



MASCULINITIES AND FOOD SYSTEMS: SUMMARY SCOPING REVIEW REPORT

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Purpose and Scope

This scoping review, produced by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), provides the first systematic interdisciplinary synthesis of evidence on the intersections of masculinities and food systems. It draws on peer-reviewed English-language studies published between 2005 and 2025, spanning multiple fields. The review was conducted following the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework and PRISMA-ScR guidelines, covering three food system domains: food supply chains, food environments, and consumer behavior.

The review addresses a critical gap: while gender has become central to food systems policy and programming, the influence of masculinities remains poorly integrated and analyzed. This gap matters because masculine norms organize who controls land, technology, labor markets, and institutional authority within food systems, and powerfully shape dietary behavior, responses to climate shocks, and barriers to gender-transformative change. Achieving SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) requires engaging masculinities, not just men, analytically, programmatically, and politically. To gauge how these literature-based findings resonate with real-world practice, the review is complemented by semi-structured interviews with 12 carefully selected experts working across food systems, agriculture, and gender, including researchers, donors, program implementers, policy actors, and advocates from across the world. Findings from these interviews are woven throughout this summary as complementary emerging findings, clearly distinguished from the literature-based evidence.

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Theoretical Frameworks

The review identifies six main frameworks that scholars have brought to the masculinity-food systems intersection. Hegemonic masculinity remains the dominant lens, applied to farmer identity, crop science institutions, meat consumption, and agrifood governance. It defines the culturally exalted form of masculine practice that legitimates patriarchal power at any given historical moment. Social constructionist and performative frameworks treat masculinity as something men actively perform and negotiate in specific contexts, rather than passively inheriting, and have been deployed productively in studies of dietary behavior, farming identity, and the domestic kitchen. Feminist political ecology identifies three interlocking structures that disadvantage women in agrarian systems: exclusionary land tenure, masculinized extension services, and male-dominated agricultural decision-making. Critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM) and cultural-critical approaches theorize how specific foods, above all meat, are culturally constructed as symbols of male power through intertwined systems of patriarchy and speciesism. Intersectional and postcolonial frameworks reveal that masculine ideals are substantially reshaped by race, class, colonialism, and structural poverty, generating fractured rather than stable masculinities. Finally, the concept of dialogic masculinity, developed specifically for food systems, shows that farmers engaged in sustainable agriculture represent more flexible and gender-equitable masculine identities than those on conventional farms, providing a direct conceptual bridge between masculinity theory and food systems transformation.

How Food Systems Shape Masculinities

A central finding of the review is that food systems do not merely reflect pre-existing masculine identities; they actively produce and reproduce them through some mechanisms



Symbolic Economy of Food and Masculine Identity

Food systems assign gendered value to foods through commodity histories, marketing, and culinary narratives. Meat is elevated as powerful and associated with bodily strength; beer functions as a vehicle for masculine identity performance across diverse cultural settings; plant-based diets are coded as morally suspicious or insufficiently masculine. Agrarian systems across the Global South designate specific crops as exclusively male or female, with profound consequences for income, prestige, and resource access. In Igbo society, yam cultivation is a paradigmatic masculine institution, institutionally protected by restriction of women to lower-value crops. These codings are structural features of food systems, not individual interpretations.



Agricultural Labor and Occupational Identity

Farming has functioned in many contexts as a masculinity-making institution, structuring identity around physical endurance, technical mastery, and intergenerational provision. In cross-regional studies across seven countries, men are assigned primary responsibility for mechanized, high-status tasks. The gendering of agricultural labor in many indigenous contexts extends to cosmological dimensions. For example, among the Shuar of Ecuador and the Canela of Brazil, gendered plant domains are embedded in ritual systems that assign distinct moral and spiritual authority to men and women as cultivators. In fisheries, toughness, sexual prowess, and resistance to health-seeking are simultaneously the norms that organize fishermen's masculine identity and the primary drivers of their disproportionate HIV vulnerability.



Mechanization, Commercialization, and the Reproduction of Advantage

As agriculture commercializes, masculine advantage is consistently deepened rather than eroded. Men gain first access to productive tools and the income tied to technological competence. In Nigerian rice farming, Kenyan dairy, and Philippine sugarcane, commercial production reinforces masculine control through targeted training, credit, and infrastructure support. In fisheries, commercialization converts existing masculine authority over productive resources into consequential power over food access: the fish-for-sex exchange in African fisheries is not a cultural tradition but an economically produced institution built on masculine monopoly over the highest-value activity in the chain.



Institutional Reproduction

Food system institutions, including cooperatives, extension systems, producer associations, and policy bodies, reproduce masculine authority through credentialing, leadership selection, and knowledge targeting. In Norway, the “tractor gene” metaphor captures how assumptions about technical aptitude operate through inheritance decisions. Agribusiness marketing actively constructs masculine food system authority: the “businessman-farmer” ideal deskills smallholders while repositioning agricultural masculinity around capital and commerce. Beer advertising in sport constructs a “crisis/resolution” narrative in which masculine identity is threatened and resolved through homosocial consumption, positioning food system actors as institutional producers of masculine norms at scale.

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How Masculinities Influence Food Systems

Masculinities also influence food systems in a variety of important ways.



Control of Land, Resources, and Decision-Making

Across agrarian contexts, masculine norms determine who holds land, assets, and decision-making authority. Land inheritance is treated as a masculine prerogative whether enforced through customary law or identity-based expectations. The pattern extends to all high-value productive resources: the greater the economic significance, the more firmly a resource is coded as male. A Kenyan dairy study illustrates the dynamic clearly: women control small-scale informal milk sales because the proceeds are too modest. Add the missing word for masculine appropriation, but once milk enters formal markets, masculine entitlement activates. In fisheries, men’s ownership of boats and control of catch creates a structural monopoly that cascades throughout the value chain. A Kenyan intervention that supported women to own and operate fishing boats demonstrated that this masculine control, not women’s individual choices, drives fish-for-sex dependence: boat ownership transferred to women reduced transactional sex and improved food security within six months.



Household Provisioning and Food Security

Masculine breadwinner identity underpins men’s control over food purchasing and household resource allocation, regardless of nutritional expertise. In Rwanda, men’s control over animal-source food purchasing shapes household nutrition outcomes even when their nutritional knowledge is limited. Masculine authority over provisioning can undermine the very security it is supposed to ensure. In Tanzania, for instance, men’s diversion of crop income toward alcohol intensified household food insecurity. When provisioning fails due to climate shocks or income loss, men often respond with shame and withdrawal rather than adaptive coping, resisting food aid or cooperative food security measures in ways that undermine program effectiveness. In Benin, men experiencing food insecurity contemplated family abandonment rather than borrow informally, because borrowing threatened masculine standing.



The Meat-Masculinity Nexus

The symbolic association between meat and masculine identity is the most robust and cross-culturally consistent finding in the literature. Meat consumption functions as an identity performance: when masculine identity is threatened, men increase meat consumption, pay a premium for it, and choose red meat specifically as an identity-stabilizing act. Plant-based eating is coded as gender-deviant, triggering social policing, ridicule, and hostile sexism. Children as young as four implicitly associate meat with male faces and vegetables with female faces; the meat-masculinity link strengthens through adulthood to peak between ages 51 and 65. Men who endorse traditional masculine identities avoid reading nutrition labels or tracking calories as feminized practices. Critically, information-based dietary change approaches can backfire. For instance, among men who experience dietary information as an identity threat, nutritional messaging can intensify meat consumption rather than reduce it.



Cross-Cultural Variation

While the structural mechanism of food-as-identity-performance appears broadly consistent, its content varies. In Israel, hummus expertise confers masculine cultural capital. In Japan, restraint from sweetness rather than meat-eating has historically been the marker. In Norway, meat-centered meals performed by men living alone assert self-sufficiency. Among Punjabi Sikh immigrant men in Canada, food identity intersects with religion, ethnicity, and intergenerational duty. These variations resist universalizing claims and underscore the need for context-sensitive intervention design.



Occupational Vulnerability

Masculine norms shape food system working conditions by embedding within men themselves expectations of risk-taking, endurance, and provider-duty that render dangerous labor a condition for masculine adequacy rather than an external imposition. In Irish farming, the masculine imperative to endure hardship without complaint transforms occupational health risks, social isolation, and chronic overwork into markers of authentic masculine identity. In Ghanaian fishing communities, 59% of fishers consume alcohol regularly, with masculine peer norms the primary structural driver. The intersection of masculine identity disruption, alcohol, and food system precarity is particularly acute in fisheries, where the masculine occupational culture generates permission structures for risk, multiple sexual partnerships, and HIV vulnerability.

Climate Shocks, Ecological Change, and Masculine Identities

In contexts where men's identity is bound to the role of farmer-provider, climate shocks that reduce agricultural output simultaneously undermine the social and psychological foundations of manhood. The consequences cascade: men experience productive failure as masculine failure, responding with shame, withdrawal, and resistance to coping strategies coded as feminine; they resist adopting new farming practices partly as an identity defense; and their psychological distress carries downstream consequences for household food security and gender-based violence risk.

Fisheries provide the most extensively documented case: as fish stocks declined in Lake Victoria, fishermen who could no longer prove masculine adequacy through catch success displaced that performance onto conspicuous consumption and transactional sexual relationships, while women's ability to negotiate condom use and exit declined. Econometric evidence confirms that fish scarcity causally increases the incidence of fish-for-sex transactions and worsens their terms for women. Climate change programs that treat behavior change as a purely technical challenge, without engaging the identity dimensions of masculine resistance, encounter predictable uptake failures.

Climate shocks can also catalyze gender renegotiation rather than simply destroying masculine identity. The "switched-on farmer" described by Coldwell (2007) represents a masculinity more compatible with sustainable food systems, produced partly by environmental pressure. Formal climate interventions can reinforce male dominance, however, by channeling resources and technology through existing masculine networks, as documented in Nigeria's rice sector. When men are unable to earn enough to support the household, they may respond by becoming more controlling over money and other limited resources.

Shifting Norms and Opportunities for Change

The evidence is not uniformly pessimistic. Alternative farming masculinities oriented towards environmental stewardship, care ethics, and collaborative practice have emerged across multiple contexts. Vegan men in Austria maintained similar levels of masculine self-concept to omnivores while incorporating traits coded as feminine, suggesting that dietary change need not require the abandonment of masculine identity but can be framed as a reconfiguration of it. In Danish alternative slaughterhouses, practitioners cultivate masculinities grounded in care and ecological responsibility rather than domination. Male athletes are normalizing plant-based diets through discourses of performance and discipline. In queer farming communities in the United States, cooperative and care-centered models reimagine agricultural life beyond heterosexual masculine norms.

Marketing strategies that reframe plant-based products through tropes of strength, performance, and technological sophistication show measurable potential to reduce masculine resistance. A study of Sydney meat-lovers found that framing plant-based proteins around masculine gustatory experience substantially reduced resistance and increased willingness to try alternatives. Online vegan communities strategically invoke masculine norms of strength, discipline, and moral authority to produce counter-narratives in which the non-vegan man is reframed as transgressing, not upholding, masculine standards. These findings point to framing and context as powerful levers for dietary change among men.

Domestic cooking also offers a partial entry point. Men are cooking more than previous generations, partly driven by the growing prestige associated with celebrity chef culture. However, the shift is asymmetric: men cook as chefs or as masculine provision rather than as domestic laborers, and participation in cooking does not consistently translate into redistribution of the invisible, obligatory daily food labor that remains predominantly women's work. Persistent structural barriers, including entrenched masculine resource monopolies, institutional arrangements, and the social sanctions attached to dietary deviance, mean that norm change is rarely linear and requires structural transformation alongside cultural shifts.

Evidence Gaps

Critical gaps constrain the review's ability to support policy conclusions across all contexts. Geographically, research is heavily concentrated in high-income settings, with the Global South, and particularly Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa, Oceania, and Central Asia, substantially under-represented. In terms of populations, indigenous men, older men, men with disabilities, men in LGBTQ+ contexts, and men in the informal food sector are largely absent from the literature. Sectorally, the food supply chain sectors between production and consumption, including processing, wholesale, retail, food service, and waste, receive comparatively little attention, as do the masculinity dimensions of digital food environments, food tourism, food sovereignty movements, and food policy governance.

Methodologically, the evidence base is predominantly cross-sectional and qualitative in production-focused research and experimental/quantitative in consumption research, with limited integration across research traditions. Longitudinal, participatory, and intersectional research designs are underrepresented. There is a particular need for causal research designs capable of establishing mechanisms rather than documenting correlations, and for multi-level designs that simultaneously capture individual, household, community, and structural dynamics. These gaps were independently corroborated by the 12 expert interviews conducted for this review, which identified strikingly similar priorities, particularly around the weakness of existing monitoring and measurement approaches for masculinities and gender norms, and flagged a further practice-based concern: programming still tends to treat men as a uniform category, overlooking differences of age, class, livelihood, and identity.



Policy and Programming Implications

The review supports evidence-based recommendations across six programmatic domains:



Organizations Designing and Funding Food System Programs

Extension services, credit programs, training initiatives, and technology transfer systems must be actively redesigned to disrupt masculine gatekeeping of agricultural resources rather than reinforce it. This requires not only including women as beneficiaries but targeting the institutional norms that sustain masculine authority over high-value activities. Gender diversity and inclusion audits must go beyond headcounts to examine how masculine norms shape organizational culture and program design. Masculinity-sensitive monitoring and evaluation indicators, tracking shifts in attitudes, intrahousehold decision-making, and men's participation in food-related tasks, should be built into intervention architectures from the outset. Food governance reforms in cooperatives, producer associations, and policy bodies must go beyond numerical representation of women to address masculine norms embedded in cultures, procedures, and credentialing systems.



Climate and Resilience Programming

Gender norm analysis must be built into every climate adaptation design from the start, not added as an afterthought. Programs should identify and amplify masculine identities compatible with climate-adaptive practices, deploying “switched-on farmer” models as peer change agents who have reframed environmental stewardship as an expression of masculine competence. Mental health and psychosocial support components must be integrated into climate programs, recognizing that climate-related losses directly threaten masculine provider identities and can precipitate psychological crises with downstream consequences for households and gender-based violence risk.



Food System Work and Value Chains

Programs must address gendered labor and income hierarchies rather than treating labor force participation as a proxy for equity. Prospective gender impact assessments should be built into all commercialization and technology programs, asking explicitly who captures income, decisions, and risk as sectors become profitable. Where masculine gate-keeping is identified, active redistribution of access is required. Masculinity-sensitive occupational health policies should be developed for high-risk food system workplaces, including fishing communities and abattoirs.



Youth Engagement

Youth is a critically underutilized entry point for gender-transformative change. Schools, vocational networks, youth farmer networks, social media, and sports programs offer opportunities to engage young men around caregiving, nutrition, and shared food system leadership before harmful patterns become entrenched. Peer legitimization strategies engaging respected older masculine figures as visible endorsers of gender-equitable and climate-adaptive practices can considerably widen social permission for norm change within communities.



Conflict, Displacement, and Humanitarian Settings

Humanitarian food programs must engage men as partners in household wellbeing rather than as restorers of masculine authority. Mental health and psychosocial support should be integrated into food security responses, recognizing that masculine identity disruption has material consequences that food distributions alone cannot address. Programs must be carefully designed to avoid inadvertently reasserting harmful masculine control or triggering backlash through rapid role changes, with safety monitoring and conflict-sensitivity analysis embedded in all designs.



Public Health and Dietary Change

Information-based dietary change approaches are insufficient and can be counterproductive for men whose dietary choices function as identity performances. Effective strategies must either work with masculine identity, reframing sustainable and health-promoting diets as consistent with masculine values of strength, discipline, and responsibility, or address the underlying social structures that make dietary choices a necessary masculine performance. The flexitarian transition, gradual reduction rather than outright elimination of meat, represents a pragmatic masculinity-compatible pathway and should be actively promoted through masculinity-sensitive communication. Regulatory frameworks should address gendered food marketing as a public health issue, requiring both voluntary industry commitments and, where insufficient, regulatory action.



Complementary Perspectives from Expert Interviews

Interviewed experts reinforced these implications with practice-grounded detail. Participatory approaches, including community dialogue, Positive Deviance, Social Behaviour Change, father-to-father groups, and husband-school models such as GIZ's ProSAR/PrAda programming in Madagascar, were consistently described as more effective than prescriptive messaging, and life-course entry points such as fatherhood, exemplified by Rwanda's Bandedereho programme, were flagged as unusually promising. Respondents cautioned that top-down feminist language can trigger defensiveness among men and urged framing change around outcomes men already value, such as household nutrition and livelihoods. On funding, experts called on donors to treat masculinities engagement as an integral, adequately resourced component of programming rather than an optional add-on, to invest in practical field-usable measurement tools, and to support cross-organizational dissemination of programme learning so that the field builds cumulatively rather than repeatedly rediscovering the same lessons.

Overarching Insights and Conclusions

Six overarching insights emerge from the synthesis, each with direct implications for policy and programming.

» **First**, masculinities are constitutive of food systems, not merely influential on them: they shape who controls land, technology, market access, and institutional authority, and define whose labor is recognized and rewarded. This is visible from the household plot to the trade ministry, in inheritance customs that route land to sons, extension systems that default to male farmers, and marketing structures that reward masculine-coded crops and commodities. Addressing gender inequality in food systems therefore requires transforming institutional and material arrangements, not merely changing individual attitudes; awareness campaigns directed at individual men cannot substitute for reform of the land tenure systems, credit structures, and market rules that organize masculine advantage in the first place.

» **Second**, food systems actively produce and reproduce masculinities through the organization of agricultural labor, marketing, extension, cooperative structures, and food symbolism. Masculine identity is not a fixed attribute men bring to food systems but is continuously constituted by the sector's own institutional categories, who a cooperative recognizes as a farmer, which crops carry masculine or feminine connotations, whose labor is classified as skilled. Gender-transformative change therefore requires redesigning food system institutions themselves, not merely challenging individual men's beliefs or behavior.

» **Third**, the relationship between masculinities and food systems is bidirectional and recursive: material structures embed cultural norms, which in turn shape access to material structures, which further entrench those norms. This recursive quality explains both the persistence of gendered inequalities in food systems, as each side of the loop reinforces the other, and the conditions under which change becomes possible: interventions that disrupt the loop at multiple points simultaneously, structural and normative together, are considerably more likely to produce durable change than those directed at only one side of it.

» **Fourth**, intersectionality is indispensable: race, class, sexuality, religion, age, and postcolonial positioning substantially modify how masculine norms operate in food systems, and universal claims about "men" risk reproducing the homogenizing assumptions that gender-blind food systems policy has long been criticized for. A smallholder farmer, a migrant agricultural laborer, and an urban food system executive are positioned differently within masculine norms, and policies calibrated to one will often be poorly suited to the others.

» **Fifth**, critical evidence gaps remain, concentrated in the Global South, in mid-chain food system sectors such as processing, transport, and retail, and among key populations including LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and men outside conventional household and farming roles, that substantially constrain the policy-relevant conclusions this review can draw with confidence.

» **Sixth**, these conclusions found striking corroboration in interviews with 12 experts working across food systems, agriculture, and gender programming, policy, research, and philanthropy worldwide. Practitioner and expert accounts converged with the literature on the centrality of masculinities to food systems programming and the need to engage men as partners rather than obstacles, while extending the literature's findings with practical measurement and programming lessons not yet captured in published research.

Masculinities are not peripheral to the challenge of building equitable and sustainable food systems. They are central to it. Men's control of land and productive resources, men's dietary patterns, men's resistance to or embrace of agricultural and dietary change, and men's physical and psychological vulnerability within food system labor markets all bear directly on the food security, nutrition, environmental sustainability, and gender equity outcomes that food systems policy must achieve. A food systems agenda that equates gender with women, leaving masculinities analytically unexamined, will continue to underperform relative to its own stated objectives, not for want of available evidence, but because a substantial portion of the causal structure remains unaddressed. Taking masculinities seriously, analytically, programmatically, and politically, is not an optional supplement to gender-responsive food systems policy. It is a prerequisite for its effectiveness.





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Way Forward

Priority research areas include longitudinal studies of how masculine food identities change over the life course and in response to structural food system transformations; participatory and intersectional research in underrepresented regions, particularly the Middle East, Latin America, and Oceania; systematic study of understudied sectors including food processing, retail, waste, and digital food environments; and research on the masculinity dimensions of food sovereignty and food justice movements. Methodologically, the field requires greater investment in designs that bridge qualitative and quantitative traditions, integrate individual-level and structural analysis, and can establish causal mechanisms. Interdisciplinary collaboration between gender studies, agricultural economics, nutrition, sociology, and development studies should be actively incentivized.

Institutionally, major food system actors including FAO, IFAD, WFP, and the World Bank should integrate a masculinity-sensitive analytical lens into their gender mainstreaming frameworks, as a complement to, not a replacement for, the existing emphasis on women's empowerment. Programming and research should run on parallel tracks with sustained investment in building local research capacity in the regions where food system programs operate. Stronger collaboration and learning partnerships between development agencies, universities, and local research institutes are essential to document how engaging men changes program outcomes and to translate evidence into operationally effective and contextually grounded program models.

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