GENDER-INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE OF URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS FOR IMPROVED FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

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ABOUT GAIN

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the UN in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, we aim to transform food systems so that they deliver more nutritious food for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

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SUMMARY

This paper responds to the need to better understand the interaction between gender norms and urban food systems in low- and middle-income countries. More people are living in cities than ever before. As a result, the role played by urban food systems is of growing importance at both the population level and for individuals, especially women, who are considered responsible for meal provision in most cultures. Unfortunately, in many countries, discriminatory gender norms exclude women from many income-generating opportunities offered by cities, reducing food security for themselves and their families. As a result, many women resort to operating within informal livelihood channels, frequently as food vendors, relying on social networks to procure both food and money. In addition to providing livelihood opportunities for many women, informal food vending networks are the primary food source for low-income urban residents of both genders. Despite these important functions, informal markets are routinely overlooked and unsupported by urban food system actors. As such, engagement with urban planners and regulators to increase support to informal food networks is a key programme entry point. Advocating for strategies to address the broader, more ubiquitous nutrition-related challenges that women face in cities is an additional consideration. This could be done, for example, lobbying municipal authorities to increase female representation on regulatory boards and other governance platforms.

KEY MESSAGES

- Urban women's tendency to engage in informal food-based work (as opposed to other types of out-of-home employment) is driven primarily by gender norms.

- Similar to rural food producers, urban women tend to consider food enterprises as both an income source and a food source, using unsold inventories for consumption.

- Female food vendors, especially those who operate outside established marketplace structures, are most likely to face mistreatment and discrimination and least likely to have a voice in urban development, and yet play a critical role in food security for the most vulnerable.

- There are a handful of examples of informal vendors successfully organising and lobbying for a safer and cleaner environment in which to work.

- Programmatic entry points include policy dialogue with municipal authorities on i) the important food security and income-generating roles played by informal food markets; ii) broader efforts to make city life easier for women through increased support to public services such as transportation, sanitation, and childcare; and iii) quotas and other strategies to increase female representation in urban government processes.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

The world is urbanising fast, with a tipping point reached in 2007, when for the first time in history, more people were living in cities than in rural areas (1). In line with this trend, the world's diet is also becoming more 'urbanised', with meals cooked at home increasingly replaced by commercially prepared convenience and restaurant foods (2,3). Often consumed 'on the go', these foods are frequently high in fat, sodium, sugar and chemical additives (2,3). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), this 'nutrition transition' has resulted in rising rates of obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases—especially among women— even as food insecurity and undernutrition remain problematic (4). In many LMIC contexts, multiple challenges related to undernutrition as well as overweight/obesity occur simultaneously within the same populations, households, and even individuals.

In addition to the nutrition transition's direct impact on diet and health, urban life in LMICs presents a new set of gender-related, food-security related opportunities and risks for women.

Historically, these issues have been overlooked by municipalities, urban planners, and other relevant actors involved in city governance and urban food systems. Gender has often been a neglected focus for theory and practice in shaping cities, with little attention paid to how the entitlements of urban dwellers are gendered (5), and with urban planners' limited knowledge of the complexity of the issue preventing in-depth discussions about the gendered nature of urban spaces (6). Additionally, gender has been underplayed in food security and more recently, food system, discussions.

Against this background, GAIN conducted a rapid review of existing literature focused on the implications of gendered norms and constraints for urban food systems and governance thereof. Applying an institutional framework to organise results, we consider how gender norms constrain economic and social life at the personal level and the interplay with formal rules and structures at the community and municipal levels. The objective is to identify key issues at the nexus of these themes to support the systematic consideration of gender within GAIN's Urban Governance for Nutrition programme.

METHODS

This review did not aim to provide comprehensive coverage of the entire scope of research related to urban food systems in LMICs. Rather, it followed Khangura et al's (7) 'rapid review' format, intended for a 'type of knowledge synthesis in which components of the systematic review process are simplified or omitted to produce information in a short amount of time'. As a result, the review is limited to existing evidence and theory that provides insights into supporting equitable and nutrition-promoting urban food systems.

Searches for English-language journal articles, working papers, and books were carried out in Google Scholar, using a variety of search strings[1] around the three central themes of **gender, nutrition and food security, governance**, and **urban food systems**. The abstracts of the first

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[1] Search terms used are: women or gender or female & urban or cities or municipal & "food systems" or "food security" or nutrition or diets or agriculture or "food environment" & governance or planning or policy & LMIC or Africa or Asia

100 results for each search, sorted by relevance, were then screened for initial inclusion based on relevance to one or more of the central topic areas. In addition, websites of relevant organisations – the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food), Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO, and CARE International - were searched for relevant reports, event proceedings, briefs, and other non-academic publications. Additional relevant publications were added during the review process based on references in key publications and conceptual gaps highlighted by programme staff.

Searches were executed between November 2020 and January 2021. For all searches, publications, including grey literature, in English, dated from 2010-2020 were included. Patents, citations, and publications not available online were excluded. Publications resulting from the two search approaches (144 in total) were read in full to determine which would be included in the final review. Thirty-nine publications were included in the final review, comprising a wide variety of resources that varied in methodology and publication type.
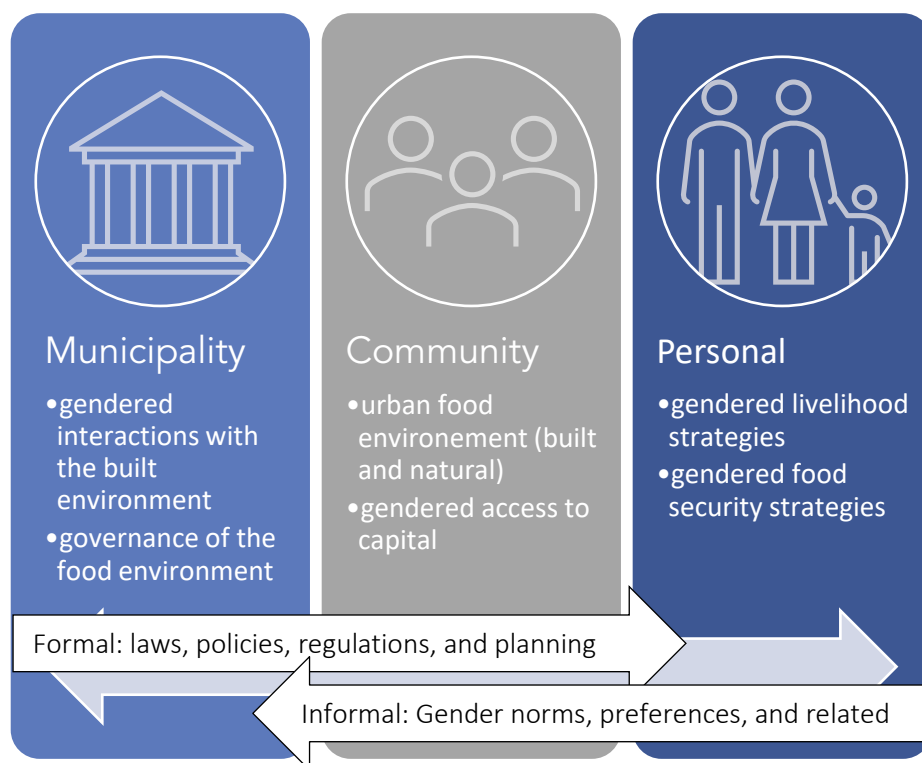
REVIEW FINDINGS

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: VISUALISING GENDER AND URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

There are a diverse set of multi-sectoral considerations that affect gendered food security and nutrition in urban spaces. Riley and Hovorka (8) present a three-tier feminist foodscape framework that supports gendered analysis of urban food systems at three levels: personal, community, and municipality, thus capturing a wide range of considerations. For this report, we adapt this framework (Figure 1), homing in on variables that are particularly relevant for nutrition in an urban context. We consider the three levels from an institutional perspective—institutions are the formal rules (policies, laws, and regulation) and informal constraints (norms, traditions, and codes of conduct) that govern social and economic life (9). Gender norms (informally) constrain economic and social life at the personal and community levels by constraining women's access to and control over productive inputs to provide nutritious and safe foods for herself and her family.[2] And they also influence the (formal) rules and structures that are developed and how they are enforced at the municipal level. Furthermore, the formal and informal aspects of institutions interact with and influence each other. The sections below provide findings from the literature review at each of these levels and then reflects on the implications for women's inclusion in urban food systems governance.

Figure 1. Gender in urban food systems

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[2] As women typically play the most pivotal role in household meal preparation and childcare, they are the primary focus of this review. However, men also have an important role to play. Engaging men in nutrition and other intrahousehold considerations are covered in a companion review: "Better Diets for Children: Integrating a Gender Lens".

Municipality	Community	Personal
•gendered interactions with the built environment	•urban food environnement (built and natural)	•gendered livelihood strategies
•governance of the food environment	•gendered access to capital	•gendered food security strategies

Formal: laws, policies, regulations, and planning

Informal: Gender norms, preferences, and related

Source: Authors' own, adapted from Riley and Hovorka (8)

PERSONAL LEVEL: GENDERED LIVELIHOOD AND FOOD SECURITY STRATEGIES IN URBAN FOOD SYSTEMS

On the personal level, women and men may have different approaches to and capabilities for earning income and supporting food security. These differences are largely based on gender norms that restrict men and women to specific activities and enable different sets of strategies. While these differences are context-specific, men are commonly seen as breadwinners (i.e., providing the income needed to cover household needs, including food) while women are responsible for preparing meals (10,11). In many urban LMIC environments, women are also responsible for food procurement (4). As such, the fulfilment of women's food responsibilities in these contexts is often contingent on the support of men, as the 'gatekeepers' of household cash (12).

In LMICs, these gender norms often coincide with discriminatory practices regarding women's employment. Feminised sectors are mostly unregistered and poorly paid (13–17). Though some—such as the garment industry—may formally employ women, they tend to work in poor conditions with little job security or bargaining power (17).[3] As a result, when circumstances require women to take on the role of 'breadwinner'—either to fulfil their gendered responsibilities within a dual-adult household or as the sole earner in a female-headed household—they are typically forced to do so 'informally', with little or no access to credit, formal contracts, licensing, and the worker protections that come with formal employment.

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[3] For more information on how gender norms and employment interact to affect food and nutrition outcomes, see the companion review: "A Gender Lens on Workforce Nutrition Efforts".

Within an urban food system context,[4] women assuming a breadwinner role often turn to selling fresh or prepared foods in stalls or roadside, or engaging in informal urban agriculture (8,18–22). Notably, in parts of South Asia, street vending has traditionally been a male-dominated job, but women are participating more frequently as urbanisation increases and women have few other options (16).

The tendency of women in urban contexts to find employment that is outside the bounds of formal, regulated channels is due in part to restrictive norms. However, when that work is food-related (as it often is), it also serves as a coping strategy for balancing food-insecure women's 'double-duty' responsibilities as meal-providers and income earners (12,13,21,23,24). This strategy of patching together productive and reproductive activities that are commonly construed as separate in urban spaces (13) has been documented across a variety of LMIC settings. For example, Floro and Bali Swain (24) show that food insecurity is associated with women's enterprise choice in Bolivia, Ecuador, the Philippines, and Thailand (24). They conclude that—similar to rural producers—women consider their food enterprises both an income source and a food source, using unsold inventories for consumption.

Urban women may also engage in 'double-duty' enterprises that allow them to work from home, facilitating childcare and other domestic tasks (8) and avoiding the need to travel for income. In LMICs, women's mobility may also be constrained by safety concerns, lack of time, and restrictive social norms. The fact that women spend more time at home means they are more affected by the functionality and extent of home utilities such as water, power, and gas (21). While childcare for young children (other than that provided by family and friends) is extremely rare in LMICs, it can potentially loosen these double-duty constraints faced by women. For instance, in Nairobi working mothers were provided subsidised early childcare. Results showed that these mothers were able to work fewer hours than those not given the service without any loss to their earnings, providing evidence that affordable childcare can be a powerful tool to support women and children (25).

COMMUNITY LEVEL: URBAN FOOD ENVIRONMENTS AND GENDERED ACCESS TO CAPITAL

Urban residents rely primarily on income – not home production – for their food, and women do most of the food shopping in many urban LMIC contexts (4). Most urban food environments are diverse, with multiple food purchase options ranging from hawkers and food stalls to large modern supermarkets, supporting the convenience of food procurement, especially compared to the rural context (26). However, accessing the diversity of food and food outlets requires mobility and money (27). Given these constraints, convenience and cost end up being major drivers of food choices (11,28), with low-income populations commonly purchasing small quantities of food on a daily basis due to lack of cash reserves and reliable electricity for refrigeration. Given these constraints, access to convenient food sources is critical for low-income urban women (15).

Women are often denied access to land and financial capital. For instance, a review paper by Nordhagen and Condes (29) concludes that women have limited access to business capital for a number of reasons, including that women are less likely to have collateral, tend to have

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[4] See Nordhagen (44) for a detailed description of the challenges women face in formal food system businesses.

limited household bargaining power, and may be discriminated against by lenders. In addition, land is scarce and harder for women to access and obtain legal rights to, which has implications for both domestic and productive activities, such as urban agriculture (8,26,30).

In place of formal assets, 'relational capital' is central to long-term food security strategies for women (11,12,23). These strategies leverage informal networks of assistance and reciprocity, grounded in social and family relationships. For example, Kawarazuka, Béné, and Prain demonstrate how female food vendors in Vietnam utilise family and social networks to support their business endeavours (20) and to support others. These women rely on male family members to make business connections in order to get fair prices or to gain access to land for urban agriculture, and on social networks to keep abreast of possible business opportunities. In contrast, male vendors are more likely to 'go it alone', relying on financial capital and their own labour rather than seeking support from family members or friends (20).

Urban agriculture can play an important role in these informal networks of relational capital, as it contributes to both household food security and community cohesion. Although high-quality studies are limited, existing evidence suggests that urban agriculture allows women to contribute to household food security and dietary diversity while simultaneously permitting fulfilment of household responsibilities (22,31) As such, it functions as a double-duty enterprise, as per above. Additionally, urban agriculture allows women to build social capital by working together with others in the community and sharing food with neighbours (22,23). Davies (12) describes these reciprocal, community-oriented food security strategies as expressions of identity and enabling agency for low-income urban women.

MUNICIPAL LEVEL: GENDERED INTERACTIONS WITH THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND GOVERNANCE OF THE FOOD SYSTEM

Gender has typically been overlooked in urban planning and development (21), and the built environment often does not consider the distinct needs of women (13,21,27,32). In LMICS specifically, many of the shortfalls of public and domestic urban infrastructure (e.g., overcrowding, poor or no sewage infrastructure, poor or no electricity provision, lack of sidewalks and places for children to play, pollution, lack of water for cooking and cleaning) are of particular concern for women, given their own health needs and their roles as primary childcare providers.

In addition to these challenges, urban built environments may pose a threat to women in terms of mobility. While both men and women face the risk of violence traveling throughout cities, for women violence is more likely to be sexualised (17). Consequently, women may view public spaces and use transport differently from men, as they may be more concerned with personal safety while moving around the city. For example, in two studies of gender and the urban built environment, Hidayati, Tan, and Yamu and Malaza, Todes, and Williamson found that women tended to avoid dark deserted areas, preferring busy shopping areas both for a sense of safety and because it facilitates multi-tasking (e.g., shopping for food while walking home from work). In addition to safety concerns, a lack of public toilets in urban areas limits women's mobility, education, and economic activities (33).

Despite these barriers, a substantial number of vendors in LMICs, especially informal food hawkers, are women. These street vendors play an important role in food security for many poor consumers, as they typically serve low-income populations lacking in time and resources

to patronise other outlets. However, a lack of training and infrastructure puts their foodstuffs, and thus their low-income clientele, at higher risk of food-borne illnesses (15,21). The lack of infrastructure increases personal risks as well. Vendors who are informal and operate outside of established markets are more likely to be mistreated by local authorities,[5] with informal female vendors at the highest risk due to gender-based discrimination, which often prevents them from physically positioning themselves in safer zones that are also more lucrative (15,21,34,35).

Given the role urban women play and the challenges they face, gender-sensitive approaches to supporting informal urban food systems represent an enormous opportunity to improve the wellbeing of both women and their families. Food safety initiatives, personal safety initiatives, and supporting female vendors and women-run outlets through increased access to credit, distributors, cold chain technology, and other retail assistance mechanisms (36) all fall under the umbrella of this strategic focus area.

Unfortunately, to date, this potential remains largely untapped, as in most LMICs traditional markets and informal food vending are at best ignored and at worst undermined by municipal policy makers (15). This sector—similar to home-based urban agriculture—is often viewed as archaic and 'backward' and is largely excluded from municipal support services (14,21,35–37), resulting in increased risk of consumption of contaminated, adulterated, and spoiled foods by low-income consumers (15).

In many countries, a vicious circle contributes to this reality: since formal sectors are easier to tax and regulate than informal ones, the latter is poorly positioned to engage in policy dialogue with local authorities (8,34). As such, informal vendors have little agency to organise and advocate for better conditions, and local governments have little incentive to support activities that remain unregulated and untaxable.

For those seeking to address this cycle, it is useful to consider (in)formality of enterprises as a continuum, rather than discrete categories of economic activity. For example, even unlicensed vendors operating on the periphery of a traditional marketplace could benefit if the local authorities are willing to grant a category of membership to existing market associations that increase their access to running water, electricity, and other services. For female vendors, increased access to such services may also mitigate the safety and sanitation concerns cited above.

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[5] Resnick notes the continued existence of colonial-era legislation in many LMICs, wherein street vendors are penalized through unpredictable crackdowns by governments, often involving arrest, fines, and even destruction or confiscation of merchandise (15).

PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION IN URBAN FOOD SYSTEM GOVERNANCE

Multiple articles in the review identify the failure of urban bureaucracies to address the particular needs and preferences of women (5,15,36). Strategies for addressing this failing commonly focus on increasing the power and participation of women in community and municipal decision making. Two ways to approach this are to enhance the role of women in advocacy to influence formal institutions or to increase the number of women elected or appointed to formal institutions.

BOX 1: NAIROBI'S ASSOCIATION OF INFORMAL FOOD VENDORS

A 2017 analysis of informal food markets in African cities reports that associations representing the urban poor have increased in the last ten years. In some contexts, these associations have played an important part in increasing recognition of informal sector interests. For example, in Nairobi, *Muungano wa Wanavijiji* ('Kenya's Federation of the Urban Poor') has established a women-led Food Vendors Association, which maps the proximity of popular vending locations to environmental hazards such as garbage heaps and areas that might be contaminated by sewage and/or subject to flooding. Routine clean-ups of these hazards are part of *Muungano wa Wanavijiji's* mission, as such this association's activities benefit not only female vendors but their households and communities as well (15 p55).

Collective action is an important mechanism for **amplifying the voices of the less powerful in local political processes** (34). There were a number of examples in the literature describing positive results achieved through 'the collective action of women asserting their right to equal entitlements as citizens'(17 p6). With respect to food vending specifically, Pozarny (13) and Skinner (38) cite cases of female street vendors who organised and lobbied to procure services that provide a clean and safe environment for their work, while Resnick (38) provides a description of female vendors from Nairobi who took matters into their own hands to improve working conditions (see Box 1). In a Canadian example relevant to the issues of transportation and safety noted above, Malaza, Todes, and Williamson (21) describe how women's rights advocates pushed for a programme that allowed women and girls to get off the bus between two regular stops in order to decrease the walking distance to their destination.

Collective action to improve conditions for informal female workers can increase pressure for policies to support equitable food systems (34) and contribute to disruption of the vicious cycle between informal workers and municipal authorities noted above. A key outcome of such engagement is **support to gender-sensitive, participatory planning** by government, to increase the likelihood that women's needs are represented and accounted for in urban food systems and other development agendas. In Box 2, Malaza, Todes, and Williamson (21) provide examples from India and Kenya of how this type of participatory planning process can yield increased political space and concrete improvements in the built environment for women.

BOX 2: GENDER-SENSITIVE, PARTICIPATORY PLANNING TO MEET WOMEN'S NEEDS IN INDIA AND KENYA

Gendered planning exercises in Kerala and Nairobi were conducted by municipal government agencies to improve understanding of women's needs in the context of 'budgeting, designing, and evaluating physical and social infrastructure such as housing, employment generation schemes, community services, [and] transport.' (21 p6)

- **People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning** – As part of its decentralisation process, the Kerala State Planning Board deployed a campaign of participatory exercises for which citizens—specifically women and marginalised groups—were recruited to take a more active role in formulating policies and projects. The programme stipulated compulsory minimum expenditures for targeted demographics. The authors conclude that the campaign 'effectively empowered women through a deliberately participatory, inclusive and re-distributive process, facilitating women's presence in local governance and increasing the political space within which they can mobilise.' (21 p3)

- **Nairobi Safety Assessment Walk** – In partnership with UN Habitat and the Intermediate Technology Development Group, Nairobi's City Council implemented a women's safety promotion initiative - the Nairobi Safety Assessment Walk - in March 2002. Designed as the lead activity of a city-wide safety audit for women, the assessment had two stages. The first was a literal walk through a designated area in Nairobi's city centre by representatives of the police, city council, business community, and women's organisations. The second stage consisted of a meeting series, during which representatives from each group discussed their walk experiences. The ensuing recommendations for resolving crime and insecurity related to four broad areas: 'lighting and visibility, physical design and maintenance, population concentration, and social and economic activities.' (21 p4)

Recognising the different productive spaces and activities used by women and bringing them into the focus of planners and regulators is the first step towards supporting inclusive city governance systems that consider the needs and priorities of women and other often excluded groups. One way to greatly increase the likelihood of this happening is by ensuring women have a seat at the table through **quotas in governmental positions.** Quotas can

change perceptions of women as political actors and encourage women to engage in politics (39,40). They have been found to be effective in increasing representation of women in government and the number of women-centred policies proposed (39,41,42). For example, Karekurve-Ramachandran and Lee (41) find that gender quotas in local government positions in Mumbai improve the quality of local service provision, especially in areas likely to be of special importance to Indian women such as health, sanitation, and housing. The authors attribute these effects to female politicians recruited through quotas focusing explicitly on distribution of public goods. (The authors also note that male politicians are more likely to focus on identity issues, individual goods, and to engage in clientelism.) A study by Burnet (40) provides useful information about the limitations of such policies. Rwanda is upheld as a success story for legislative quotas for women, contributing to female representation in public life. However, the study reports that these successes have not led to legislation contributing to the status or rights of women, as gender quotas are enacted within the context of the broader political climate, which is unsupportive of substantive reforms to gendered power structures.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the literature reviewed for this paper demonstrates how gender norms constrain livelihood activities for women at the personal level and also influence formal food systems policies and investments in the built environment at the community and municipality level.

At the personal level, gender norms constrain the options and approaches available to women to make a living. Thus, in the urban context, women are impelled to engage in 'double duty' food-based enterprises that permit simultaneous attention to childcare and livelihoods.

At the community level, women mitigate barriers to obtaining formal control over resources, such as land and financial capital, by wielding relational capacity and reciprocal giving to increase their access to income and food through informal channels such as food sharing. Women's operationalisation of relational capacity suggests that women in LMIC cities retain and capitalise on the 'moral economy.'[6] While more commonly acknowledged by governments and development partners as integral to rural village life in many LMICs (43), the important role of this parallel economy is generally absent from the policy discourse.

At the municipal level, women's needs and preferences are often at odds with the built environment, and institutional discrimination reinforces women's exclusion from the formal urban food system. The literature points to two strategies for helping to **amplify the voices of women in local political processes**: collective action and representation in government. There are strong examples in the literature of collective action initiatives increasing support for equitable reforms to food system governance (15,21,34). While research on quotas for women in government have demonstrated some positive outcomes, the extent to which this approach supports gender equity is not clear (39–42).

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[6] See, for instance, discussion on the moral economy by Margolies et al. (43).

Findings from this review support GAIN's approach in urban settings to work with municipal governments to improve the infrastructure and governance of traditional markets.[7] Furthermore, in traditional markets, supporting female vendors' agency in the marketplace and their formal participation in market governance may allow for essential changes to market policy and infrastructure that can improve their economic empowerment, food security, and nutrition. This strategic focus pinpoints a population of workers that is, in many countries, primarily female, critical to the food system as a whole, and key to the provision of nutritious foods to low-income consumers in particular.

In order to address the broader, ubiquitous challenges that women face in cities, the literature points to a set of 'low-hanging fruit' that may be worth pursuing through GAIN's established relationships with government, including sanitation and infrastructure, childcare, and safe transportation initiatives. These improvements can be implemented in such a way to both support safe and nutritious urban food environments and gender equity.

Reflecting on the discussion on the informality continuum, the most vulnerable of urban women working in the food system are likely outside the traditional market system, such as unlicensed street vendors and hawkers. However, addressing the entry points above extends the scope of potential impact to reach beyond established market structures, with projected knock-on effects for street vendors. Additionally, identifying low-income communities within which informal vendors can be supported and empowered is an approach that has been successful in the past.

In addition to direct support to gender-sensitive improvements, GAIN can consider supporting quotas and facilitating participatory governance processes to encourage policy dialogue and action on these entry points.

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[7] See GAIN's COVID response activities for a description of some market engagement activities: https://www.gainhealth.org/impact/our-response-covid-19.

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