development projects, and measure their impact, is critical. Women's empowerment is not only an important development objective in itself but also has been shown to have strong connections to women's own health and nutritional status and that of their children.

## STUDYING ASPECTS OF EQUITY BEYOND GENDER

A less studied area of equity, according to Harris and colleagues, is age. However, existing studies can provide important insights. [A recent study by Dominic Glover and James Sumberg](#), also of IDS, looked at a particular aspect of age, youth, around a particular issue, their interaction with food systems. What they found was that, in terms of engagement with food systems, many of the aspects that matter to youth—nutrition, food safety, and access to jobs, among others—also matter to other categories of people. They found some issues were more exclusive to youth, such as lack of resources to engage with food systems, and experience in doing so. These may not be the most significant issues impacting youth engagement in food systems, but they do make up part of the overall picture. This serves as a useful example of the importance of considering the intersectionality of issues when addressing equity, as well as the weight of particular issues compared to one another in a given context.

[A recent blog](#) on the [Gender Nutrition Idea Exchange](#) by IFPRI researcher Stuart Gillespie considered another angle of age-related inequity, one that Glover and Sumberg touched on: the lack of agency, or ability to make decisions for oneself, of youth when it comes to nutrition. In his post, Gillespie noted that decisions made today can have impacts on the nutritional health of future generations – and disadvantages in nutrition, he noted, can last for many decades.

## IDENTIFYING THE KNOWLEDGE GAPS

[The IFPRI gender researchers note](#) that [a woman's level of empowerment is also determined](#) by factors such as her age, education level, or status within the household. Similarly, Glover and Sumberg note that someone's classification as "youth," is likely not the only, nor necessarily the primary, way

they interact with the world around them: "the specific ways in which a person engages with food systems are influenced by the intersection of their phase of life with many other factors, such as their gender, marital status, culture, class, location, health and so on." Yet this intersectionality of issues and the corresponding impact on equity was found by Harris et al. to be largely unstudied in the ANH field.

In addition to considering the intersectionality of equity issues, addressing governance, or how systems are framed and who they work for, is crucial to progress in addressing inequities. Gillespie cited governance as a key area for reform in order to make progress toward equity over the long-term, yet it remains a relatively under-studied area. Indeed, in their scoping review, Harris et al. found only nine papers since 2008 that have addressed issues of equity in concert with aspects of governance. Moreover, the review noted that while some studies did look at how a problem was shaped, very few delved far enough into the problem to identify why it exists in the first place and therefore how it could be most sustainably addressed.

To truly make progress on equity, research must uncover and address the underlying causes, and consider how inequities of different kinds interact with one another in a particular situation. Therefore, additional research and data are needed not only on less-studied aspects of equity, but also how different issues interact with one another, how they came to be and how they are being addressed, and where these interactions have taken place.

## EFFECTIVE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE ACROSS DIMENSIONS OF EQUITY MOVING FORWARD

In 2018 and 2019, A4NH conducted a series of [regional consultations](#) with implementation and research partners to identify priorities for equity research. [While it was broadly acknowledged](#) that an explicit focus on equity is warranted, the consultations made clear that ANH researchers and partners must continue to build the "business case" for incorporating equity. This work includes understanding the economic value of making interventions more equitable, as well as the economic consequences of not considering equity.

The need to strengthen partnerships echoed throughout the series of consultations. [To support national policy makers and implementers](#) engaged in national agri-food transformation efforts, ANH researchers can provide the appropriate tools, approaches, lessons, and practical examples to enable them to integrate equity and equality issues into agriculture, nutrition, and health policy. This could include tools to measure and improve women's empowerment, as well as frameworks to understand how programs reach, benefit, and/or empower women or other vulnerable groups.

Equity is inextricably linked to power relations; one cannot consider one without the other. As part of their work on the WEAI suite of products, IFPRI researchers developed a

# Applying R-B-E to equity

	Reach	Benefit	Empower
<b>Objective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include <b>[disadvantaged group]</b> in program activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase <b>[disadvantaged group]</b>'s well-being e.g. food security, income, health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase <b>[disadvantaged group]</b>'s agency over production and nutrition decisions</li> </ul>
<b>Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce costs to participation</li> <li>• Use delivery modalities that are accessible to <b>[disadvantaged group]</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider <b>[disadvantaged group]</b>'s needs, preferences, and constraints in the design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance <b>[disadvantaged group]</b>'s decision making power in households and communities, especially on key steps along impact pathway</li> </ul>
<b>Indicators</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proportion of <b>[marginalized group]</b> attending training, receiving extension / technology / services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Sex-)disaggregated data by <b>[disadvantaged group]</b> for yields, income, land use, nutrition, time use, etc</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrinsic agency (power within)</li> <li>• Instrumental agency (power to)</li> <li>• Collective agency (power with)</li> <li>• <i>Ex: WEAI indicators stratified by <b>[disadvantaged group]</b></i></li> </ul>

Adapted from: [IFPRI, 2020 Global Food Policy Report](#)

[framework for aligning a project's goals, strategies, and indicators for addressing gender equity](#). Recognizing women as a disadvantaged group, this framework asks project designers to consider whether their aim is to reach women, such as by including them in program activities; benefit women, by improving their circumstances in some way, or empower women, strengthening their ability to make and put into action strategic life choices. Distinguishing between these different goals is important because the strategies and indicators that correspond to each goal will vary.

This Reach-Benefit-Empower (RBE) framework can be applied to other aspects of equity, defining goals related to poverty, social inclusion, or other sources of disadvantage. Its usage enables project implementers to consider equity in a more clear, deliberate, and logical way, laying out a format for moving beyond simply identifying the problem and toward taking action to address underlying causes and monitoring achievement and impact toward these goals.

Beyond programs, the RBE [framework can also be applied at the policy level](#). Policies that aim to reach women aim to improve women's access to infrastructure and information,

for example, to strengthen agricultural extension systems by hiring male and female extension workers. Policies that aim to benefit women remove gender-based discrimination in access to public services or attempt to redress discrimination in schooling, access to the labor market, among others. Policies that aim to empower women attempt to reform social and political institutions to achieve gender equality—giving women equal property rights, reforming inheritance and marriage law so they don't discriminate against women—and implement these together with activities that make women aware of their rights and how to claim them.

For policies and programs to be well-designed and implemented, they need to consider the overlapping dimensions of inequality and disadvantage, and how these are produced in different contexts. Understanding intersectionality and how it plays out in a given context is a first step for equity-oriented programs and policies.

*By Hazel Malapit, Senior Research Coordinator, and Agnes Quisumbing, Senior Research Fellow, International Food Policy Research Institute; and Janet Hodur, Senior Communications Specialist, A4NH*

## INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

*A world free of hunger and malnutrition*

1201 Eye Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005 USA

T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606 | [ifpri@cgiar.org](mailto:ifpri@cgiar.org) | [www.ifpri.org](http://www.ifpri.org)

Copyright © 2020 International Food Policy Research Institute. All rights reserved. Contact [ifpri-copyright@cgiar.org](mailto:ifpri-copyright@cgiar.org) for permission to republish.

 VISIT A4NH ONLINE

[www.a4nh.cgiar.org](http://www.a4nh.cgiar.org)

 CONTACT A4NH

**John McDermott**

A4NH Director  
[j.mcdermott@cgiar.org](mailto:j.mcdermott@cgiar.org)

 TWITTER

[@A4NH\\_CGIAR](https://twitter.com/A4NH_CGIAR)

**Hazel Malapit**

Senior Research Coordinator, IFPRI  
[h.malapit@cgiar.org](mailto:h.malapit@cgiar.org)