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Enhancing food safety and women's empowerment through gender-responsive agrifood policies in Uganda

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Introduction: Food safety is critical to public health, economic stability, and the Sustainable Development Goals, yet its governance in countries like Uganda is undermined by persistent gender disparities and fragmented policy approaches. This study examines the integration of gender and food safety in Uganda's national agrifood policies to inform the development of a gender-responsive National Food Safety Policy.

Methodology: Employing the Women's Empowerment in Agrifood Governance (WEAGov) framework, we conducted a mixed-methods policy diagnostic, including a landscape review, content analysis of 13 policies, expert surveys (n = 51), and a validation workshop.

Results: Policies show a strong rhetorical commitment to gender equality but a marked "action gap." Only three of thirteen reviewed policies include specific gender goals, targets, and indicators, and 92% of experts rated budget allocations for women's empowerment as weak or limited. Citizen and women's engagement is low, with only 30% of policies reflecting participatory input. While food safety was identified as the top agrifood priority by 49% of experts, policies treat it in a fragmented, gender-blind manner, a "salience-silence paradox" that reveals a critical governance blind spot.

Conclusion: The analysis reveals a cycle of disempowerment sustained by weak consideration, tokenistic inclusion, and limited influence for women in agrifood governance. As Uganda drafts its first National Food Safety Policy, closing the action gap and breaking the silence on gender is essential for designing effective, equitable, and holistic food safety systems.

KEYWORDS

agri-food policies, empowerment, food safety, Uganda, women

Highlights

- The study provides a policy governance diagnostic, examining the extent to which Uganda's agrifood policies integrate gender and food safety considerations in their processes.
- The study employs the Women's Empowerment in Agrifood Governance (WEAGov) analysis framework.
- Reviewed policies make broad gender equality commitments but reveal a significant 'action gap', lacking targeted actions, budgets, and accountability.
- Agrifood policy landscape presents few opportunities for citizen and women input and feedback into the policy process.
- Most agrifood policies incorporate measures to ensure food safety but lack gender-responsive measures.
- There is a need to institutionalize inclusive policy formulation processes that deliberately engage women and marginalized groups to ensure their voices shape policy decisions.

1 Background

Food safety is central to food systems transformation and the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet the intersection of food safety, gender, and women's empowerment remains a critical but under-addressed dimension of this transformation (Dysard et al., 2025; Njuki et al., 2021; Sell et al., 2025). Food safety risks are not gender-neutral; rather, they are shaped by socially constructed roles, power relations, and unequal access to resources across the food system. Understanding and addressing these gendered dynamics is therefore essential for effective, equitable, and sustainable food safety governance.

Unsafe food, contaminated by biological, chemical, or physical hazards during production, processing, distribution, or preparation, poses severe public health and economic risks. Globally, contaminated food causes an estimated 600 million cases of foodborne illness and 420,000 deaths annually, with the heaviest burden falling on low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (WHO, 2022). The associated economic losses are estimated at USD 110 billion per year, driven by healthcare costs, productivity losses, and trade disruptions (Jaffee et al., 2019). In Africa alone, foodborne diseases affect approximately 92 million people and cause 137,000 deaths annually (Jiya and Balogu, 2023). In Uganda, an estimated 1.3 million people are diagnosed with food-borne illnesses annually, constituting 14% of all human ailments treated annually (FAO, 2022). Notably, over 60% of known foodborne diseases result from consuming fresh and perishable foods which are often sold through formal and informal market channels (Roessel, 2014, Augustin et al., 2020).

Women play a central role across these market channels and throughout the agrifood system in LMICs. They are heavily engaged in food production, processing, distribution, retailing, handling, and preparation, and they influence dietary choices for nutritionally vulnerable groups such as infants, older persons, and people with disabilities (Njuki et al., 2016; Visser and Wangu, 2021). This positioning makes women pivotal actors in shaping food safety outcomes. At the same time, it exposes them to heightened health risks, including increased contact with contaminated farm environments, unsafe processing conditions, and poor market infrastructure (Garsow et al., 2022). Despite their centrality, women

often lack access to essential resources such as financial services, training, quality inputs, water and sanitation facilities, and infrastructure that are necessary to adopt and sustain safe food practices (Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2020). Social and cultural norms further constrain women's participation in leadership and decision-making spaces, including those that shape food safety standards, regulations, and enforcement mechanisms (Milovanova et al., 2024).

Recognizing and addressing this gendered dimension of food safety is therefore both an equity imperative as well as a strategic pathway to improving food safety outcomes. Evidence shows that empowering women through access to resources, voice in governance, and targeted capacity building enhances compliance with food safety practices, improves household nutrition, and reduces public health risks (Grace et al., 2015). Moreover, gender-responsive food safety governance contributes to broader national and global priorities, including climate resilience, food and nutrition security, and inclusive economic development (Gutierrez-Montes et al., 2020).

These gendered challenges are compounded by structural weaknesses in food safety governance in many LMICs. Food safety governance typically spans multiple sectors, jurisdictions, and public-private actors, often resulting in fragmented mandates, regulatory gaps, inconsistent enforcement, and a reactive emphasis on outbreak response rather than prevention (Candel, 2014; Candel and Pereira, 2017; Termier et al., 2018). In Uganda, food safety oversight is distributed across several government institutions, with local governments and municipalities playing a frontline enforcement role. However, the absence of a unified and inclusive policy framework has led to weak coordination, underinvestment, and limited accountability. These governance failures disproportionately affect smallholder producers and informal market actors, particularly women who have limited bargaining power, reduced access to information, and minimal influence over food safety standards and policy processes (Botreau and Cohen, 2020).

In alignment with global and continental food safety policies such as UNEP's Sustainable Food Systems Strategy, the Multisectoral Action in Food Systems Unit, One Health Initiative, WHO global strategy for food safety 2022–2030 and Food Safety Strategy of Africa (FSSA), Uganda has initiated the development of a National Food Safety Policy. The policy aims to provide a harmonized framework for mitigating food safety risks across the food system. This process creates a critical policy window (Kingdon, 2010), defined as a period when conditions align to enable substantive policy change. In Uganda, this window is opened by the convergence of three streams: (a) heightened political and public attention to food safety as a salient public health and economic issue (problem stream), (b) the formal policy drafting process (policy stream), and (c) sustained national and international advocacy for gender equality and women's empowerment in agrifood systems (politics stream). This convergence presents a strategic opportunity to harmonize food safety regulations while using empirical evidence to inform the integration of gender responsiveness into food safety policy design.

To leverage this opportunity, this study conducts a diagnostic assessment of Uganda's existing agrifood policy framework and governance processes, with the aim of identifying gaps and opportunities for strengthening gender-responsive food safety governance. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- 1 Assess the extent of gender inclusivity and women's empowerment within Uganda's existing agrifood policy frameworks.

- 2 Analyze the integration of food safety provisions in these policies.
- 3 Examine the policy processes for citizen engagement, particularly of women and marginalized groups.

The study applies the Women's Empowerment in Agrifood Governance (WEAGov) framework, drawing on policy document analysis, expert surveys, and a technical validation workshop to provide actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders. While situated within this immediate policy window, this study's diagnostic framework and findings are designed to inform broader agrifood governance reforms and offer analytically generalizable insights for other policy areas where gender integration remains a challenge.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: After this introduction, Sections 2 and 3 detail the WEAGov conceptual framework, methodology and data collection, respectively. Section 4 presents the results of the policy and expert analysis. Section 5 discusses the key findings, focusing on the identified gaps and their implications. Finally, Section 6 concludes with actionable recommendations for crafting a holistic, gender-responsive National Food Safety Policy for Uganda.

2 Theoretical and analytical framework

This study is grounded in the Women's Empowerment in Agrifood Governance (WEAGov) framework (Ragasa et al., 2023), which serves as its theoretical and analytical lens. The framework is predicated on the theory that effective and equitable agrifood governance requires the systematic empowerment of women across the entire policy cycle.

Empowerment can be understood as a multi-level process: it manifests individually, as women enhance their capacities and exercise agency (Kurtiş et al., 2016) and relationally, through interactions and collective action (Huis et al., 2017). For governance, empowerment must transcend individual capacity to include meaningful voice and influence in the systems that shape resources and rules across three distinct dimensions: the micro-level, where individual beliefs and actions reflect personal empowerment; the meso-level, which involves interactions with relevant others and demonstrates relational empowerment; and the macro-level, where broader societal outcomes indicate societal empowerment.

The WEAGov framework operationalizes this theory into a diagnostic tool. It posits that empowerment manifests not only through policy content (consideration) but also through equitable process (inclusion) and transformative agency (influence):

- 1 *Consideration* - The integration of gender-differentiated needs and priorities into policy content (e.g., targets, budgets, data).
- 2 *Inclusion* - The creation of opportunities for women to meaningfully *participate* in policy processes.
- 3 *Influence* - The ability of women to exercise agency and *lead* in shaping policy agendas and outcomes.

This tripartite lens moves analysis beyond a simple inventory of gender keywords to a diagnostic of the governance architecture, evaluating whether structures and processes genuinely enable women's voice and agency.

The WEAGov framework applies the three empowerment dimensions across the three stages of the policy cycle (Figure 1): design, implementation, and evaluation (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2018; Resnick et al., 2018). This creates a 3×3 matrix of nine diagnostic indicators that assess whether women are considered, included, and influential throughout the policy process. Policy design assesses how problems are framed, objectives set, and stakeholders engaged. Policy implementation examines administrative actions, expenditure, and service delivery. Policy evaluation reviews whether objectives were achieved and identifies improvements. The framework also suggests that weaknesses in one dimension can reinforce weaknesses in others, creating a cycle that sustains gaps between policy rhetoric and implementation, what this study later examines as a 'cycle of disempowerment'.

The framework directly informs the research design, data collection instruments (Table 1), and the interpretation of findings presented in the following sections.

3 Methods

3.1 Data collection

A multi-method approach was used for data collection, triangulating information from multiple sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of women's voice and agency in agrifood governance.

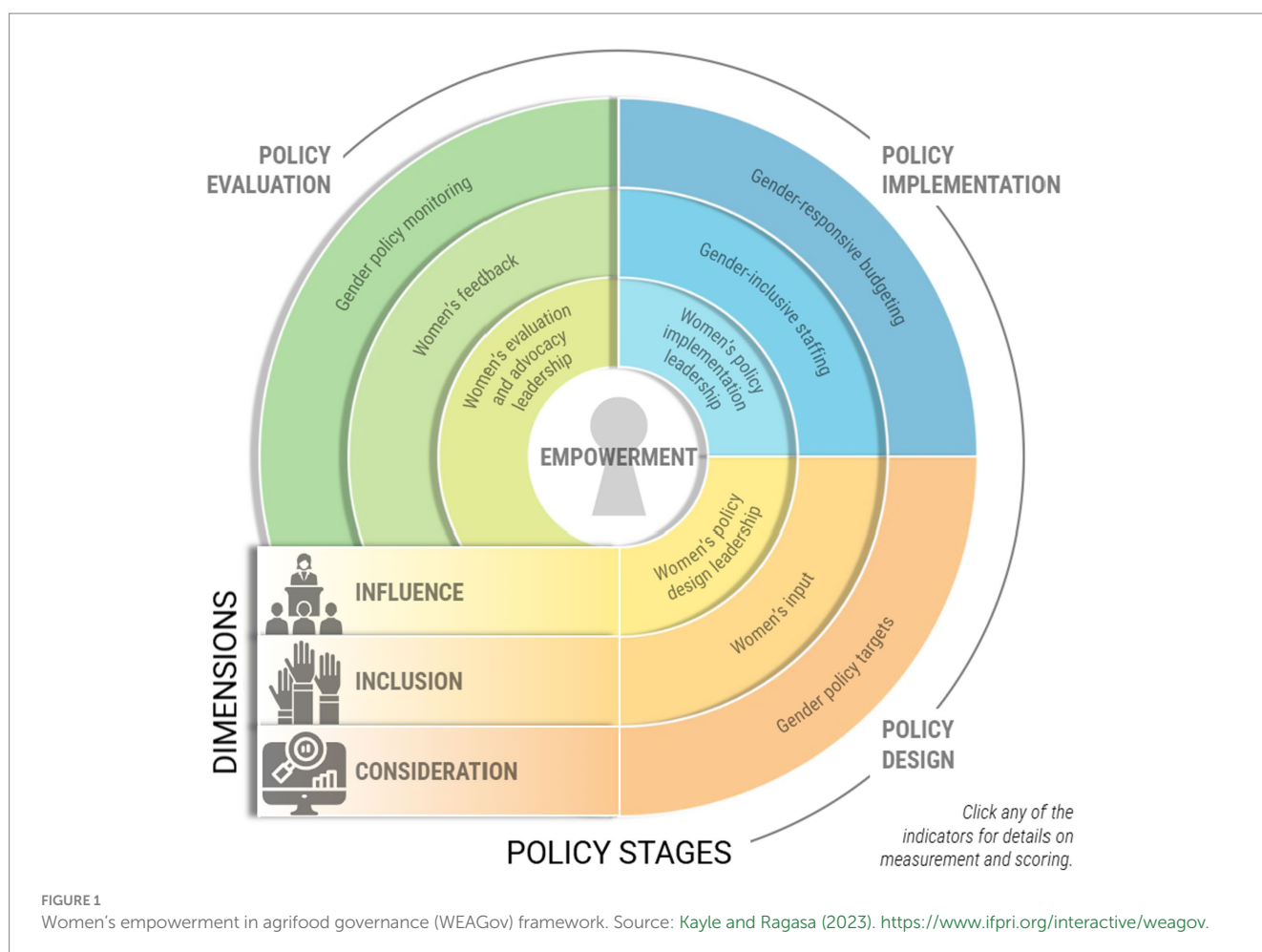
3.1.1 Policy analysis

3.1.1.1 Landscape analysis

An analysis of the key national policies, actors, and organizations in Uganda's agrifood sector was done to develop an inventory of the main agrifood policy documents (laws, strategies, plans and policies). The set of policies considered in this study spans (a) agricultural/food production, including crop and livestock production, land use, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, and climate-smart agriculture; (b) agricultural/food distribution and value chains, including food handling, food safety and disposal; (c) household consumption of food, including food security and nutrition, (d) long- and short-term national plans; and (e) policies specific to gender and youth equality. Actors include ministries that design and implement policies, as well as civil society organizations and private sector which play a role in policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Research institutes and academia also play a role especially in the policy deliberations, reviews, and evaluations.

3.1.1.2 Content analysis

Policy documents were reviewed for gender and food safety integration using a set of assessment questions (Table 1). First, the analysis examined the frequency and context in which key gender-related terms appeared in the policy document (e.g., gender, men, women, girls, mothers, inclusive, equity, equality, voice, agency, social justice, empowerment), and intersectionality and other social markers (using terms such as youth, age group, poor, marginalized, socioeconomic status, smallholder, ethnic, ethnicity). Further, the assessment explored whether terms like "empowerment" and "equality" were associated with concrete actions or objectives for



different gender groups. These terms were then cross-referenced with the assessment questions to determine their presence in response to specific prompts and to understand the context in which they were used. Lastly, the review examined whether the policies include consideration to gender equality and women's issues in food safety, as well as measures to address these issues.

To keep the selection and content analysis manageable, the focus was put on national-level policies that directly govern and affect agrifood systems and food safety, paying attention to those that are operational or currently being implemented, not in draft or too old.

3.1.2 Expert survey and validation workshop

An expert survey was conducted to assess the gap between written policy and its implementation, focusing on perceptions of enforcement, citizen and women's engagement, and the tracking of gender-related targets. The survey also explored emerging agrifood issues and the prominence of citizen and women's participation. The guiding questions for the survey are based on Table 1. A total of 51 experts participated, selected through stakeholder mapping and snowball sampling. Respondents included leaders, managers, decision-makers, gender focal points, and technical experts from civil society organizations (67%), government ministries (27%), and research institutions (6%) (Table 2). Survey administration followed a semi-structured questionnaire via Open Data Kit (ODK),

conducted through in-person or telephone interviews, or self-administered online via Enketo. Only respondents who rated their policy knowledge as moderate, good, or very good completed the full survey. Ethical clearance was obtained from the CABI Ethics Review Board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. The survey was conducted between November and December 2024.

A technical validation workshop was held in December 2024 with 39 stakeholders (Table 3), including policymakers from key ministries, local government, academia, research institutions, private sector representatives, farmers' federations, agribusiness alliances, and advocacy groups. The workshop provided a platform to review, discuss, and validate survey findings, ensuring their accuracy and relevance to Uganda's agrifood policy landscape.

3.2 Data analysis

Data analysis entailed calculating the share of positive responses for each of the indicators, and scoring based on a 4-part scale ranging from: low (1), on the way (2), advancing (3), and at goal (4). To ensure consistency and reliability in the policy content scoring, a structured multi-step process was followed. First, a detailed coding manual was developed based on the WEAGov framework definitions

TABLE 1 Adapted WEAGov policy assessment questions for gender and food safety integration.

Analysis criteria	Indicators/research questions
Gender integration	<p>Gender content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the policy mention a gender analysis or gender study that guided and informed the policy • Is gender mainstreamed throughout the policy document or relegated to a separate section? • Does the policy document recognize intersectionality and other social markers (e.g., youth, age group, poor, marginalized, socioeconomic status, smallholder). • Does the policy document include specific objectives or targets related to improving women's voice and participation in decision-making, women's leadership, women's agency or empowerment • Does the policy document aim to address gendered social norms and structural gender inequalities.
Consideration (are women considered?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender policy targets – does the policy recognize women's roles and/or challenges in agriculture and rural development? Does it include specific objectives or targets related to gender equality in access to inputs, resources, and opportunities? • Gender-responsive budgeting – does the policy allocate budget equitably, addressing the different needs of men and women? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What is the stakeholder perception of budgetary support and implementation of gender targets in the agrifood policy? * • Gender policy monitoring – does the policy include gender indicators and promote the use of sex-disaggregated data in monitoring and evaluation? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Do agrifood policy implementing agencies track and monitor gender goals in the agrifood policy? *
Inclusion (are women included?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women input – what is the experts' views and perception of opportunities for women and/or women's groups to provide inputs in the deliberations and policy development? * • Women's feedback – are there formal mechanism for citizens to provide feedback on agrifood policy implementation? * <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What are expert's perceived opportunities for women to provide feedback on agrifood policy implementation? *
Influence (are women influencing?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's policy design leadership – what are experts' perception of women's influence over agrifood policy design? * • Women's policy implementation leadership – what are experts' perception of women leadership roles in agrifood policy implementation? * • Women's evaluation and advocacy leadership – what are experts' perception women's leading role in monitoring, review and advocacy of the agrifood policy? *
Thematic assessment (food safety)	<p>Food safety integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the policy document include consideration to gender equality and rural women's issues in food safety (food handling, infrastructure, standards, knowledge and practices at farm level, transportation and market)? • Does the policy document include measures to address to gender equality and rural women's issues in food safety?

*Data on these perception questions were obtained from a survey of local agrifood policy experts. Questions were adapted and modified from Ragasa et al. (2023) and literature review to fit the scope of this study.

(Kayle and Ragasa, 2023). All researchers involved in scoring participated in a training session to calibrate understanding of the scale and indicators.

Each policy was then independently reviewed and scored by at least two researchers. Initial inter-rater agreement was calculated, and discrepancies were identified. Where scores differed, the researchers engaged in a structured consensus discussion, referring to the specific policy text and the coding manual to resolve differences. A third senior researcher was consulted to arbitrate any unresolved discrepancies. This iterative discussion process continued until full consensus was reached on a final score for each policy indicator. This procedure enhances the internal validity and transparency of the policy scoring.

Data from expert survey was analyzed using descriptive analysis and presented in tables and graphs.

3.3 Study limitations

This study has some interrelated limitations that define the scope and appropriate application of its findings.

- 1 The empirical evidence is derived from policy documents and institutional experts, which provides a crucial top-down, governance-level perspective but potentially introduces an elite bias. This methodology limits direct insights into the lived experiences and agency of women producers, informal traders, and consumers at the grassroots level. Consequently, the findings are explicitly framed as a diagnostic of policy architecture and governance processes rather than an assessment of on-the-ground impacts or budget execution.
- 2 While the study identifies the systemic omission of gender from food safety policy, it does not examine the specific, everyday food safety practices, knowledge, or challenges of women across the value chain. This represents a critical gap for future complementary research.
- 3 As an in-depth analysis of Uganda's policy landscape, the specific scores and institutional findings are not statistically generalizable to other countries. The study's external validity lies in analytical generalization. The WEAGov methodology and the identified categories of governance failure such as the "action gap" between rhetoric and implementation, and the systemic exclusion of women from policy processes, provide a

TABLE 2 Characteristics of experts surveyed.

Characteristic		Freq.	%
Role	Head of the organization	12	24
	Manager of specific program	33	65
	Expert in agrifood policy	6	12
Type of organization	Civil society organization / NGO	34	67
	Government MDA	14	27
	Research institution /University	3	6
Gender	Female	18	35
	Male	33	65
Age category	<35 years	4	8
	36–50 years	32	63
	51–65 years	12	24
	Over 65 years	3	6
Education level	Bachelor-level or equivalent	8	16
	Masters' degree or equivalent	31	61
	PhD	8	16
	Post PhD	4	8
Policy knowledge	Moderate	15	29
	Good	26	51
	Very good	10	20

Source: Expert survey data.

transferable diagnostic framework and highlight analytically generalizable pitfalls relevant to other low- and middle-income countries with similar fragmented governance structures.

As such, this policy-level diagnostic should be paired with community-based, qualitative research to create a fully integrated evidence base for transformative change.

4 Results

4.1 Uganda's agrifood policy context

Drawing from the landscape analysis conducted as part of this study, Uganda's agrifood policy framework is designed to promote a competitive, sustainable, and resilient agricultural sector with an emphasis on food security, nutrition, and food safety. The analysis identified 25 national policies, strategies, and plans relevant to agrifood (Table 4). Key guiding documents include the National Agriculture Policy, the Food and Nutrition Policy, Uganda Vision 2040, and the Third National Development Plan (NDP III)¹, which collectively aim to enhance productivity, nutrition, and safety while prioritizing agro-industrialization and natural resource management.

In terms of food safety, the primary law is the Food and Drugs Act (1964), which initially covered both food and pharmaceuticals. Its

¹ NDPIV has recently been launched but this study was undertaken prior to this.

TABLE 3 Participation at the technical validation meeting.

Participant category	Number
Number of participants who attended the feedback meeting	
Total	39
Female	14
Male	25
Type of organizations they are affiliated to	
Government (Ministries, District Local Governments, KCCA)	10
NGOs/CSO/networks/alliances	8
Private sector	7
Research and academia	6
Other (consultants, enumerators)	8

Source: Validation workshop attendance.

revision in 1993 established the Drug Act under the National Drug Authority (NDA), leaving food safety regulation without a unified legal framework. Currently, oversight of food safety is dispersed across multiple institutions: the Uganda National Bureau of Standards sets general food standards; sector-specific bodies under the Ministry of Agriculture animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) regulate dairy, coffee, meat, and fish; and local authorities enforce hygiene under the Public Health Act.

Nutrition and public health are recognized as integral to food safety. Foodborne illnesses and unsafe food undermine nutrition gains and increase health risks, particularly for vulnerable populations. To address this, the government has integrated food security, nutrition, and public health into key national development plans, including NDP III. Uganda's approach to food and nutrition policy has evolved from a sector-specific focus, led by the Ministry of Health (MoH) and MAAIF, to a multi-sectoral approach coordinated since 2011 by the Office of the Prime Minister. The Uganda Nutrition Action Plan (UNAP) operationalizes this approach, incorporating food safety considerations.

Gender equality and youth empowerment are acknowledged as key drivers of food security and safety. The National Gender Policy and National Youth Policy promote inclusion, access to resources, and agribusiness engagement. NDP III further supports youth through agro-industrialization and food safety training.

Critically, Uganda is in the process of developing a National Food Safety Policy and a proposed Agriculture and Food Safety Agency to establish a coherent regulatory framework. For this policy to be effective, it must integrate gender considerations to address the distinct challenges faced by men, women, youth, and marginalized communities.

4.2 Gender content in agrifood policies

Policy content analysis reveals that Uganda's agrifood policies demonstrate a foundational commitment to gender inclusion, with all reviewed documents acknowledging gender, women's roles, and equity. Gender is mainstreamed throughout seven policies, while others address it in dedicated sections. Notable policies such as NDP III, Vision 2040, the Uganda Food and Nutrition Strategy and Investment Plan, and the National Agriculture and Extension Policy

TABLE 4 Major agrifood, gender and food safety policies, strategies and plans reviewed.

	Name of policy	Year	Type of policy
Agriculture/food production			
1	National Agriculture Policy**†	2013	Policy
2	National Agriculture and Extension Policy**†	2016	Policy
3	The National Land Use Policy**†	2006	Policy
4	National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy**†	2017	Policy
5	National Fertilizer policy	2016	Policy
6	Uganda Climate Change Policy**†	2015	Policy
7	National Agriculture Extension Strategy	2016	Strategy
8	Updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC)	2022	Plan
9	The Animal Feeds Policy	2005	Policy
10	Uganda One Health Strategic Plan 2018–2022	2018	Strategy
11	National Environment Management Policy for Uganda (draft)	2014	Policy
12	Agriculture Sector Strategic Plan 2015/16–2019/20	2015	Strategy
13	National Seed Policy*	2018	Policy
Agriculture distribution and value chain			
14	Food and Drugs Act	1964	Legislation/Law
15	Markets Act	2021	Legislation/Law
16	Public Health Act	2000	Legislation/Law
17	Public Health Act (Meat) Rules	1935	Legislation/Law
Household consumption			
18	Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy**†	2003	Policy
19	Uganda Food and Nutrition Strategy and Investment Plan*	2004	Investment plan
20	Uganda Nutrition Action Plan*	2020	Action Plan
Long- and short-term national plans			
21	Uganda Vision 2040*	2015	Long-term plan
22	The Third National Development Plan (NDP III) (2020/21–2024/25)*	2020	Medium-term plan
23	Parish Development Model*	2022	Strategy
Gender and youth policies			
24	Uganda Gender Policy	2007	Policy
25	National Youth Policy*	2004	Policy

Policy content analysis was conducted on 13 national agrifood policies (marked with “*”), with 6 of these (marked with “†”) further examined through expert surveys to assess implementation and gender goal tracking. The selected policies for expert surveys contained some gender considerations. Older sectoral policies, draft policies, and specific programs/projects were excluded to maintain focus on current, actionable frameworks.

Source: Authors’ compilation.

score highly, incorporating explicit gender equality objectives and provisions to improve women’s access to resources. Several policies, including the Food and Nutrition Policy and the National Seed Policy, also acknowledge intersectionality—considering youth, smallholders, and marginalized groups—and promote capacity building, gender-friendly technologies, and women’s participation in agribusiness.

However, this rhetorical commitment is not uniformly translated into actionable design. Only 60% of policies explicitly recognize the distinct roles and challenges of women in agriculture. Key frameworks such as the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy and the National Agriculture Policy lack strong provisions to address gender disparities, limiting their potential to foster equality. While some policies promote equitable access to resources, few

tackle structural barriers such as discriminatory social norms, gender-based violence, land ownership, or financial exclusion. Additionally, gender analysis is inconsistently applied, and intersectionality remains underdeveloped across the policy suite, reducing responsiveness to the lived realities of diverse women in agriculture.

Table 5 summarizes the gender content assessment, detailing key provisions and persistent gaps across the 13 reviewed policies.

4.3 WEAGov diagnostic of agrifood policies

Building on the gender content analysis presented above, this section applies the WEAGov framework’s three empowerment

TABLE 5 Scored gender content in key agrifood policies.

Name of policy	Score*	Gender provision	Gender gaps
1. National Agriculture Policy (2013)		Highlights gender equity in agricultural growth; calls for balanced regional/demographic interventions.	No gender analysis. Lacks gender-specific objectives or measures for women's participation. Does not address discriminatory norms.
2. National Agriculture and Extension Policy (2016)		Strong gender analysis; explicit equality objectives focused on empowering women, youth, and vulnerable groups to access inputs, markets, and finance.	Lacks indicators to monitor women's participation; no measurable actions to address gender inequalities in access to resources (e.g., land).
3. The National Land Use Policy (2006)		Acknowledges gender, inclusion, equity; recognizes gender roles in land use planning; includes provisions for women's tenure security, decision-making participation, and skills-based economic empowerment.	Lacks specific gender-focused objectives for agriculture/rural women's rights; no gender analysis or gender-disaggregated data.
4. National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy (2017)		Explicit objectives to promote women's participation in fisheries management, support entrepreneurship, and enhance resource access via public-private partnerships.	No gender analysis or measurable targets; omits women's welfare, nutrition, and gender-based violence.
5. Uganda Climate Change Policy (2015)		Prioritizes gender equality and social inclusion to mitigate vulnerability of women/children to climate impacts; advocates equal participation in adaptation planning.	Lacks mechanisms to address women's access to land/credit; does not address discriminatory norms or gender-based violence.
6. Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy (2003)		Gender-sensitive strategies for food supply, resource access, and entrepreneurship (e.g., user-friendly credit); addresses women's welfare and nutritional needs of vulnerable groups.	No sex-disaggregated data for M&E; does not explicitly tackle discriminatory norms or gender-based violence; lacks specific measurable targets and tracking details.
7. Uganda Food and Nutrition Strategy and Investment Plan		Gender analysis acknowledges women's roles/challenges in agriculture/nutrition; explicit strategies to improve nutrition and social equity.	Lacks explicit mention of women's participation in policy formulation/monitoring; gap in using sex-disaggregated data for monitoring.
8. Uganda Nutrition Action Plan		Prioritizes gender in nutrition for vulnerable groups; emphasizes women's participation and technology access; aligns with gender equality mandates; addresses GBV and discriminatory norms.	Lacks clear objectives for women's rights in agriculture; does not address rural women's needs/participation.
9. Uganda Vision 2040		Strong gender analysis; gender equality and women's rights as explicit objectives; actions to support women's economic empowerment; promotes women's policy participation, use of sex-disaggregated data, and addressing discriminatory norms.	–
10. The Third National Development Plan (NDP III)		Strong gender analysis; gender-specific objectives to reduce inequality and ensure equitable resource access for women, youth, and vulnerable groups; uses sex-disaggregated data and addresses GBV.	No clear indication of how women/marginalized groups directly contributed to policy formulation.
11. National Youth Policy (2004)		Integrates gender by recognizing higher female youth population (53%), addressing gender discrimination, and highlighting disparities in education, training, and health; promotes equality, girl-child education, and non-discrimination in employment.	Limited specific gender-related goals/targets; lacks clarity on participation of different genders in formulation, implementation, and evaluation.
12. National Seed Policy (2018)		Promotes gender equity/fairness; recognizes women's roles/challenges; aims to support women-led farmer groups and gender-friendly technologies; emphasizes adult literacy and seed-business skills to enhance women's agribusiness participation.	Lacks clear gender-specific goals/targets, sex-disaggregated data, and measurable gender indicators.
13. Parish Development Model (2022)		Prioritizes equity/inclusion of women, youth, and PWDs in development action plans; focuses on improving household incomes to ensure women/smallholder farmers benefit; involves both male/female opinion leaders in Parish Development Committees.	Lacks provisions for rural women's policy participation; absence of sex-disaggregated data; weak institutional capacity for gender-sensitive work.

*Policy content score rating: **Low** – no or little mention of “gender” or “women” in the policy document; **On the way** – limited gender analysis; some discussion of gender but lacks any specific gender-related goals or targets; **Advancing** – some gender analysis in the policy document with clear links to agrifood policies, has gender-related goals but lacks specific measurable targets and details of how to track them; and **At goal** – strong gender analysis; has gender-specific goals with specific measurable targets in the results framework and implementation plan; exemplary in its focus on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Source: WEAGov policy scoring matrix.

dimensions to systematically assess how Uganda's agrifood policies engage with gender in practice along three dimensions: Consideration, Inclusion, and Influence. The analysis examines the extent to which

Uganda's policies empower women across these three interdependent dimensions, moving beyond rhetorical commitments in policy content.

TABLE 6 Gender-specific policy targets and goals.

Policy	Gender policy targets – reviewers' score (1–4) *	Expert perceptions of gender in policy formulation (% of sample experts) **				Response rate
		1	2	3	4	
Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy (2003)	4	25	19	50	6	65
The National Land Use Policy (2006)	2	41	29	18	12	33
National Agriculture and Extension Policy (2016)	3	37	30	27	7	59
National Agriculture Policy (2013)	1	39	21	29	11	57
National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy (2017)	2	50	20	10	20	22
Uganda Climate Change Policy (2015)	3	25	29	42	4	47

*Research team score of policy content using a 4-scale: 1 = has no or little mention of gender or women, 2 = has some gender analysis and discussion, but no gender-specific goals, 3 = has gender-specific goals, but no details on the gender targets and how they will be tracked, 4 = has gender-specific goals and targets, with details on how to track them in the monitoring and evaluation framework and implementation plan (is exemplary in its focus on gender equality, results for women, and women's empowerment).

**Expert perception on the extent to which policies include gender specific goals and targets on a 4-point scale: 1 = This policy set very few specific gender targets and goals, 2 = This policy set a few specific gender targets and goals, 3 = This policy set a moderate number of specific gender targets and goals, 4 = This policy set a strong number of gender targets and goals.

Response rate indicates the proportion of experts who provided a response to this question.

Source: WEAGov policy scoring matrix and expert survey data.

4.3.1 Consideration of women in Uganda's agrifood policies

This section assesses how women are considered in Uganda's agrifood policies, focusing on three indicators: (1) gender policy targets, (2) gender-responsive budgeting, and (3) gender policy monitoring.

4.3.1.1 Consideration indicator 1: gender policy targets

Policy content analysis reveals that only three of the 13 assessed policies—Uganda Food and Nutrition Strategy and Investment Plan, Uganda Vision 2040, and NDP III—include clear gender-specific goals, targets, and quantitative indicators within their results frameworks. The National Climate Change Policy also outlines targeted actions for women's empowerment through climate adaptation and technology adoption.

However, most policies show a commitment-achievement gap. For example, the National Agricultural Extension Policy emphasizes reaching women through training but lacks defined outreach targets or dedicated resources for women-led initiatives. Similarly, the Parish Development Model mentions quotas for men, women, and youth but does not specify corresponding actions, benefits, or decision-making roles.

The policies are also inconsistent in addressing gendered barriers to resources. The Uganda National Agriculture Policy recognizes the need for equitable allocation but lacks mechanisms to ensure rural women can access seeds, fertilizer, and credit. While the Agriculture Credit Facility exists, it does not adequately address systemic barriers like collateral requirements. Social support networks (e.g., savings groups) are encouraged but not universally accessible. The National Seed Policy promotes women's participation in seed businesses but does not tackle structural challenges like land ownership or financial inclusion.

Regarding women's welfare and nutrition, policies acknowledge women's roles in household food security but offer few targeted interventions to address their specific challenges in food access, preparation, and handling especially in rural and informal sectors.

Expert perceptions align with these findings (Table 6). For most policies (except the Food and Nutrition Policy), experts gave low

scores (1 or 2), indicating few gender-specific targets. The Food and Nutrition Policy was rated most gender-responsive (56% moderate/strong), while the Fisheries & Aquaculture and Land Use Policies were seen as weakest (50 and 41% lowest ratings, respectively).

4.3.1.2 Consideration indicator 2: gender responsive budgeting

Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is a strategic approach that integrates gender perspectives into budgeting processes to address systemic inequalities in resource distribution and ensure that public spending contributes to gender equity. It recognizes that fiscal policies and budget allocations affect men and women differently due to their distinct socio-economic roles and constraints.

Policy document review shows that while policies acknowledge gender equity, they rarely embed GRB mechanisms. For instance, NDP III outlines gender-focused activities but lacks designated budget lines, making implementation uncertain. The Parish Development Model introduces participation quotas without specifying financial commitments or enforcement mechanisms. The Uganda National Agriculture Policy affirms equitable resource access but omits safeguards to ensure women receive inputs. The Agriculture Credit Facility recognizes women's financial barriers but does not mitigate collateral challenges. The Food and Nutrition Policy mentions funds for capacity-building but does not define women's engagement in budgeting.

These gaps in the policy content analysis align with the perceptions captured in the expert survey. When asked about the adequacy of budgetary support for gender targets in agriculture, only 2% of experts considered budgetary support for gender targets adequate; 92% rated it as weak, limited, or very weak (Figure 2). This consensus underscores that gender commitments are rarely backed by sufficient financial allocations or structured implementation frameworks.

4.3.1.3 Consideration indicator 3: gender policy monitoring

Gender policy monitoring examines whether policies integrate gender indicators, sex-disaggregated data, and track progress toward gender goals. While some policies show progress, e.g., NDP III uses

gender-disaggregated data, significant gaps remain. The Agricultural Extension Policy emphasizes reaching women but lacks indicators to measure impact or ensure accountability. The Climate Change Policy acknowledges women's empowerment but omits gender-specific benchmarks.

Expert perceptions reveal major shortcomings in tracking (Figure 3). Although 54% noted some government tracking of agrifood policy, only 8% reported monitoring of gender targets, and just 2% identified robust gender-inclusive systems. Notably, 35% observed no government tracking at all. Additionally, only 49% of experts reported using sex-disaggregated data in their own monitoring, highlighting a need for strengthened institutional mechanisms and professional practices.

4.3.2 Inclusion of women in Uganda's agrifood policy processes

This section assesses whether citizens, especially women, have meaningful opportunities to participate in agrifood policymaking. Two indicators were examined: (1) opportunities for policy input and (2) opportunities for feedback on implementation.

4.3.2.1 Inclusion indicator 1: opportunities for policy input

Policy content review reveals limited formal inclusion of citizens and women in policy processes. Only 30% of policies reflect engagement with citizens, women, or marginalized groups. Most acknowledge women's roles in agriculture but lack mechanisms to facilitate their active participation in policy formulation.

Expert perceptions strongly align with this finding (Table 7). Across six key policies, most experts recalled very few or limited opportunities for women's input. The National Land Use Policy and the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy were rated lowest, with 44 and 40% of experts, respectively, recalling very few avenues for engagement.

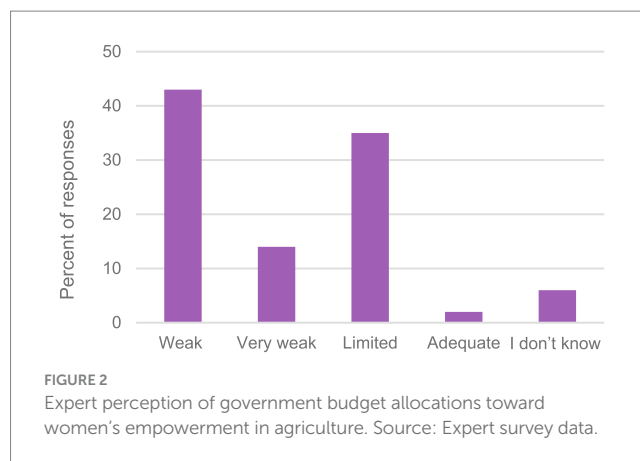
Policy analysis and expert responses highlight a critical gap between policy formulation and meaningful citizen engagement. While most experts indicated that there are mechanisms for citizens, they indicated that very few people know how to navigate them (Figure 4). The existing mechanism therefore fail to reach or involve the broader population, especially rural communities and women. Elite dominance, low awareness, and inadequate facilitation prevent inclusive participation. As one expert observed:

“The opportunities available are mainly for citizens who hold important decision-making positions in the community. Not everyone is consulted.”

Another respondent emphasized the disconnect between formal structures and grassroots realities:

“There are organizations like UNBS that regulate standards, but few people know its function, as such they remain underutilized ... most rural people are not even consulted when it comes to policy formulation.”

Women face compounded barriers, including limited awareness of their role in policymaking, lack of technical knowledge, mobility constraints, care responsibilities, and cultural norms. Although platforms like women parliamentarians' groups and local farmer



associations exist, access for grassroots women remains limited. Programs such as the Women Entrepreneurship Program (WEP) and Uganda Women Empowerment Program (UWEP) provide support, but greater effort is needed to build capacity, raise awareness, and create structured feedback channels that capture women's lived experiences.

4.3.2.2 Inclusion indicator 2: women's feedback

Effective feedback mechanisms are essential to ensure that citizen voices, particularly those of women and marginalized groups are meaningfully integrated into agrifood policy processes. While experts indicated that multiple feedback channels exist such as ministries (e.g., MAAIF), parliamentary agricultural committees, local grievance committees, sub-county meetings, and media platforms, their effectiveness is severely constrained by weak institutional structures, low public awareness, and limited citizen mobilization. Although civil society organizations and media (including radio and social media) have helped amplify some voices, coordination among these actors remains weak, and feedback rarely translates into visible policy adjustments.

Data from the expert survey underscore this systemic weakness (Figure 5). Only 4% of experts indicated that citizens have well-functioning feedback avenues for agricultural policy implementation. A majority (53%) recognized the existence of opportunities but noted that few citizens know how to utilize them, while 43% stated there are no meaningful feedback opportunities at all.

Both the policy review and expert responses highlight a critical disconnect between formal mechanisms and meaningful citizen engagement. While channels exist, they fail to reach or involve the broader population, especially rural communities and women. Elite dominance in consultation processes, widespread lack of awareness, and inadequate facilitation collectively prevent inclusive participation. As experts emphasized, bridging this gap requires deliberate efforts to simplify policy discourse, expand accessible and well-publicized platforms, and create responsive systems where citizen feedback leads to tangible policy change—key steps toward building public trust and participatory agrifood governance.

4.3.3 Women's influence in agrifood policy process

This component aimed to assess whether women have leadership roles within the constellation of organizations that play a role in

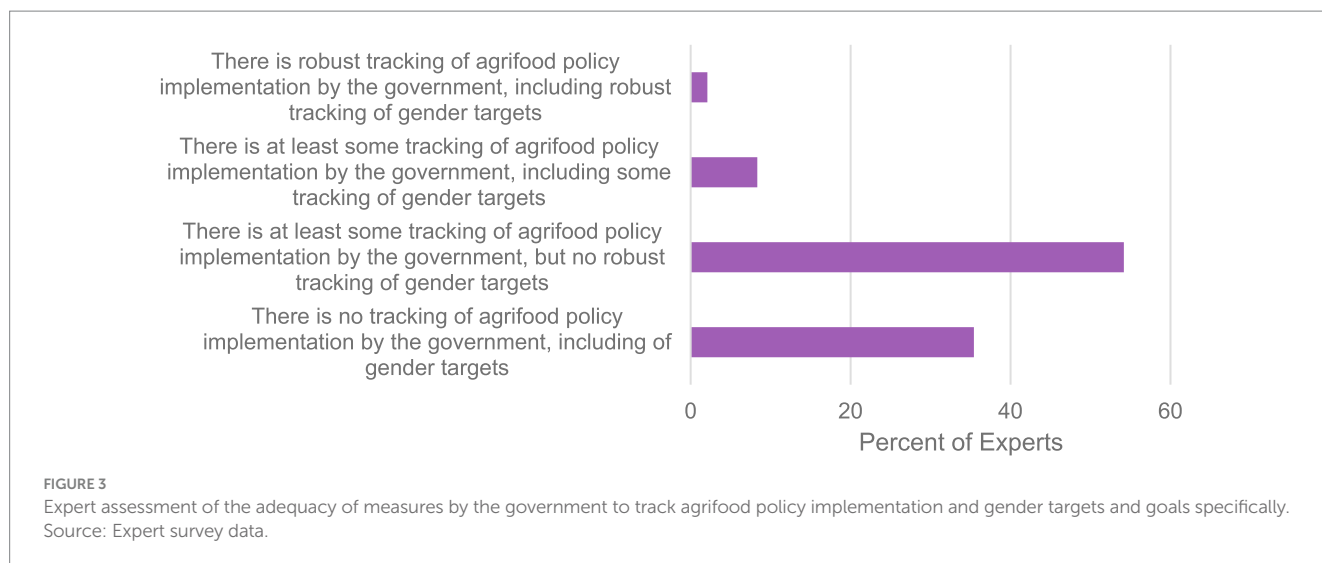


TABLE 7 Expert perceptions of women/women groups input in policy formulation.

Policy	Ranking (% of respondents) *				Response rate
	1	2	3	4	
Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy (2003)	29	26	39	6	65
The National Land Use Policy (2006)	44	38	19	0	33
National Agriculture and Extension Policy (2016)	37	37	20	7	59
National Agriculture Policy (2013)	36	32	21	11	57
National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy (2017)	40	20	30	10	22
Uganda Climate Change Policy (2015)	9	48	30	13	47

*Ranking on a 4-point scale: 1 = I recall very few opportunities for women's input into this policy; 2 = I recall limited opportunities for women's input into this policy; 3 = I recall many opportunities for women's input into this policy, but few women knew how to use those opportunities; and 4 = I recall many opportunities for women's input into this policy, and many women were able to use them.
Source: Expert survey data.

shaping what is perceived as a policy problem, the set of potential solutions, and what is ultimately adopted. Assessment of this measurement was primarily based on data collected from a survey of local agrifood policy experts, since it's not possible to assess this from policy content evaluation.

4.3.3.1 Influence indicator 1: women's policy design leadership

Findings from an expert survey indicate that women's influence in policy design remains weak across most national policies in Uganda. The majority of responses place women's influence in the "very weak" or "weak" categories, with only a few policies showing moderate or strong involvement by women (Figure 6). As one respondent stressed,

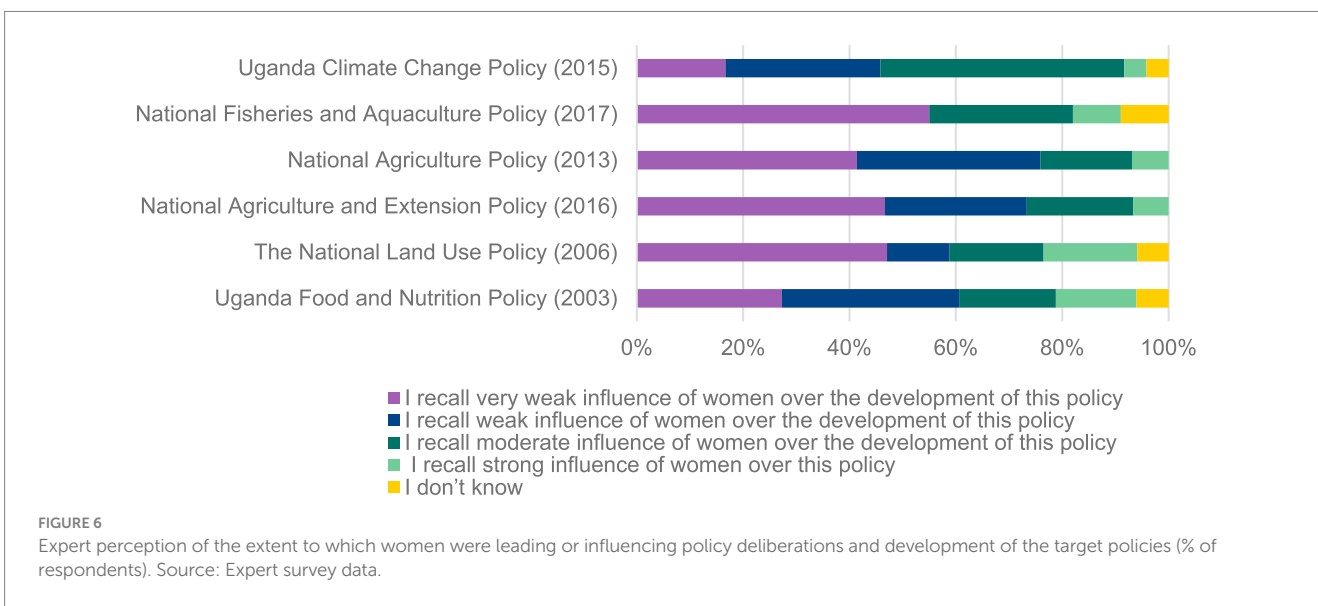
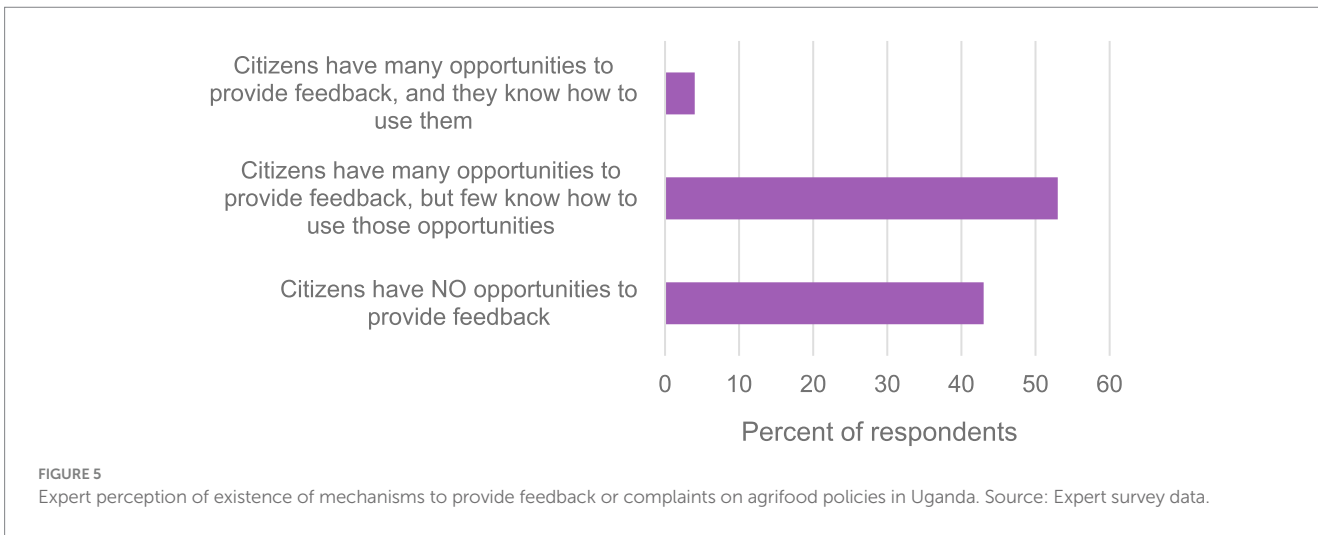
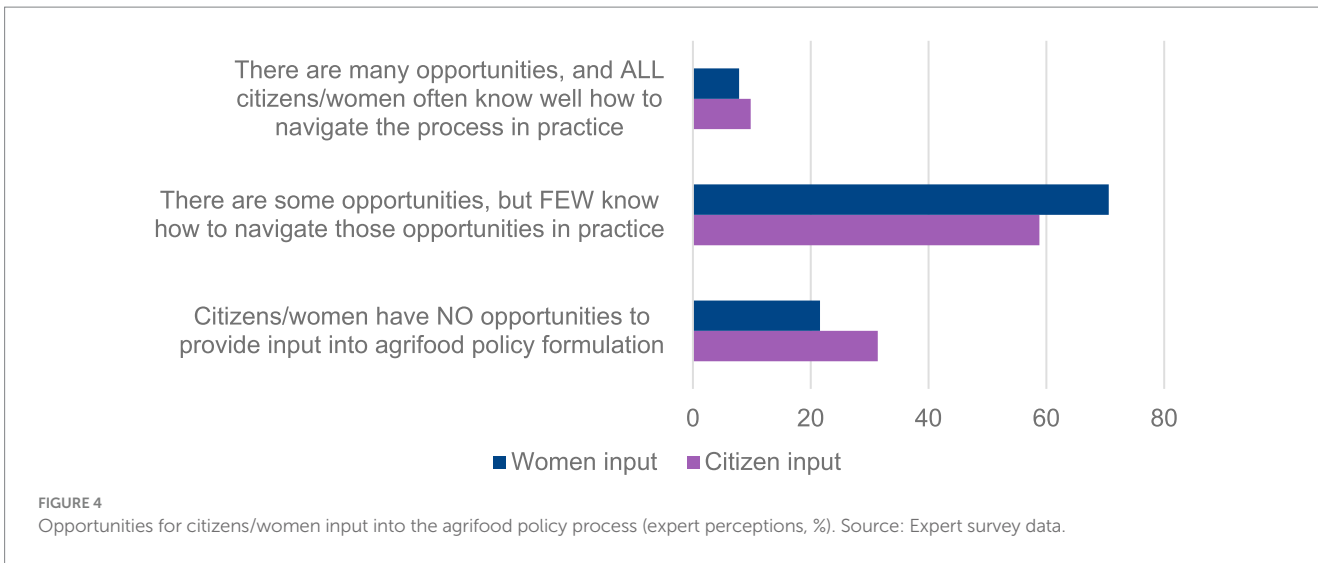
"Issues affecting women should be generated from the grassroots not from conferences."

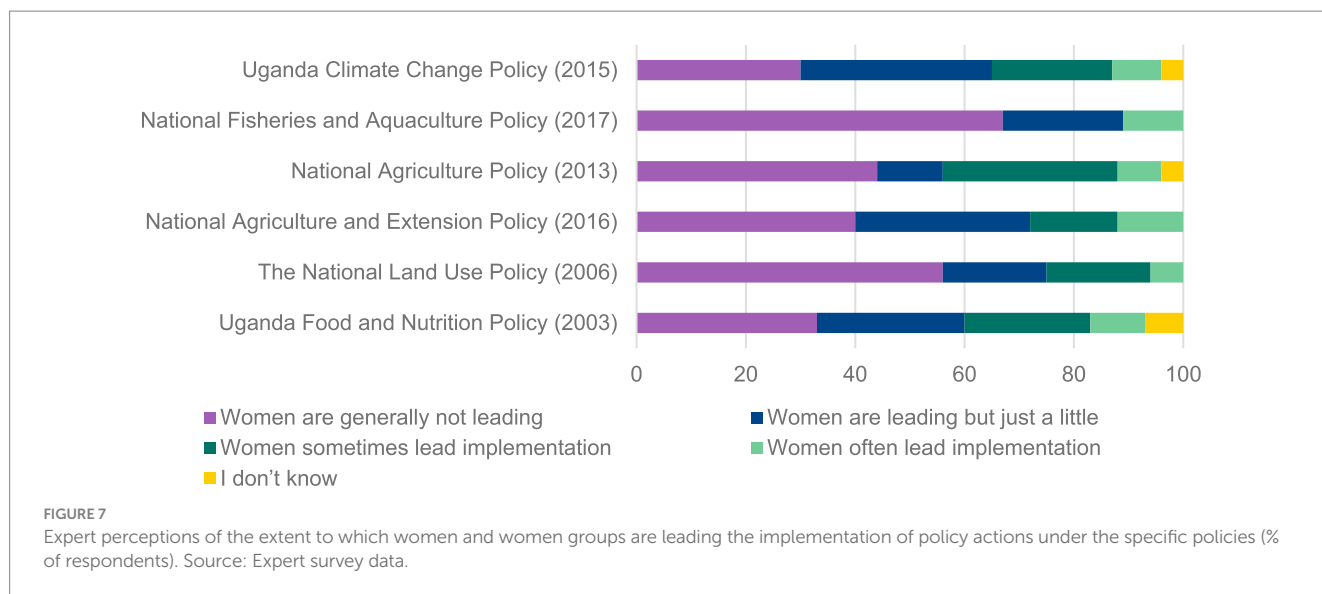
This highlights the exclusion of rural women's voices from leadership in policy formulation. For instance, the National Agriculture and Extension Policy and the National Land Use Policy had the highest proportion of responses indicating "very weak"

influence (47% each), followed closely by the National Agriculture Policy (41%). Similarly, the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy had the highest percentage (55%) of responses indicating "very weak" influence, with no responses suggesting even "weak" influence. In contrast, the Uganda Climate Change Policy stood out as the only policy where a significant proportion (46%) of experts recalled "moderate" influence by women, though strong influence remained rare (4%). The Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy had a relatively balanced distribution, with 18% recalling moderate influence and 15% recognizing strong influence.

4.3.3.2 Influence indicator 2: women's policy implementation leadership

Expert perception and opinion of women leadership in policy implementation also reflects persistent gender disparities in leadership roles (Figure 7). The National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy and the National Land Use Policy had the highest proportion of responses indicating that women are generally not leading implementation (67 and 56%, respectively). Similarly, the National Agriculture Policy and the Uganda Climate Change Policy showed limited female leadership, with most experts placing them in the lowest two categories of leadership involvement.





4.3.3.3 Influence indicator 3: women's policy evaluation and advocacy leadership

When it comes to policy monitoring and evaluation, women's roles remain similarly constrained. The National Land Use Policy and the National Agriculture Policy had the highest proportion of responses (55 and 50%, respectively) indicating that women are generally not leading policy monitoring and review. Other policies, such as the Uganda Climate Change Policy and the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy also had low ratings for women's leadership in evaluation processes (Figure 8). Rating of women leadership for policies such as the National Agriculture and Extension Policy and the Uganda Food and Nutrition Policy showed slightly better engagement, with some experts acknowledging that women occasionally take on leadership roles in implementation (16 and 23%, respectively) and in monitoring and evaluation (24 and 30%, respectively). However, strong leadership by women—where they “often” take the lead—remains rare across all policies.

Although expert perceptions consistently indicated weak women's leadership across policies, isolated cases were highlighted where individual champions and organized advocacy created openings for women's influence. These cases demonstrate that targeted leadership can create pathways for inclusion, yet they also reveal the limits of relying on individual advocacy within structurally elite-driven processes. For example, in the Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy, women fishing communities—though few—were well-organized and actively engaged, ensuring some gender-specific challenges were noted. Similarly, the Agricultural Extension Policy was championed by a female Director at MAAIF, and women-led organizations helped ensure the policy addressed female farmers' needs. In the Land Use Policy, Ms. Naome Kabanda spearheaded efforts to integrate women's land rights perspectives from village to national levels. The Food and Nutrition Policy was likewise shaped by women activists and CSOs like the Food Rights Alliance.

However, these advocacy gains often failed to translate into strong, measurable gender provisions in the final policy texts as evidenced by the low gender-responsiveness scores of several of these same policies (e.g., National Agriculture Policy, Land Use Policy, National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy). This disconnect underscores a systemic

pattern: even where women's voices entered the process, elite-dominated drafting and negotiation phases often diluted or marginalized gender-specific inputs. As one expert noted,

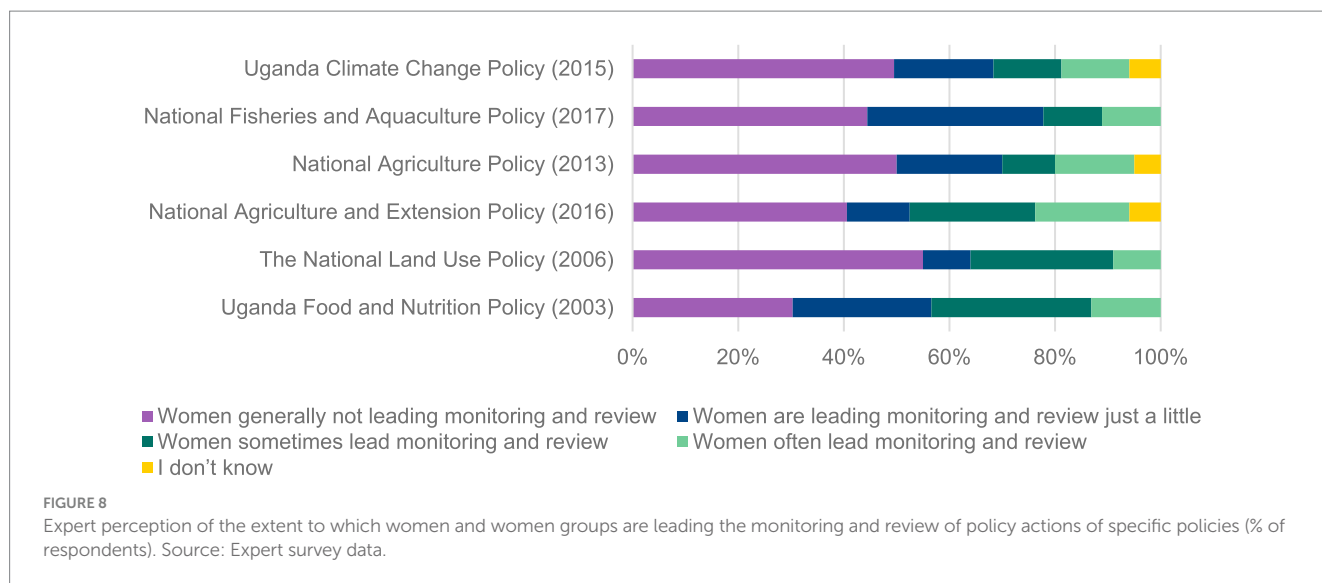
“If we are talking of real women views from the rural areas they are not thought of and their views are never got for any policy. It's always a few women in civil societies thinking on behalf of the women which doesn't make sense.”

Thus, while these pockets of leadership show that inclusive engagement is possible, they remain exceptions in a landscape where policy formulation remains predominantly elite-driven and gender-blind. Scaling up women's influence will require moving beyond reliance on individual champions to institutionalizing inclusive processes that systematically embed women's participation and leadership across all stages of policymaking.

4.4 Food safety provisions and gender gap

While all reviewed policies include some references to food safety, these references are fragmented, and inconsistently applied across the food chain, from production and storage to handling, transportation, marketing, and consumption. This disjointed treatment prevents a coordinated, holistic approach to food safety governance. For instance, the Uganda Food and Nutrition Strategy emphasizes awareness-raising and street-food risks, the National Agriculture Extension Policy touches on post-harvest safety, the National Land Use Policy addresses it indirectly through agrochemical management, and the Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy includes fish safety as a standalone objective. These scattered and often superficial mentions create policy silos, complicating integrated and inclusive planning and implementation.

More critically, this fragmentation is mirrored by a systematic omission of gender-responsive measures. The policies fail to connect food safety provisions to the gendered realities of the food system. For example, the Food and Nutrition Strategy links nutrition to food safety but does not tailor interventions for women producers, vendors, or handlers, who often lack access to technology, finance, and



infrastructure. The National Agriculture Extension Policy and Land Use Policy ignore women's roles in informal markets where they dominate. The Nutrition Action Plan recognizes food safety as a nutrition determinant but does not specify how gender equality will be operationalized. Even the Fisheries Policy, vital to women's livelihoods, overlooks women-specific resource and training needs. This dual failure, vague, disjointed food safety references combined with gender blindness, undermines both policy coherence and equity.

The disconnect between salience and policy focus is starkly illustrated by expert survey findings. Food safety was identified as the top agri-food priority issue in the past 14 months prior to the study (49% of experts), yet experts concurrently noted that current policy frameworks remain both fragmented in scope and silent on gender, failing to address the roles, risks, and resource constraints of rural women who are central to food safety outcomes. This undermines coordinated action and perpetuates the "policy silence" identified earlier, missing a critical opportunity to build effective, equitable, and holistic food safety systems.

5 Discussion

Applying the Women's Empowerment in Agrifood Governance (WEAGov) framework, this study diagnoses systemic gaps in Uganda's agrifood policy framework with specific attention to food safety integration. As a governance-level diagnostic, the analysis reveals interconnected failures that sustain a significant disconnect between policy rhetoric and actionable design. Two principal dynamics emerge: a persistent "action gap" where gender commitments remain aspirational rather than operational (Ampaire et al., 2017; Huyer, 2016), and a profound "policy silence" on the gendered dimensions of food safety, despite its high salience. These findings, while context-specific, offer analytically generalizable insights into the architecture of policy failure in similar fragmented governance contexts.

The WEAGov framework posits that empowerment in governance requires progress across three reinforcing dimensions: consideration in content, inclusion in process, and influence in leadership. Our findings reveal that in Uganda, weaknesses in each dimension are mutually reinforcing, creating a cycle of disempowerment that explains the

persistence of the "action gap." This cycle begins with weak consideration characterized by generic gender objectives and a near-total absence of gender-responsive budgeting undermines meaningful inclusion. When policies lack specific targets and dedicated resources, consultations with women risk becoming symbolic exercises, as their input cannot be linked to accountable design features (Howland et al., 2021). This dynamic is reflected in our data, where only 30% of policies showed evidence of engagement, and experts perceived consultation as limited. In turn, this tokenistic inclusion stifles transformative influence. Without formal mechanisms to translate participation into authority, women's leadership in policy design, implementation, and evaluation remains weak, as consistently reported by experts across all surveyed policies. This lack of influence at decision-making tables ensures that subsequent policy revisions are unlikely to strengthen gender targets or budgets, thus perpetuating the cycle.

The consistent framing of gender as a standalone "women's issue" within sectoral policies, rather than as a cross-cutting governance imperative, has limited its integration. This has contributed to weak institutional ownership beyond gender focal points and failed to engage male allies effectively (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Moving from tokenistic mentions to transformative integration requires institutionalizing gender analysis and accountability throughout the policy cycle. This includes embedding gender indicators and sex-disaggregated data in monitoring systems and creating performance incentives for agencies to meet gender targets. As Adam et al. (2024) argue, such gender-transformative approaches are not merely about equity but are strategic investments that enhance overall food system outcomes, including dietary quality, safety, and climate resilience.

A striking finding with direct policy implications is what we term the salience-silence paradox. Food safety was identified by experts as the most prominent agrifood issue in Uganda (49%), indicating high political and institutional salience. Paradoxically, this salience exists alongside a near-complete policy silence on its gendered dimensions. While older policies may understandably lack integrated food safety provisions, the silence on gender persists even in policies that mention food safety. Most policies omit gender-responsive measures, failing to address the distinct roles, risks, and resource constraints of women who dominate food handling, informal trade, and small-scale

processing (Garson et al., 2022; Grace et al., 2015). This disconnect reveals a critical governance blind spot: a high-priority, technical issue is being addressed in isolation from the social relations that determine its outcomes. As gender and food systems scholars note, treating food safety as a gender-neutral technical challenge overlooks how socially constructed roles and power dynamics shape risk exposure and compliance capacity (Milovanova et al., 2024; Njuki et al., 2021). This paradox is particularly consequential within the current policy window. The high salience of food safety ensures political attention and resources for the new National Food Safety Policy, but if the drafting process fails to recognize and address the gendered dimensions of the issue, it risks designing interventions that are technically sound yet socially exclusionary. Therefore, the urgent task is not merely to add food safety to the policy agenda, but to ensure it is added in a gender-responsive form from the outset, breaking the historical pattern of silence and designing interventions that respond to gendered realities.

Taken together, these insights yield several novel contributions to the literature on gender and agrifood governance. First, this study provides original, systematic evidence from Uganda quantifying the precise nature of the “action gap” in national agrifood policies, detailing the disconnect between gender rhetoric and actionable design elements like budgets and targets. Second, it introduces a critical contextual and thematic nuance by applying a gender empowerment lens specifically to food safety, a high-priority governance issue often analyzed in isolation from gender. The identification of the salience-silence paradox reveals a specific, actionable site for intervention previously under-identified in the literature. Third, by employing the WEAGov framework holistically, the study offers a process-oriented diagnostic of the entire policy cycle. This reveals that governance weaknesses are systemic and mutually reinforcing: a lack of *consideration* in design precludes meaningful *inclusion* in implementation, which in turn stifles transformative *influence*. This integrated view of empowerment dimensions as a cyclical system provides a more sophisticated framework for diagnosing and intervening in agrifood governance in comparable low- and middle-income contexts.

6 Conclusion and policy recommendations

This governance diagnostic of Uganda’s agrifood policy framework reveals systemic gaps that are analytically generalizable to similar policy environments. The analysis confirms a foundational recognition of gender issues within policy documents, yet it identifies two critical, interlocking failures: first, a persistent “action gap” between rhetorical gender commitments and actionable, accountable policy design; and second, a profound “policy silence” on the intersection of gender and the high-salience issue of food safety. These gaps are sustained by institutional and procedural flaws in consultation, budgeting, and thematic integration.

These findings arrive at a critical policy window as Uganda develops its first comprehensive National Food Safety Policy. There exists a strategic opportunity to design a policy that is both effective and equitable from the outset, as well as other policy processes within the agrifood systems. The following recommendations, structured around the three core dimensions of empowerment in the WEAGov framework—Consideration, Inclusion, and Influence—provide a

targeted blueprint for systemic reform. They are designed not only to address the general governance failures identified but to offer a specific, actionable roadmap for ensuring new policies or policy review processes ensure gender-responsive governance:

A Recommendations for “Consideration”: Integrating Gender into Policy Content

- 1 Mandate gender-responsive design in all agrifood policies and sectoral plans, integrating specific, measurable, and time-bound gender equality objectives and targets. This should include dedicated gender-responsive budgeting, with transparent, tracked financial allocations explicitly linked to closing gender gaps.
- 2 Mandate and resource the routine collection, analysis, and public reporting of sex- and gender-disaggregated data across the food system. This data is essential for diagnosing gendered challenges, tracking track progress and enforcing responsibility.
- 3 Directly address the distinct roles, risks, and resources of women across the food chain. For the National Food Safety Policy this is the core operational principle. Interventions must be co-designed with women to ensure they are practical and accessible. This includes tailored training and extension services, appropriate technology and infrastructure and inclusive standards and financing to help women invest in compliance.

B Recommendations for “Inclusion”: Creating Equitable Policy Processes

- 1 Establish formal, well-resourced and mandatory mechanisms for women’s meaningful participation and leadership across all stages of the policy cycle. This means ensuring women’s representatives have formal seats in the technical working groups and consultations shaping the policy.
- 2 Create robust, well-publicized channels for citizens, especially women, to report on policy implementation. This includes establishing clear procedures for vendors or producers to report biased enforcement, impractical standards, or a lack of support services. This feedback loop is essential for making the policy adaptive and responsive, building trust and compliance from the ground up.

C Recommendations for “Influence”: Fostering Women’s Leadership and Agency

- 1 Implement deliberate measures to increase women’s representation in the agencies and committees governing food safety. For example, ensuring gender parity or significant representation on the board of the proposed Agriculture and Food Safety Agency (AFSA), within inspectorates, and in standard-setting bodies.
- 2 Institutionalize the role of women’s cooperatives and CSOs in the independent monitoring of food safety policy. This includes formally recognizing and capacitating these groups to conduct community-level compliance checks, gather data on implementation gaps, and advocate for accountable enforcement. This transforms women from passive subjects of regulation into active guardians of food safety within their communities.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

MK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AA: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. IM: Software, Validation, Writing – review & editing. LO: Formal analysis, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. CA: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. MO: Validation, Writing – review & editing. DM: Validation, Writing – review & editing. PM: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. MA: Conceptualization, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

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