



G20 SOUTH AFRICA 2025

Gender Inequality and Technical Measures: Evidence from G20 Agri-Food Export Practices

2025

Dr Fatima Olanike Kareem, Senior Scientist, Trade and Development Policy Research Network (Nigeria)

Prof Dr Christine Wieck, Head, Department of Agricultural and Food Policy, University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart (Germany)

Dr Olayinka Idowu Kareem, Senior Researcher, Agricultural and Food Policy, University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart (Germany)



04

Solidarity for the Achievement of the SDGs



Abstract

Gender inequality occurs not only in relation to inclusivity and export market access capability, but also in the intensity and extensiveness of agri-food exports in developing countries, particularly in Africa. Women are disproportionately affected by technical measures – mainly food safety measures – in the G20. Economic factors, such as inadequate access to finance, lack of quality infrastructure and inadequate technology adoption, and socio-cultural and religious factors, such as inadequate education and training, limited access to land, and restrictions on inheritance and movement, have contributed to women's inadequate compliance with technical measures in export markets. This affects their access to the export market. These challenges are adversely impacting the extent to which women contribute to sustainable households and national economic development.

This policy brief examines the gender inequality effects in developing countries, particularly in Africa, of the G20 technical measures in agri-food export. To address the challenges of gender inequality in the context of the G20 technical measures and to reduce gender inequalities in market access in the agri-food sector, we propose the following for Africa and other developing countries: mainstream gender-equality clauses into all the G20 development cooperation documentation; reduce inequality in access to land, finance, inheritance, quality infrastructure and technology; engage in due diligence in terms of rights to land and productive resources; channel development assistance to direct beneficiaries; adopt an inclusive approach to women's empowerment; integrate women into export markets through the G20's soft power in trade arrangements; and support the establishment in the G20 of user- friendly digitalised market access conditions information hubs.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Technical Measures, Sustainable Development, G20, Developing Countries, Food Production

Diagnosis

A large proportion of the labour force in the agri-food systems in developing countries, especially in Africa, is comprised of women. These women contribute to the bulk of agri-food exports in developing countries destined for developed countries' markets,¹ particularly to the G20 members. G20 markets are targeted owing to the higher prices and increased and/or better absorptive capacity. This highlights the importance of G20 markets to Africa and other developing countries' agri-food exports and the corresponding impact on the attainment of their Sustainable Development Goals 1,2,3,4,5 and 8.² However, many of these agri-food exports are subjected to market access conditions such as technical measures, eg, sanitary and phytosanitary measures (SPS) and technical barriers to trade (TBT). The application of these food safety measures³ – SPS and TBT – has proliferated in recent years in export markets.⁴ This, together with the global crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, environmental degradation, the war in Ukraine, and supply disruptions in the Red Sea and geoeconomics, contributes to the worsening of food security, in particular in less affluent countries.

Widespread technical measures during the COVID-19 pandemic were due to extensive food safety measures, especially regarding food contamination and mycotoxins. Moreover, the adaptation of green and sustainability strategic policies in some G20 countries, demands improved quality and safe agri-food imports.

¹ United Nations Trade and Development. "Women in Trade: Female Labour Remains Undervalued in Global Exports". UNCTAD Publications, Geneva, March 7th, 2025. [Women in trade: Female labour remains undervalued in global exports | UN Trade and Development \(UNCTAD\)](#)

² The SDGs are no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality and decent work and economic growth, respectively.

³ The technical measures and food safety measures are used interchangeably in this policy brief. Examples of food safety measures are maximum allowable limits of mycotoxins, pesticides of lead in food products; specification on food contact materials; packaging and labelling requirements; among others.

⁴ OECD-WTO-UNCTAD. "Reports on G20 Trade and Investment Measures (October 22 to May 2023)". World Trade Organisation Publication, Geneva, Switzerland, July 2023. [f2cf5b34-en.pdf](#)

Besides, the challenges from climate change, environmental degradation and the corresponding food losses have impacted the quality of agri-food exports from developing countries. This has deepened the inability of agri-food exporters, particularly women, to comply with the technical regulations because it requires huge finance and investment for quality upgrades. Moreover, the recent implementation of biodiversity, emission reduction policies and the change in taste and preference for organic agri-food have led to the preponderance of technical measures in most G20 countries. This has put enormous pressure on producers and exporters in developing countries and Africa in particular to comply, which entails additional investments in facilities upgrading and scaling up the quality of agri-food exports.

To this end, compliance could enhance producers' income, create wealth and employment and reduce poverty and inequality as well as increase the countries' foreign exchange earnings. Nevertheless, there are enormous costs associated with compliance, which can disproportionately inhibit women agri-food producers and exporters, thereby impeding their export market access, ability to earn more income, generate employment and reduce poverty. Evidence shows that trade is less favourable for women in developing countries⁵ due to the entrenched gender inequality in access to relevant market intelligence, food quality and safety infrastructure, training, finance, extension services, land and so forth. Besides, many women have inadequate technical know-how to comply with technical measures, are deficient in technology adoption for improved outputs and have weak resilience to climate change.⁶ Due to the time poverty from household engagement and the limitations to export market intelligence gathering due to movement constraints,

⁵ Kareem, Fatima O. and Olayinka I. Kareem. "Employment Responses to EU Food Safety Regulations: A Gendered Perspective." *The European Journal of Development Research* 33.6 (2021): 1899-1929.

⁶ Food and Agriculture Organisation. *The Status of Women in Agrifood Systems*. Rome, 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.4060/cc5343en>

women have less food safety-compliant-capacity knowledge frontiers. This impairs their market access compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors such as local traditions in some countries that forbid women from inheritance, land ownership, higher education and 'agri-preneurship' adversely impact and create inequality in compliance with technical measures and export earnings. Some religious practices restrict women's entrepreneurship, and interactions with the larger society, which immensely affects their acquaintance with prevailing technical measures, acquisition and adaptation to quality-enhancing infrastructure and ability to comply.

This policy brief examines the gender inequality effects in developing countries, particularly in Africa, of the G20 technical measures related to agri-food export. This policy brief is relevant to the current G20 South African presidency's collective solution approach to global economic challenges. Besides, it built on the G20 T20 Italian presidency policy briefs on 'Social Cohesion and Future of Welfare Systems'.

Recommendations

Compliance with technical measures in the G20 is the *sine qua non* for agri-food export market access for developing countries. To improve the market access of women's agri-food exporters, which could reduce gender inequality, we propose the following policy options.

Reduce gender inequality in all spheres

The G20 should seek the reform of domestic laws and norms in developing countries which entrench gender inequality, as a pre-condition for further

inequality development cooperation, particularly in Africa, in line with goals 16 and 17 of the African Agenda 2063.⁷ The reform should entail the reduction of gender in the establishment and leadership of entrepreneurship and access to education, land, finance, and so on, which conform to SDGs 4, 5 and 10.

Incorporation of deeper gender-equality clauses into all development cooperation

The G20 should further incorporate extensive and deeper provisions for gender equality and women's empowerment in its development cooperation and economic arrangements or agreements with developing countries. While the most recent trade agreements allow for these provisions, they are largely missing in many of the earlier agreements negotiated with African countries.

Engage in due diligence

There is a need for developing countries to demonstrate seriousness and action regarding women's empowerment and gender equality. Besides, the G20 should engage in due diligence in the areas of rights to land, higher education, decent work, inheritance and productive resources before initiating development cooperation and/or ratifying trade agreements. This would ensure a significant overhaul in development assistance programmes to be more women- sensitive and gender-balanced.

Channel development assistance to direct beneficiaries, in particular women

The G20 should ensure that a high proportion of market access support and quality infrastructure technical assistance to developing countries consider women's constraints sensitively.

⁷ African Union Agenda 2063: The Goals. <https://www.nepad.org/agenda2063/goals#:~:text=Achievements-,GOAL%201,GOAL%2019>

Evidence suggests that much agri-food export development assistance is channelled to institutional training at the national and regional levels with fewer direct exporters targeted, especially women, while some donors engaged producers.^{8,9} Thus, a change in the development assistance approach to target direct beneficiaries is an important policy practice for the G20 to consider.

Participatory approach to women's empowerment

Development assistance should take practical approaches to empowering women and increasing their export market intelligence with quality export technical know-how. This could entail deliberately including women in decision-making when implementing development assistance to ensure their cooperation and buy-in.

Utilisation of moral suasion and soft power to integrate women into export markets

After more than 50 years of reform, many developing countries, especially those from Africa, still engage in discriminatory practices regarding land rights, access to productive resources and mobility constraints, which are proportionally tilted against women. Using moral suasion and 'soft power', the G20 can overhaul existing practices. In addition, as many developing countries have guiding policies on promoting gender equality, we advocate a wholehearted commitment to the implementation of these policies to break the 'glass ceiling' that presently prevents women from accessing export markets.

⁸ UNCTAD-UNDP. Trade Capacity Development for Africa: Compendium of Papers. UNCTAD/DITC/TNCD/2005/1. United Nations Publication, New York and Geneva, 2005.

⁹ Standards and Trade Development Facility, 2018. Annual Report 2018. www.standardsfacility.org

Mainstreaming gender equality into trade policies

Many economic activities in the agri-food system, particularly in the supply and value chains, are not gender friendly because of inadequate gender mainstreaming. Women are being discriminated against and sometimes excluded in activities such as transportation (cold chain, haulage), warehousing and related activities. Domestic policy- and decision-makers need to note that sometimes trade policies are not gender-neutral¹⁰ and this should be reflected in their policy strategic actions.

Halt discriminatory gender practices through punitive laws

Many women are prevented from integrating into the export markets through illicit and dangerous acts involving *inter alia*, sexual harassment and victimisation by officers. Moreover, they are susceptible to illegal and unrecorded tariff and non-tariff duties due to their non-adherence to technical regulations and other border measures. Each country must halt these discriminatory practices through punitive laws and regulations to better safeguard women, while adequately integrating them into the global value chains.

Establishment of user-friendly digitalized information hubs on technical measures

Developing countries should establish regularly updated digital information hubs related to export markets and market access conditions that will provide stakeholders with real-time market intelligence. This will enhance awareness and compliance, particularly for women who are movement-constrained, and thereby improve market access and export intensity.

¹⁰ There is a disproportionate effect of trade policies on gender – see <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41287-020-00330-8>.

The hubs would provide access to information for women who have significant time poverty to participate in technical training. Also, specific technical measures demystifying mobile apps targeting women should be developed with G20 support.

T20 South Africa Convenors



associated with



The Institute for Global Dialogue
(IGD)



The South African Institute of
International Affairs (SAIIA)



The Institute for Pan-African
Thought and Conversation
(IPATC)

© T20 South Africa and the original authors

This publication is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).



This license enables reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.

To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

For publication enquiries, please contact t20@t20southafrica.org

Website: www.t20southafrica.org