



MASCULINITIES AND FOOD SYSTEMS: A SCOPING REVIEW



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food systems are among the most consequential arenas in which gender relations are enacted, negotiated, and reproduced. Yet the dominant framing in food systems scholarship and policy has overwhelmingly centered on women's empowerment, leaving the roles of men and the influence of masculinities comparatively underexamined. This scoping review addresses that gap by systematically mapping and synthesizing interdisciplinary evidence on the intersections of masculinities and food systems across three domains: food supply chains, food environments, and consumer behavior. To gauge whether literature-based findings resonate with real-world programming, policy, and funding experience, and to surface complementary evidence not well captured in the peer-reviewed record, the review also draws on semi-structured interviews with 12 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 integrated throughout this report as complementary emerging findings, clearly distinguished from the literature-based evidence.

The findings of the review are organized around five overarching thematic clusters: (1) conceptual and theoretical frameworks used to analyze masculinities within food-systems research; (2) how food-system structures and dynamics shape and reproduce masculinities; (3) how masculinities, in turn, shape access, authority, and outcomes within food systems; (4) shifting masculine norms and emerging opportunities for gender-transformative change; and (5) the intersections of climate change, ecological disruption, and masculine identity within food-system contexts.

Hegemonic masculinity, as elaborated by Connell (1995) and extended by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), remains the predominant theoretical lens, though increasing numbers of scholars draw on intersectional, postcolonial, feminist political-ecology, and performativity-oriented approaches. These frameworks collectively reveal that masculinities in food systems are plural, dynamic, and contested rather than monolithic or static.

Across agrarian, aquatic, and urban settings, masculine norms consistently organize access to and control over land, means of production, livestock, productive technologies, labor markets, and institutional authority. Men's privileged positioning is reinforced not only through informal cultural norms but also through the formal architecture of extension systems, inheritance law, cooperative structures, state agricultural programs, and agribusiness marketing. As food systems commercialize and modernize, masculine advantage is frequently entrenched, with high-value niches becoming masculinized while women's contributions are symbolically downgraded or practically marginalized.



In food environments and consumer behavior, the symbolic association between meat and masculine identity remains among the most robust and cross-culturally consistent findings. Men's consumption of meat functions not merely as a dietary preference but as an identity performance; under conditions of masculine threat, compensatory meat consumption intensifies. Conversely, plant-based diets are widely coded as gender-deviant, eliciting social policing, ridicule, and hostility. These dynamics pose structural barriers to dietary transition and carry significant implications for nutrition, environmental sustainability, and food justice.

The review also identifies evidence of shifting masculine norms. Alternative farming masculinities oriented towards environmental stewardship, care ethics, and collaborative practice have emerged across multiple contexts. Meanwhile, the growing masculinization of foodie culture, health-focused, and performance-oriented cooking has partially reconfigured men's roles in food preparation, though often without substantively altering the gendered division of domestic labor. Marketing strategies that reframe plant-based products through tropes of strength, performance, and technological innovation show promise in reducing masculine resistance to dietary change.

Nevertheless, critical evidence gaps remain. Research is disproportionately concentrated in high-income contexts, with substantial underrepresentation of the Global South, the Middle East, and Oceania. Men's experiences of food insecurity, the masculinities of food processing and retail labor, and the intersections of masculinity with disability, indigeneity, and age are largely absent from current scholarship. There is a pressing need for longitudinal, participatory, and intersectional designs capable of capturing complexity, temporality, and structural change. These gaps were independently corroborated by expert interviews conducted for this review, which identified strikingly similar priorities, particularly around the weakness of existing monitoring and measurement approaches, and surfaced additional practice-based concerns, including a tendency across programming to treat men as a uniform category rather than attending to differences of age, class, livelihood, and identity (Section 10.6).

The review concludes with a suite of evidence-based recommendations for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners committed to building food systems that are equitable, sustainable, and nutritionally adequate for all. These recommendations draw on both the peer-reviewed literature and complementary insights from the expert interviews, which reinforced the case for treating masculinities as an integral, adequately resourced component of food systems programming and pointed to practical entry points, from participatory community approaches to donor investment in measurement tools and cross-organizational learning, for putting these findings into practice.

1

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE



1.1 The Problem of Masculinity's Invisibility in Food Systems

Transforming food systems is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Food systems shape livelihoods, nutrition, health, and environmental outcomes, yet they are deeply embedded in social relations and power structures that determine who benefits from, participates in, and governs these systems. In recognition of this, gender has become an increasingly prominent consideration in food systems policy and research. However, prevailing gender approaches have focused predominantly on women and girls, often overlooking the roles of men and the influence of masculinities in shaping food system outcomes (Tarjem & Tufan, 2023).

This asymmetry is consequential. Masculinities, understood as socially constructed, dynamic, and relational expressions of gender, are a critical yet underexamined dimension of food systems. Dominant masculine norms influence men's access to and control over productive resources, decision-making authority within households and institutions, engagement in agricultural and food-related labor, and patterns of food consumption. These norms also shape behaviors directly relevant to food systems transformation, including risk-taking, adoption of climate-resilient practices, dietary choices, and participation in caregiving and domestic food preparation (Pyburn & Hallin, 2023). At the same time, food systems themselves contribute to the production and reinforcement of masculinities, through agrarian ideals of male productivity, market-oriented notions of masculine success, and cultural associations between manhood and specific foods or modes of consumption (Ragetlie & Luginaah, 2023). These interactions carry significant implications for nutritional outcomes, environmental sustainability, and progress toward gender equality.

1.2 Gender-Transformative Approaches and their Limitations

Within the gender and development discourse, there is a growing realization that attaining SDG 5 requires not only empowering women and girls but also engaging men and boys and fundamentally shifting the gender norms and power dynamics that perpetuate inequality. Gender-transformative approaches, increasingly endorsed by multilateral agencies and development organizations, highlight the importance of challenging harmful norms rather than merely accommodating them. However, the knowledge base needed to operationalize such approaches in food systems policy and programming remains fragmented across disciplines, sectors, and methodological traditions. This fragmentation has impeded understanding of how masculinities evolve in response to structural transformations, including climate change, urbanization, agricultural commercialization, and labor mobility, and how these shifts shape and are shaped by food system dynamics.

It has also hindered the development of inclusive, evidence-based food policies that acknowledge the diversity of men's roles and identities and can support efforts to address gender inequities in food systems.

This review contributes to bridging the above gaps by synthesizing available evidence to inform responsive and gender-transformative food systems policy, while identifying critical priorities for future research and evidence generation. Its value extends beyond academic circles. By highlighting how gender norms shape food production, purchasing, preparation, distribution, marketing, and consumption decisions, it will pinpoint where programmatic interventions can realistically shift behavior. Practitioners can translate these insights into engagement strategies that speak to men's identities and motivations. Findings on social norms can guide norm-change approaches, such as community dialogues that surface and challenge assumptions about who should cook, farm, or make food decisions, or peer-led initiatives that model alternative, positive masculinities. Evidence gaps and patterns from the review can also sharpen monitoring and evaluation considerations: for example, tracking not only behavior change but also shifts in attitudes, intra-household decision-making, and men's participation in food-related tasks, while capturing norm dynamics over time. By identifying the ways gender norms shape power, access, decision-making, and the distribution of care work within food systems, the review complements broader gender equality efforts and highlights practical programmatic entry points for fostering more equitable norms and shared responsibilities.



2

KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS



Within food systems, gender norms determine who farms, who cooks, who eats first, who controls food-derived income, and whose dietary needs are prioritized.

2.1 Masculinities

Masculinities refer to the socially constructed norms, practices, and patterns of behavior associated with being a man or performing male-identified roles within specific cultural and historical contexts. Rather than fixed or biologically determined, masculinities are dynamic and vary across time, place, and social settings. They are shaped through interactions with other gender identities and by broader social, economic, and political power structures. Importantly, masculinities are plural and relational, defined in relation to femininities and other masculinities, and both reflect and reinforce gendered hierarchies and power relations (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The concept of hegemonic masculinity denotes the culturally dominant form of masculine practice that, at any given historical moment, legitimates patriarchal arrangements and subordinates both women and non-hegemonic masculinities. However, hegemony is contested and historically variable, not a fixed property of persons or institutions.

2.2 Gender Norms

Gender norms are socially constructed expectations and shared informal rules that define appropriate or desirable behaviors, roles, and attributes for individuals based on their gender. These norms are learned through socialization, reinforced through everyday interactions and institutional practices, and shape individuals' attitudes, actions, and access to resources and opportunities (EIGE, 2024). Gender norms are culturally and historically contingent and play a central role in sustaining or challenging gendered power relations and inequalities. Within food systems, gender norms determine who farms, who cooks, who eats first, who controls food-derived income, and whose dietary needs are prioritized.

2.3 Food Systems

In scholarly and policy literature, food systems are understood as interconnected sets of activities, actors, and structures involved in feeding populations, covering the full range of processes from food production through to consumption, along with the drivers and outcomes associated with these processes. As defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food systems “encompass the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products” and the broader economic, societal, and natural environments in which they are embedded (FAO, 2018).

This review operationalizes food systems through three interlinked components:

1

Food supply chains, encompassing activities that move food from production to consumption, including production, storage, processing, packaging, transport, retailing, and marketing;

2

Food environments, referring to the physical, economic, political, and socio-cultural contexts that shape how people access and interact with food; and

3

Consumer behavior, capturing household and individual decisions about acquiring, preparing, consuming, and allocating food within households (Fanzo & Davis, 2021; HLPE, 2017).



3 METHODOLOGY



3.1 Scoping Review Design

This scoping review was conducted in accordance with the methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), further refined by Levac et al. (2010), and reported following the PRISMA-ScR guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018). A review protocol developed before hand by the review team specified the objectives, eligibility criteria, search strategy, screening procedures, and data-charting approach. The review was deliberately designed to capture the breadth of interdisciplinary scholarship on food systems and gender, drawing on contributions from sociology, anthropology, nutrition, development studies, agricultural economics, and gender studies.

3.2 Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

The review adopted a global scope and did not impose geographic restrictions. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they:

- 1 Were published in English between 1 January 2005 and 31 December 2025;
- 2 Explicitly examined masculinities, male gender norms, or male identities in relation to food supply chains, food environments, or consumer behavior; and
- 3 Were empirical studies, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods, or systematic/scoping reviews employing transparent methodological procedures. Only publications presenting primary or secondary data with documented research processes, published in peer-reviewed journals, academic book chapters, or institutional publications, were included.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they: were published prior to 2005; appeared in predatory journals as identified through Cabell's lists, DOAJ verification, or publisher reputation assessments; lacked a clear ethical statement when human participants were involved; were non-empirical (editorials, commentaries, opinion pieces); or did not substantively examine masculinities. Grey literature not meeting established academic standards, including national or organizational strategies, press releases, news articles, poster presentations, and conference materials lacking a full peer-reviewed manuscript, was also excluded. Studies were further excluded if they focused solely on descriptive differences between men and women without linking these to socially constructed gender norms, or if they failed to engage meaningfully with any component of the food system.



3.3 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented across interdisciplinary databases spanning agriculture, food systems, gender studies, and social sciences, including AGRICOLA, FAO AGRIS, EBSCO Agriculture and Food Science Collection, ProQuest Social Science and Gender Databases, JSTOR, Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), Scopus, and the Web of Science Core Collection. Reference lists of all included studies were hand-searched to identify additional eligible publications. The search strategy combined controlled vocabulary terms (including MeSH where applicable) with free-text keywords related to masculinities, gender norms, and food systems, using Boolean operators to structure and refine search logic. A professional research librarian developed and executed the search strategy, which was iteratively refined in consultation with the review team to optimize both sensitivity and specificity.

3.4 Study Selection and Data Extraction

Study selection followed a multi-stage process. All retrieved citations were imported into Excel, where automatic and manual de-duplication procedures were performed. Three independent reviewers then screened titles and abstracts against inclusion criteria; disagreements were resolved by a fourth senior reviewer. The same three reviewers independently conducted full-text screening, with conflicts again adjudicated by the senior reviewer and reasons for exclusion systematically recorded. A standardized data-charting form was developed, piloted, and refined before full implementation. Three reviewers independently extracted information on bibliographic details, study settings and populations, geographic coverage, theoretical framings of masculinities, food system components addressed, methodological approaches, ethical approval status, key findings, and research gaps identified by authors.

3.5 Data Synthesis

Given the interdisciplinary and heterogeneous nature of the evidence base, data synthesis follows a narrative thematic approach informed by Thomas and Harden's (2008) framework for thematic synthesis. The analysis begins with descriptive mapping of study characteristics, including geographic distribution, methodological designs, and conceptual framings. This is followed by thematic synthesis of how masculinities are conceptualized in literature, the mechanisms through which masculinities intersect with food system structures and practices, and the implications of these intersections for food security, nutrition, environmental sustainability, and gender equity. Evidence is further mapped across the three core domains of the food system to identify patterns, divergences, and conceptual or empirical gaps. Appendix 1 highlights the PRISMA flow-chart for the scoping review process.

3.6 Complementary Expert Interviews

To gauge whether the findings of the scoping review resonated with real-world programming, policy, and funding experience, and to surface complementary evidence not well captured in the peer-reviewed literature, the review team conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 experts working at the intersection of food systems, agriculture, and masculinities or gender. Respondents were purposively selected to represent a diversity of institutional vantage points, including researchers, donors, program implementers, policy actors, and advocates, and were drawn globally. The sample included both men and women and spanned government agencies, bilateral and multilateral organizations, philanthropic foundations, food systems businesses, civil society organizations, and academic institutions. Experts were identified through ICRW's and GIZ's existing networks and partnerships, as well as through targeted online searches, to ensure a diverse range of geographic, institutional, and disciplinary perspectives.

Interviews were conducted in person or online using a semi-structured guide organized around six thematic domains: the landscape of programs and interventions engaging masculinities in food systems; key actors and entry points; pathways of change and shifting masculine norms; gaps in current programming; monitoring, evaluation, and measurement; and lessons learned and recommendations for organizations and donors. To ensure that interview data built directly on, rather than duplicated, the review's synthesis of the academic literature, each interviewee received both a summary and the full scoping review report in advance of their interview. This design allowed experts to react to, validate, extend, or complicate the literature-based findings, positioning the interview data as a complementary, practice-grounded source of evidence rather than an independent or parallel dataset.

Interview notes and transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, coding content both deductively against the six domains of the interview guide and inductively for emergent themes, following established conventions for thematic analysis of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were compared across respondents to identify areas of convergence, divergence, and tension, and were then mapped against the findings of the literature-based scoping review to identify where expert accounts corroborated existing evidence, where they extended it into areas the literature addresses only thinly, and where they surfaced practical lessons and recommendations not readily derivable from published research alone. Findings from these interviews are integrated throughout the Evidence Gaps and Conclusion sections of this report as complementary emerging findings that sit alongside, and are clearly distinguished from, the literature-based synthesis.

3.7 Limitations of the Review

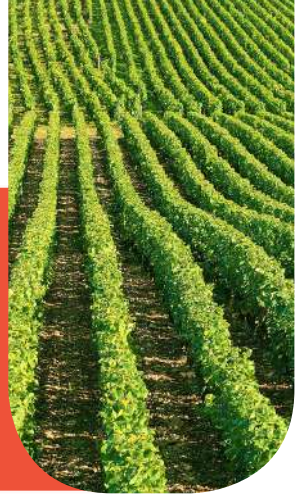
Due to feasibility constraints and the language capacities of the review team, only peer-reviewed studies published in English were included. This introduces a potential source of selection bias, as the review may not fully capture the geographic and epistemic diversity of existing scholarship, particularly from regions such as Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, and Francophone Africa, where substantial bodies of relevant research may exist in other languages. In addition, the exclusion of grey literature and other non-peer-reviewed sources, such as policy reports, theses, technical reports, and working papers, may cause a loss of valuable evidence and insights. Finally, the perspectives of the interviewed experts reflect their professional experience and informed assessments rather than evaluations of the literature reviewed, and should therefore be interpreted as complementary to, rather than representative of, the findings of the evidence synthesis.

FINDINGS



4

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN MASCULINITY AND FOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH



4.1 Hegemonic Masculinity

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, developed in *Gender and Power* (1987) and *Masculinities* (1995), subsequently revised with Messerschmidt (2005), remains the dominant theoretical lens in masculinity and food systems research. The framework defines hegemonic masculinity as the culturally exalted form of masculine practice that, at any given historical moment, legitimates patriarchal power and subordinates both women and non-hegemonic masculinities. Researchers have deployed the framework across four main domains: rural masculinity and farmer identity (Brandth, 1995; Saugeres, 2002), the masculinized institutional culture of crop science organizations (Tarjem & Tufan, 2023); farming masculinity as a driver of resistance to sustainable agriculture (Bell et al., 2015); meat consumption as a symbolic marker of manhood (Rothgerber, 2013; De Backer et al., 2020; Camilleri et al., 2024).

The most developed application focuses on rural masculinity and farmer identity. Brandth (1995) showed how farm machinery, particularly the tractor, became a symbol of hegemonic rural masculinity, linking farming to physical strength, control over nature, and technical mastery. Saugeres (2002) extended this analysis to the agricultural press, demonstrating how media representations consistently reproduced the ideal of the lone, strong farmer dominating the land. More recently, Tarjem and Tufan (2023) applied feminist technoscience studies and critical masculinities frameworks to argue that crop-breeding organizations are structured by hegemonic masculinity characterized by individualism, heroism, toughness, rationality, and control. Chipeta et al. (2024), drawing on Connell's theory of gender order, further demonstrated that hegemonic masculinity in agricultural development contexts is characterized by men's authority, decision-making power, household headship, and control of key resources across class, race, caste, and ethnicity dimensions.

4.2 Social Constructionist and Performative Frameworks

Alongside Connell's structural-relational approach, a substantial body of research draws on social constructionist and performative frameworks that emphasize the ongoing, situated production of gender through practice. Rather than treating masculinity as a static role or fixed essence, this tradition understands masculine identity as something men actively perform and negotiate in particular social contexts. The approach has been productive across studies of men's dietary behavior (Campos et al., 2020), farming identity formation (Hammersley et al., 2021), and the everyday enactment of masculine farmer identity in community settings (Campbell & Bell, 2000). Hammersley et al. (2021), studying male farmers in Ireland, found that farming masculinities were deeply embedded in ideals of strong work ethic, physical toughness, stoicism, and self-sufficiency, characteristics consistent with hegemonic farming masculinity but actively constituted through daily practice rather than passively inherited. Pini (2008) documented how hegemonic masculinity operates not only on farms but within the bureaucratic and managerial structures of the agricultural sector, shaping hiring, promotion, decision-making, and the valuation of different forms of knowledge.



Farming masculinities were deeply embedded in ideals of strong work ethic, physical toughness, stoicism, and self-sufficiency,

Hammersley et al. (2021)

4.3 Feminist Political Ecology

Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) provides a third major framework, particularly influential in research on the Global South. Applied in this literature, FPE identifies three interlocking patriarchal structures that systematically disadvantage women in agrarian systems: land tenure arrangements that deny or limit women's property access or rights; masculinized extension services that channel agronomic knowledge and inputs toward male farmers; and male-dominated agricultural decision-making that excludes women from different food system processes and activities. Sibanda (2025) and Kansanga et al. (2019) argue that these mechanisms compound one another, producing outcomes that simultaneously undermine food security and environmental sustainability, linking gender inequality directly to ecological degradation rather than treating the two as separate analytical concerns.

4.4 Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and Cultural-Critical Approaches

The interdisciplinary field of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM), which treats masculinity as a specific object of critical inquiry rather than a neutral analytical background, has informed the health-focused strand of food and masculinity research (Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Aavik & Velgan, 2021). Cultural-critical approaches have proved especially generative in theorizing the symbolic and ideological dimensions of food choice. Building on Carol J. Adams's foundational work in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), a substantial body of scholarship has examined how the consumption of particular foods, meat above all, but also the avoidance of vegetables and the embrace of certain dietary patterns, is culturally constructed as a symbol of male power, domination, and virility through intertwined systems of patriarchy and speciesism (Rothgerber, 2013; Rozin et al., 2012; De Backer et al., 2020; Mertens & Oberhoff, 2023; Camilleri et al., 2024; Velzeboer et al., 2024). The theoretical mechanism most proposed within this tradition is identity-protective reasoning: the consumption or avoidance of particular foods functions as a performance and signal of masculinity, such that perceived threats to masculine identity increase men's motivation to consume or reject specific food types.

4.5 Intersectional and Postcolonial Frameworks

Intersectional analysis has become an increasingly important theoretical corrective to frameworks that treat gender as a freestanding variable. The hegemonic farming masculine ideal, the independent, rugged, white male landowner mastering nature, is historically specific, bound up with race, property ownership, and colonial land dispossession. Research by Bezner Kerr et al. (2016) and Hillenbrand and Miruka (2019) demonstrates that in postcolonial settings, hegemonic masculine ideals are filtered through, and substantially reshaped by, legacies of colonialism, structural poverty, and the dislocations produced by structural adjustment programs. Rather than reproducing a stable, coherent hegemonic form, these conditions generate fractured, hybrid, contradictory, and shifting masculinities with distinct consequences for how labor is divided, resources are allocated, and decisions about production and consumption are made.

Bell, Hullinger, and Brislen (2015) introduced the important concept of "manipulated masculinities," documenting a strategic rebranding of farming masculinity at the intersection of agribusiness and food media, one that serves corporate interests

by facilitating agricultural deskilling while preserving masculine identity through new scripts of entrepreneurial manhood. Similarly, Tavenner and Crane (2018) found that the commercialization of farming systems triggered masculine appropriation of previously female-managed agricultural domains, illustrating how shifts in food systems political economy actively reconfigure gender relations on the ground.

4.6 Dialogic Masculinity

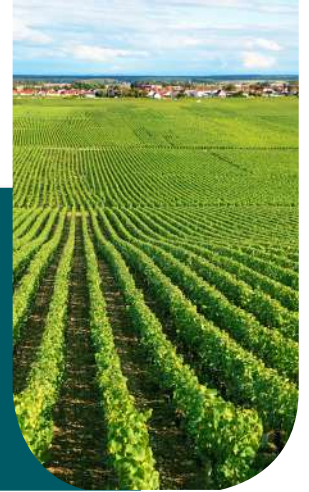
A particularly influential theoretical contribution specific to food systems comes from Peter et al. (2000), who drew on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism to develop a distinction between monologic and dialogic masculinity in farming. On non-sustainable farms, men more often represented monologic masculinity, a conventional masculinity with rigid and polarized gender expectations that draw a sharp distinction between men's and women's activities. Male farmers involved in sustainable agriculture, by contrast, more often represented dialogic masculinity¹, characterized by different measures of work and success, less need for control over nature, and greater social openness. Peter et al. argued that the acceptance of a more dialogic masculinity helps promote the transition to sustainable agriculture, providing one of the most direct conceptual links between masculinity theory and food systems change.



¹This refers to a male identity paradigm built on continuous, egalitarian dialogue and introspection as opposed to strict, conventional presumptions. It emphasizes mutual respect, empathy, emotional openness, and the willingness to actively discuss what it means to be a man through honest dialogue with others.

5

HOW FOOD SYSTEMS SHAPE MASCULINITY



5.1 The Symbolic Economy of Food and Masculine Identity

Food systems shape masculinity first and foremost by assigning gendered value to foods through their cultural, economic, and symbolic organization. Commodity histories, marketing, and national culinary narratives elevate certain foods, especially meat, as powerful, premium, and tied to bodily strength or moral authority. Sweets and “light” foods acquire connotations of softness or immaturity (Holtzman, 2018), while plant-based diets become framed as morally suspicious or insufficiently masculine (Ruby & Heine, 2011). Beer occupies a distinctive position within this symbolic economy: historically associated with male homosocial spaces, physical labor, and competitive endurance, beer has functioned across diverse cultural settings as a beverage through which masculine identity is publicly performed and confirmed (Messner & Montez de Oca, 2005). These codings are not the product of individual interpretation alone; they arise from the food system’s broader symbolic economy, which stabilizes hierarchies of value that men must navigate.

Gambert and Linné (2018) trace the cultural making of this association, showing how meat-eating came to express “real” masculinity while plant-based foods were simultaneously feminized, a symbolic system that naturalizes the masculinization of animal agriculture and delegitimizes alternatives. Rogers’ (2008) analysis of television food advertising through an ecofeminist lens showed how meat consumption is explicitly linked not only to masculinity in the abstract but to a “crisis of masculinity” in which eating meat is constructed as a defensive performance of primitive manhood against perceived feminist and environmental threats. Calvert (2014) extends this analysis to reality television, showing through close readings of the US series *Man v. Food*, how hegemonic masculine performance is enacted through competitive meat consumption, with the sexualization of both women and meat operating simultaneously, and the show functioning as a post-feminist backlash text. Parry (2010) similarly examines the gendered assumptions underpinning the slaughter of animals in popular food media, finding that in television cooking shows both emotional concern for farmed animals and the animals themselves are feminized and denigrated, while slaughter and meat-eating are masculinized and celebrated, illustrating how food media normalizes the gendered hierarchy in which mastery over animal life is coded as an expression of masculine authority.

The symbolic economy of gendered foods extends well beyond meat into the domain of staple crop cultivation. Across many agrarian societies, particular food crops are designated as exclusively male or female, a phenomenon documented most extensively in West African ethnography but present across the Global South. In Igboland, southeast Nigeria, yam cultivation stands as the paradigmatic case: yam is understood as a “male crop” and functions as an index of masculine achievement, wealth, and social authority (Madu et al., 2023). The accumulation of yams and the size of a man’s barn defined status in many Igbo communities, and men who distinguished themselves as yam farmers were recognized with the title of Ezeji (“yam king”), a form of masculine prestige institutionalized through the food system itself (Nwoye, 2023). Crucially, this masculine claim to the prestige crop is supernaturally ratified: yam

is associated with the deity Ahiajoku, who must be appeased only by men, rendering the gendered crop assignment structurally resistant to challenge (Madu et al., 2023). Women are assigned “female crops”, cassava, cocoyam, and pumpkins, which carry lower market value and cultural prestige than the male prestige crops. Howard (2003) and da Costa et al. (2021) document comparable gendered crop designations across West Africa and Brazil, confirming that the symbolic assignment of crops by gender is a widespread structural feature of agrarian food systems rather than an idiosyncratic cultural practice.

5.2 Agricultural Labor, Production Identity, and Masculinity

There is robust evidence that food systems shape masculinity through the organization of agricultural labor, land control, and production roles. Farming has in many contexts functioned as a masculinity-making institution, structuring identity around physical endurance, provision, technical expertise, and intergenerational responsibility (Laoire, 2005; Anderson, 2020). In cross-regional studies spanning India, Mali, Malawi, Morocco, Mexico, Nigeria, and the Philippines, Elias et al. (2018) find that men are assigned primary responsibility for land preparation, mechanized farming, fertilizer application, and livestock management across all study contexts, activities whose common denominator is their association with physical strength, productivity, and technical authority.

Ferrell's (2012) ethnographic study of tobacco farmers in Kentucky demonstrates that farming tasks are culturally coded as masculine through their demands for endurance, hardiness, and the capacity to negotiate difficult conditions. Farming transitions, such as when tobacco farmers are compelled to shift to alternative crops, are experienced not merely as an economic disruption but as a challenge to masculine identity itself, illustrating how deeply production and personhood are intertwined for male farmers. Coldwell's (2007a) work in Australia similarly shows that dairy farming labor constitutes both the economic core and the identity foundation of farming masculinity, with physical farm work functioning as a daily performance of masculine competence.

The gendering of agricultural labor extends, in many indigenous contexts, to a strict gendering of entire plant domains. Among the Shuar of the Ecuadorian Amazon, the *chakra* (garden) is a complex social-ecological system in which horticulture, ritual, cosmology, and plant agency are inseparably interwoven. Tuber cultivation is an exclusively female domain, but its productivity is understood to depend not only on women's cognitive and embodied skills but on the agential qualities of the plants themselves, which are held to possess souls that are gendered male or female, with female-souled plants such as cassava requiring cultivation by women (Espinoza, 2025). This cosmological gendering of plants organizes masculine and feminine authority across both the material and mytho-ritual dimensions of the food system in ways that standard economic or labor analyses cannot capture. In the Canela society of indigenous Brazil, gendered gardening knowledge and human-plant relationships are deeply structured from childhood: girls and boys learn to engage with plants through distinct gendered practices, food prohibitions, and ritual activities that connect human and plant lives across cosmological and ecological systems (Miller, 2019). These cases reveal that gendered labor divisions in food production are not merely practical arrangements but are, sometimes, embedded in cosmological and ontological frameworks that assign different moral and spiritual authority to men and women as cultivators.



Food systems shape masculinity through the organization of agricultural labor, land control, and production roles.

In aquatic production systems, the association between masculinity and physical risk is especially pronounced. Salguero-Velázquez et al. (2022), studying Mexican small-scale fisheries, find that traditional fisher masculinities are organized around risk acceptance and endurance, with the capacity to withstand dangerous sea conditions serving as a marker of masculine status. Resistance to women's inclusion in fishing activities is directly linked to these masculine norms. Cole et al. (2015), in their study of aquatic food systems in Zambia, document the same logic across multiple high-value activities, fishing, timber harvesting, and cattle herding, which are dominated by men because they are culturally associated with physical strength and masculine labor, regardless of whether actual physical demands require male-specific capacities.

Sub-Saharan African inland and coastal fisheries provide particularly well-documented cases in which the food system constitutes masculinity through occupational identity in ways that have direct consequences for health and food security. In their ethnographic study of young fishermen on the southern shores of Lake Malawi, MacPherson et al. (2020) demonstrate that fishing is not merely a livelihood but a masculine-making institution: toughness, sexual prowess, risk acceptance, and resistance to health-seeking behavior are simultaneously the norms that organize fishermen's sense of self and the primary drivers of their disproportionate HIV vulnerability. The food system does not simply employ these men; it also produces a particular kind of masculine subject for whom risk is not an unfortunate consequence of work but the very content of masculine identity. Masculine occupational identity grounded in the gendered division of labor in the fishery means that men control boats, catches, as well as decisions about who buys at what price. Mojola (2011), writing about Luo fishing communities around Lake Victoria in Kenya, argues that it is not simply masculine norms in the abstract but the specific organization of the fishery, its gendered ecology, that shapes the masculine identity available to fishermen. As fish stocks declined due to ecological change, fishermen's economic leverage relative to women traders increased: scarcity made their catch more valuable and their gatekeeping more consequential, producing a masculinity organized around conspicuous display of wealth and sexual access as markers of success. These studies establish that, in fisheries, the food system is actively producing masculine identities with specific and measurable health consequences, not as a side effect but as a structural feature of the system's gendered organization.

5.3 Mechanization, Commercialization, and the (Re)production of Masculinity

As agriculture becomes more mechanized, commercialized, or sustainability-oriented, food systems can sustain or generate new masculine identities, entrepreneurial farmer, environmental steward, managerial producer, each tied to broader shifts in agricultural practice (Coldwell, 2007a; Bell et al., 2015; Brettin, 2025; Heggem, 2014; Tavenner & Crane, 2018; Kansanga et al., 2019; Abdullahi, 2025). Heggem (2014) and Bell et al. (2015) converge most directly on this argument: Heggem through the "tractor gene" metaphor, which captures how the belief that aptitude for machinery is naturally masculine functions as a taken-for-granted norm shaping inheritance, training, and access to technological resources; and Bell et al. through their analysis of how agribusiness marketing actively constructs and naturalizes the association between masculine identity and technological-commercial authority.

In livestock systems, commercialization intersects with the cultural significance of cattle as markers of masculine status, wealth, and social authority. Cole et al. (2015) show that men's dominance over cattle herding and fishing in Zambia is justified through cultural associations with strength and masculine labor but sustained through differential access to productive assets and markets. In sugarcane farming in the Philippines, Eleazar et al. (2024) document how commercial production is organized around masculine authority, with women's roles in the value chain concentrated in lower-status positions. In Nigerian rice farming, Abdullahi (2025) shows that government-supported



commercial rice production reinforces masculine control through the targeting of male farmers for training, credit, and infrastructure support. Across these cases, commercialization functions less as a gender-neutral economic process than as a mechanism through which existing gendered hierarchies are reproduced and often deepened.

The same dynamic operates in fisheries, where commercialization has consistently deepened rather than eroded masculine control. Merten and Haller (2007), in a study of the Zambian Kafue Flats observed that fish-for-sex² exchange is not a cultural tradition but an economically produced institution. As commercial fishing expanded and livelihoods became monetized, masculine control of fish as a tradeable commodity, and the income it generates, became the structural foundation on which transactional sexual relationships between male fishers and female fish traders were built. For the authors, it is the political economy of the fishery, and specifically the masculine monopoly over the highest-value activity in the chain, that creates the conditions for fish-for-sex. Béné and Merten (2008), in a cross-national analysis of African fisheries, document the same pattern: in every case where fish-for-sex has been documented, it is associated with commercial fishing contexts in which men control catch and market access and women are structurally dependent on male gatekeeping to obtain fish for food provisioning or trading. In sum, these scholars note that commercialization does not introduce gender equality into subsistence fishing systems per se; but it converts existing masculine authority over productive resources into a more consequential power over food and economic access.

5.4 Institutional Reproduction of Masculine Authority in Food Systems

Beyond the farm itself, food system institutional spaces, cooperatives, restaurants, industry associations, policy bodies, and governance structures, reproduce masculine authority through credentialing, leadership selection, and the organization of collective action. Braun et al. (2024) demonstrate that credibility in agricultural governance in the Canadian Prairies is constructed around forms of production experience, machinery use, crop failure, ranching hardship, that men are structurally more likely to accumulate, not because of individual incapacity but because of the gendered division of agricultural roles.

Agricultural extension systems, state policy, inheritance systems, and cooperative governance constitute additional institutional sites and mechanisms for channeling productive assets, knowledge, and services in ways that reproduce masculine production authority across generations (Braun et al., 2024; Abdullahi et al., 2025; Jellison, 2018; Cole et al., 2015; Aregu et al., 2018; Heggem, 2014). In Norway, the “tractor gene” operates precisely through inheritance

² Fish for sex, sometimes also referred to as sex for fish, is a socio-economic practice in which female fish traders engage in transactional sexual relationships with fishermen to secure their supply of fish, often out of coercion (Béné & Merten, 2008).



Food system institutional spaces, cooperatives, restaurants, industry associations, policy bodies, and governance structures, reproduce masculine authority through credentialing, leadership selection, and the organization of collective action.

decisions, with farms and equipment passing to sons rather than daughters because of gendered assumptions about technical aptitude (Heggem, 2014). In Nigeria, Abdullahi (2025) shows that government rice programs target male farmers for credit, training, and infrastructure, institutionalizing the assumption that men are the primary and most competent agricultural producers.

Agribusiness marketing constitutes an underappreciated institutional mechanism for reproducing masculine food system authority. Bell et al. (2015) show how agribusiness firms in the United States have actively constructed the “businessman-farmer” as a masculine ideal, cultivating a masculine identity around technological adoption, market orientation, and business acumen that simultaneously deskills smallholder farmers and repositions agricultural masculinity in relation to capital. Gambert and Linné (2018) trace how the cultural construction of meat as inherently masculine, and plant foods as inherently feminine, is actively mobilized through marketing to sustain consumer demand for animal products in ways that naturalize the gendering of livestock production. Carson (2021), drawing on neo-colonial food discourse analysis, shows how “eating like a white man” encapsulates an ideal of masculine consumption historically marketed through white masculine identity, with implications for how meat marketing intersects with race, colonialism, and food sovereignty movements.

Stibbe (2004), in a critical discourse analysis of Men’s Health magazine, demonstrates that popular men’s health media reproduces hegemonic masculinity in its food advice: despite providing abundant dietary guidance, the magazine frames meat, convenience food, and alcohol positively while minimizing their health risks, producing health discourses structured around masculine performance rather than genuine health promotion, illustrating how food-related health advice is itself a site for the production and reproduction of masculine identity. Sloan, Gough and Conner (2010) extend this analysis in a complementary direction by showing that even men who actively pursue health-promoting lifestyles, regular exercise, low alcohol intake, health-conscious diet, do not abandon masculine frameworks but reconstruct healthy eating and fitness as masculine practices through discourses of self-mastery, discipline, and physical performance, suggesting that masculinity-compatible health framings represent a genuine pathway for dietary change rather than a contradiction of masculine identity.

The food system workplace itself can function as a space for producing masculine norms that do not simply reflect pre-existing culture but are actively generated by the occupational environment. Sileo et al. (2016), in a qualitative study of fishing communities on Lake Victoria in Uganda, document this mechanism directly: fishermen and other workers describe the landing site as a social world in which behaviours “not from my home village” become normalized. This finding has important implications beyond fisheries: it suggests that food system workplaces and institutional spaces, including remote agricultural labour camps, abattoirs, processing plants, and fishing communities, can be critical sites for masculine performances.

Beer advertising constitutes another important institutional dimension of this process. Wenner and Jackson (2009) theorize beer promotional culture as a key element in the production of hegemonic masculine identity. Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) demonstrate that beer and liquor advertisements in mega sports media events construct a “crisis/resolution” narrative in which masculine identity is threatened by feminist gains and resolved through homosocial beer consumption, positioning the male consumer as a loser who reclaims status through the beverage. Gee and Jackson

(2012) extend this analysis to New Zealand, showing how Speight's "Southern Man" campaign activated a crisis of masculinity around globalization and rural decline, with beer advertising serving as the cultural vehicle through which regional masculine identity was reasserted. More recently, Finlay and Wenner (2020) document the persistence of this dynamic across three decades of sport-related beer advertising on television, with masculine archetypes evolving in form, from the rugged working man to the ironic "bro", while the underlying patriarchal structure of the beer-sport-masculinity nexus remains intact. In a study in London, De Visser and Smith (2006) illustrated how masculine identity management translates into concrete health-relevant food and lifestyle choices even for men who do not fully embrace hegemonic masculine norms. These findings position the beer beverage industry not merely as a commercial actor but as an institutional mechanism through which masculine norms are produced, circulated, and naturalized across food-adjacent consumer culture.

5.5 Racialized, Nationalized, and Moralized Masculinities in Food Systems

Food systems shape masculinity through local, racialized, and moral discourses that structure who is allowed to embody legitimate manhood. Carson (2021) demonstrates that meat-eating has been historically used to construct white, settler-colonial masculinity in Asia, while Gambert and Linné (2018) show how "soy boy"³ and similar tropes rely on and foster racialized images of masculine emasculation. Further, migrant men encounter additional tensions as they negotiate contrasting food norms between origin and host countries, as illustrated by Punjabi Sikh elders interpreting Western dietary expectations through culturally rooted masculine values (OliFFE et al., 2010). Moral frameworks, too, embed masculinity within food systems: Namie and Timmons (2014) and Brown (2020), writing about the United States, document how for men of faith, foodwork is a marker of responsibility, moral leadership, and health stewardship.

5.6 Food Systems in Ecological Transition and Emerging Masculine Identities

As food systems undergo ecological and ethical transformation, they create conditions for new masculine identities to emerge. Sustainability discourses challenge meat-centered hegemonic masculinity by linking environmental responsibility, animal welfare, and dietary restraint to social virtue. Rather than eroding masculinity, these transitions often generate alternative forms: men in alternative slaughter systems⁴ cultivate masculinities grounded in care and ecological responsibility rather than domination (Rutt & Tjørring, 2024), while "switched-on" farmers incorporate environmental stewardship into their sense of competence (Coldwell, 2007a). Athletes adopting plant-based diets further normalize a masculinity compatible with environmental and health concerns (van der Horst et al., 2023). Food systems in transition thus catalyze a concurrent transformation of masculinities, revealing the malleability of gender identity amid ecological change.

³ The term stems from the pseudoscientific claim that consuming soy products, which contain phytoestrogens, decreases testosterone and "feminizes" men. It is an insult used mostly online to describe men who are not considered very masculine.

⁴ Alternative slaughterhouses aim to reduce animal stress, eliminate long-distance transport, or adhere to specific ethical and religious standards

6

HOW MASCULINITY SHAPES FOOD SYSTEMS



6.1 Masculine Control of Land, Resources, and Decision-Making

Across diverse agrarian contexts, masculinity organizes who holds land, assets, and decision-making authority. Land inheritance is widely treated as a masculine prerogative, whether enforced through customary law, as in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where women's access is mediated through male kin, or maintained through identity-based expectations even where legal equality exists (Abdullahi, 2025; Farnworth et al., 2023; Elias et al., 2018; Laoire, 2005; Heggem, 2014; Eleazar et al., 2024). In Ireland and Norway, equal inheritance statutes coexist with strong masculine norms around farm succession, making farm exit feel like masculine failure rather than economic strategy (Laoire, 2005; Heggem, 2014).

These same norms extend to the distribution of high-value natural productive resources, including forest resources, livestock, water bodies, fishing grounds, timber, land, grazing areas, where the greater the economic significance, the more firmly the resource is coded as male (Cole et al., 2015; Hovorka, 2005; Gonda, 2017; Farnworth et al., 2023). Tavenner and Crane's (2018) work in Kenya illustrates this boundary-setting with particular clarity: women retain control over small-scale informal milk sales because the sums are too modest for male appropriation, but once milk enters formal markets, masculine entitlement activates. Masculine dominance also operates through formal food-system institutions and organizations, cooperatives, government departments, producer associations, and marketplace governance, where leadership, expertise, and credentialing systematically privilege men (Abdullahi, 2025; Ilomo et al., 2021; Hammersley et al., 2021; Braun et al., 2024).

The cultural designation of specific crops as "men's crops" or "women's crops" is a particularly consequential mechanism through which masculine control of agricultural resources is institutionalized at the crop level. Doss and Morris (2002), using nationally representative household data from Ghana, provide an important empirical corrective to the tendency to treat these categories as fixed cultural facts: they find that few crops can be rigorously defined as men's crops, and none as clearly women's crops, when tested against who actually controls the plot, the labor, and the revenue. Yet Carr (2008), also drawing on Ghana's Central Region, demonstrates that the claim that certain crops are masculine is nonetheless consequential, functioning as a gatekeeping ideology that justifies differential access to land, inputs, extension services, and income even when the empirical division is not clean. In the Igbo case, this mechanism is particularly well-documented: men's cultural monopoly over white yam cultivation is institutionalized through the restriction of women to lower-value varieties, the spatial allocation of prime farmland to male yam plots, and the exclusion of women from yam-related title and prestige systems (Madu et al., 2023; Nwoye, 2023). The gendering of crops thus functions not merely as a descriptive statement about who grows what, but as an ideological structure that organizes resource access, labor allocation, and income distribution in ways that reproduce masculine advantage across generations.

The same logic of masculine resource gatekeeping applies with particular clarity in fisheries, where men's ownership of boats and control of catch decisions creates a structural masculine

monopoly that extends throughout the value chain. In their work in Mali, Tindall and Holvoet (2008) document that masculine authority is not merely a feature of capture fishing but operates as a cascading mechanism: men control the most remunerative activities at every node of the chain, boat ownership, large-volume trading, export-facing markets, while women's participation is concentrated in lower-value processing, drying, and local retail. Béné and Merten (2008) have also noted that the move from subsistence to commercial fishing has strengthened rather than attenuated masculine control of fish as a productive resource across Africa, with men claiming the income gains from commercialization while women's processing and trading roles remain casualized and undervalued. Incidentally, women traders and processors are central to post-harvest activities and local retail. In Kenyan Lake Victoria fisheries for instance, women predominate as brokers of smaller fish sales to other female traders and combine brokerage with cooking and hotel work for crews (Camlin, Kweni & Dworkin, 2013), and in Mali women are the main actors in drying and smoking fish as well as marketing of processed fish products (Tindall & Holvoet, 2008).

Nathenson et al. (2017) have shown through the "No Sex for Fish" intervention at a Kenyan Lake Victoria beach that masculine gatekeeping of boat ownership is the proximate cause of fish-for-sex dependence: when women were supported to own and manage boats, accessing the masculine resource directly, their food provisioning and income security improved dramatically and transactional sex declined, confirming that it is masculine control of the primary productive asset, not women's individual choices, that drives the exchange. Taken together, these findings suggest that women traders do have pull in the fisheries system but that their economic leverage is limited by masculinized control of boats, large-scale trade and high value markets.

6.2 Masculine Labor Hierarchies and Technological Modernization

Masculinity strongly structures agricultural labor divisions and access to technologies. Mechanized, public-facing, high-status tasks, machine operation, equipment loading, mechanized processing, are coded as skilled male work, while non-mechanized tasks remain devalued and feminized (Kansanga et al., 2019; Anderson, 2020; Bell et al., 2015; Ilomo et al., 2021; Abdullahi, 2025; Galiè et al., 2013; Heggem, 2014; Coldwell, 2007a). As a result, technological modernization acts as a multiplier of masculine advantage: men gain first access to productive tools and the income and recognition tied to technological competence, widening gender gaps with each wave of innovation.

Galiè et al. (2013) document this dynamic in Syrian farming households, showing that mechanization, marketing, and irrigation control are associated with "important work" and masculine authority, while women's equally central contributions, planting, harvesting, seed selection, are systematically symbolically downgraded despite their productivity. Elias et al. (2018) extend this argument across multiple national contexts, showing that the symbolic association between "modern," technology-intensive farming and masculine aspiration operates to direct women toward lower-status, less mechanized, subsistence-oriented agricultural activities.

Farming masculinity, associated with physical strength, toughness, stoicism, and self-reliance, both sustains production under hardship and generates resistance to the collaborative, adaptive, and externally supported practices required for food-system transformation (Laoire, 2005; Hammersley et al., 2021; Braun et al., 2024; Ferrell, 2012; Abdullahi, 2025; Ragetlie & Luginaah, 2023). Laoire (2005) shows that in Ireland, farm continuity is understood as a moral masculine duty, making men reluctant to adopt cooperative models or land-use change. In the United States, tobacco farming endures not merely for economic reasons but because the crop's labor regime provides a unique arena for masculine identity performance (Ferrell, 2012). Olapade and Zahara (2014), writing about Sierra Leonean artisanal fisheries observed that men's exclusive ownership of boats and fishing gear creates a monopoly over the most productive assets in the fishery, entrenching masculine authority over both catch and income and structuring women's access to fish on terms set by male gatekeepers.

6.3 Masculinity, Household Provisioning, and Food Security

Masculine breadwinner identity underpins men's control over food purchasing, agricultural income, and household resource allocation, regardless of nutritional expertise (Ragetlie & Luginaah, 2023; Farnworth et al., 2023; Bonatti et al., 2019; Aregu et al., 2018). In Rwanda, men's control over purchasing animal-source foods shapes household nutrition outcomes, even though their nutritional knowledge is often limited (Farnworth et al., 2023). This pattern reflects Bonatti and colleagues' (2019) argument that masculine authority over provisioning can undermine the very security it is expected to ensure, as shown in their Tanzania study where men's diversion of crop income toward alcohol intensified household food insecurity. Masculine norms also shape intrahousehold food distribution: men's privileged access to meat is also often framed by family members as care rather than inequality (Bonatti et al., 2019), and across Rwanda and Iraq, masculine status is a strong predictor of who consumes animal-source foods, independent of nutritional need (Farnworth et al., 2023; Abdalla et al., 2023).

When provisioning fails, due to climate shocks, poor harvests, or income loss, men often experience this as masculine failure, responding with shame, withdrawal, and avoidance of coping strategies coded as feminine (Ragetlie & Luginaah, 2023; Ashwill et al., 2011). In Benin, Ragetlie and Luginaah (2023) document men expressing acute shame, sometimes contemplating family abandonment, while simultaneously avoiding borrowing or informal labor because these strategies threaten masculine standing. This finding has profound implications for food security programming: when masculine identity is threatened, men may resist accepting food aid or engaging in cooperative food security measures, undermining program effectiveness.

In fishing communities, masculine provisioning identity and household food security interact in ways that have received insufficient attention. Amponsah et al. (2025), in a survey of fisherfolk across four Ghanaian coastal communities, find that poverty and debt, failures of masculine provisioning, are the primary structural causes of fish-for-sex transactions: women enter these exchanges not out of preference but because masculine gatekeeping of fish access leaves them without alternative routes to food provisioning or trading livelihoods. Wandera et al. (2021), using cross-sectional survey data from Ugandan fishing communities, document the consequences of this configuration at the household level: alcohol use, driven by masculine identity scripts and occupational peer culture, is significantly associated with intimate partner violence and HIV risk, which in turn reduce women's capacity to manage household food provisioning and health. The masculine breadwinner who controls income but diverts it toward alcohol and multiple partners simultaneously compromises household food security and women's food access, a dynamic that echoes Bonatti et al.'s (2019) findings in agricultural Tanzania and underscores that the mechanism is not specific to one food system context but a consequence of masculine provisioning norms as such.

6.4 Masculinity, Food Symbolism, and Dietary Culture

The symbolic association between meat and masculine identity is among the most robust findings in the literature (Lax & Mertig, 2020; Rothgerber, 2013; De Backer et al., 2020; Camilleri et al., 2024). In peer and workplace contexts, expectations to consume large quantities of meat function as a mechanism of masculine boundary policing (Fidolini, 2021; Gasiorowska et al., 2023). When masculinity is threatened, men often increase meat consumption, pay a premium for it, or choose red meat specifically as an identity-stabilizing act (Mertens & Oberhoff, 2023; Leary et al., 2023; Pohlmann, 2021). The symbolism of meat extends globally: in Iraq and across sub-Saharan Africa, priority access to meat communicates masculine status and provider identity (Abdalla et al., 2023; Bonatti et al., 2019).

In societies or cultures where meat is coded as masculine, plant-based eating may be constituted



Because meat is coded as masculine, plant-based eating is coded as gender-deviant. Vegetarian and vegan men are judged less masculine than omnivores, and meat abstinence poses a sharper identity threat for men than for women

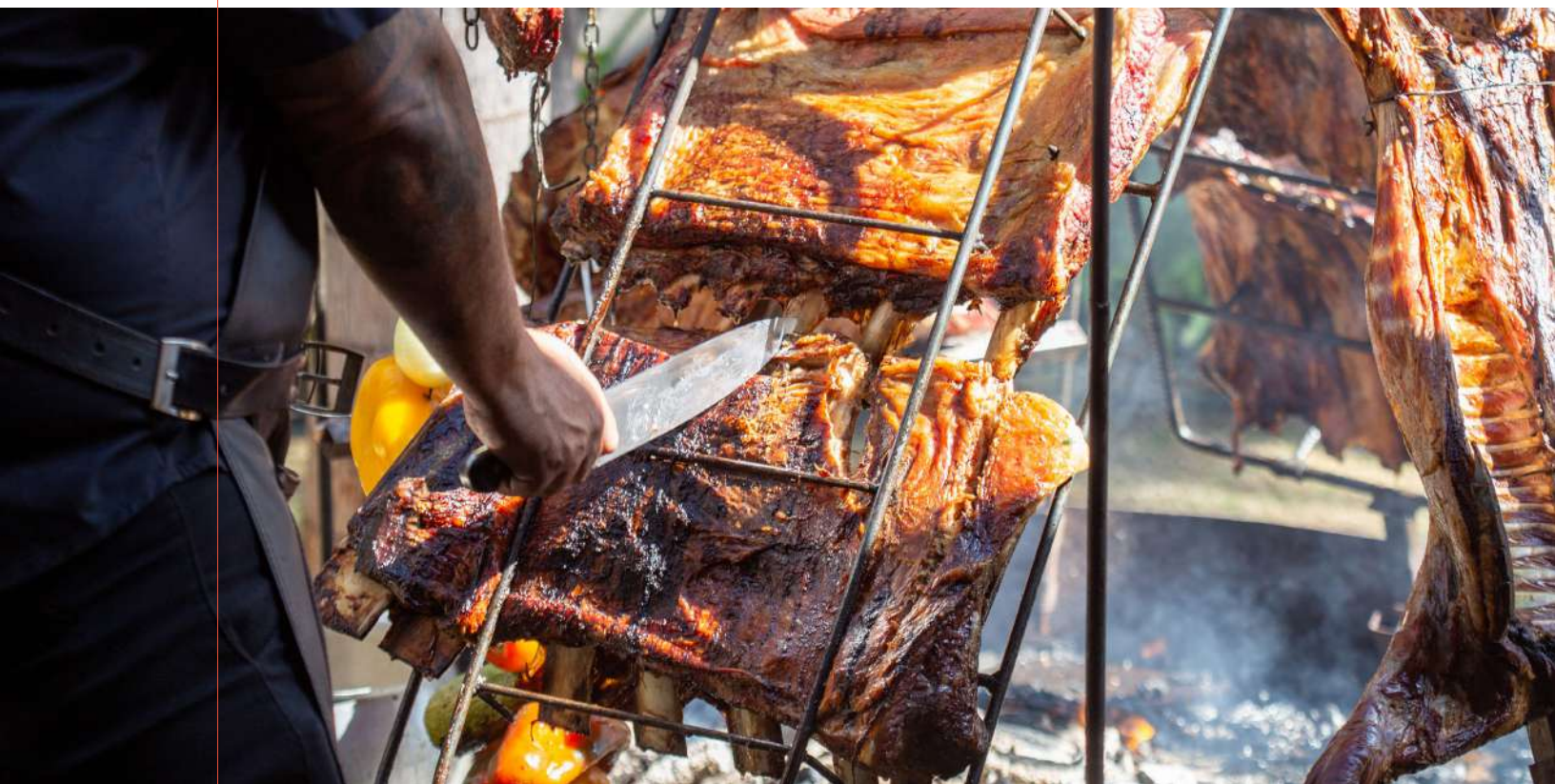
(Ruby & Heine, 2011; Thomas, 2016; Mycek, 2018)

as gender-deviant. Research shows that, in such contexts, vegetarian and vegan men may be judged less masculine than omnivores, and meat abstinence poses a sharper identity threat for men than for women (Ruby & Heine, 2011; Thomas, 2016; Mycek, 2018). Plant-based eating thus becomes a social risk, triggering ridicule, irritation, or even hostile sexism (Modlinska et al., 2020; Hinrichs et al., 2022; Salmen et al., 2025; Pohlmann, 2021). Structural factors can compound this resistance: in the Netherlands, cheap, normalized meat combined with traditional norms creates obstacles to dietary transition that information and pricing alone cannot overcome (Cho et al., 2023). The ideological underpinning of this resistance has been theorized through the concept of beef consumption as “heteromuscular fortification”: Buerkle (2009) shows that meat eating is mobilized in popular culture as a defensive performance of heterosexual manhood, directly countering the perceived feminizing threat of metrosexuality⁵ and plant-based alternatives. Complementing this, Love and Sulikowski (2018) demonstrate through implicit association tasks that men exhibit stronger implicit associations between meat and healthiness than women, suggesting that the meat-masculinity link is embedded at the level of automatic cognition and not merely conscious identity management.

Cross-cultural research demonstrates that although the mechanism linking masculinity to dietary practice is widespread, the specific foods used to perform masculinity vary. In Israel, hummus expertise serves as masculine cultural capital (Hirsch, 2016). In Japan, masculine performance has historically been tied to restraint from sweetness rather than meat consumption (Holtzman, 2018). In Norway, men living alone use meat-centered meals to assert self-sufficiency (Sellaeg & Chapman, 2008), while in Italy, men frame engagement with nutrition and cooking as masculine self-mastery (Fidolini, 2021). Among Punjabi Sikh immigrant men, masculine food identity intersects with religion, ethnic loyalty, and intergenerational duty, complicating assumptions about meat as the universal currency of masculine eating (OliFFE et al., 2010). These cross-cultural variations underscore the importance of context-sensitive analysis and resist universal claims about the content of masculine food norms, even as the structural mechanism, food as identity performance, appears broadly consistent. Even within institutional settings, meat carries masculine symbolic weight: Kildal and Syse (2017) studied the introduction of a voluntary meat reduction scheme in Norwegian Armed Forces mess halls and found that soldiers’ resistance was substantially driven by the perceived threat to masculine identity that reduced meat consumption posed, illustrating how the meat-masculinity nexus operates even within highly structured institutional environments, where collective masculine identity can trump individual dietary preferences and hinder policy-driven change from above.

Beer is a particularly well-documented vehicle for masculine identity performance in the food and drink domain. De Visser and Smith (2007) established that beer consumption functions as a “cardinal masculine practice” for young men in ways that other alcoholic beverages do not, with excessive drinking in all-male settings operating as a competitive ritual through which masculine status is earned and displayed. Their finding that abstinence detracts from perceived masculinity, while the ability to outdrink peers confers status, reveals the identity-protective logic structuring alcohol choice specifically. Darwin (2018) extends this to the craft beer context, demonstrating

⁵ A man who is fastidious about his appearance, grooming, and fashion, especially if he lives in an urban area, is referred to as metrosexual.



that craft beer culture has reproduced rather than dismantled masculine gatekeeping: men are free to consume diverse beer styles without social penalty, while women remain subject to gendered judgment regardless of their choices, a configuration Darwin terms “omnivorous masculinity.” The physical spaces of beer consumption compound this dynamic: brewpubs, taprooms, and beer festivals operate as heavily masculinized environments in which women’s presence and expertise are structurally marginalized (Thurnell-Read, 2022; Nanney et al., 2020). Critically, Dumbili (2022) shows that this beer-masculinity nexus is not confined to Western settings: in Nigeria, specific beer brands, Star, Gulder, Legend, are understood as masculine drinks, and women who consume them are perceived as transgressive or indecent, illustrating how the gendering of beer as a masculine beverage operates as a cross-cultural mechanism of social boundary-maintenance even as its specific cultural content varies.

Food system occupational settings can intensify masculine alcohol cultures by creating specific structural conditions in which drinking serves masculine identity functions that would otherwise be met differently. Kyei-Arthur and Kyei-Gyamfi (2023), using the Alcohol Myopia Theory to analyze alcohol use among 385 fishers in Elmina, Ghana, find that masculine peer norms, including social bonding among crews and the performance of toughness in all-male occupational groups, are the primary structural driver of the 59% alcohol consumption rate among fishers. The theory’s application reveals a direct mechanistic pathway: intoxication narrows cognitive focus to immediate situational.

6.5 Masculine Dietary Preferences: Mechanisms and Dynamics

Masculinity shapes dietary preferences most powerfully through the symbolic coding of foods, a process that has made red meat the paradigmatic vehicle for performing manhood in some cultures and societies. As Ruby and Heine (2011) clarify, masculinity becomes legible through the willingness to consume animal flesh, while men who avoid meat risk being marked as less masculine. Scholars further show how traditional masculine norms generate an ideological defense of meat eating grounded in appeals to nature, necessity, hierarchy, and divine order (Abdalla et al., 2023; Rothgerber, 2013; De Backer et al., 2020; Camilleri et al., 2024; Lax & Mertig, 2020). Bogueva, Marinova and Gordon (2020) extend this analysis in the Australian context, showing



Meat-masculinity link grows stronger as masculine identity becomes more entrenched across the life course

US National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey

that rebranding men's dietary choices toward plant-based options is complicated by the deeply embedded symbolism of meat as masculine power; vegetarian men are perceived by the majority of the male population as betraying social expectations about masculine behavior, making dietary change a matter of social identity and not merely individual preference.

There is evidence that men gravitate toward masculine-coded foods when dining with male peers, turning food choice into a site for masculine performance and social affirmation rather than individual nutritional preference (Gasiorowska et al., 2023; Vartanian et al., 2007). Research on interactions between meat eaters and meat avoiders shows that dietary deviance carries reputational penalties that discourage men from adopting plant-forward diets (Peeters et al., 2025). Qualitative work with young men in Belgium illustrates how foods such as steak take on ritualistic significance, structuring masculine bonding and coming-of-age practices (Vrijsen et al., 2025). Carroll, Capel and Gallegos (2019), in their qualitative study of young Australian men stratified by occupational class, show that food choices function as performances of class-inflected masculine identity, with meat consumption operating as a cultural marker of the "typical Aussie bloke" regardless of occupational status. Nakagawa and Hart (2019), drawing on nationally representative US survey data and experimental methods, demonstrate that men experiencing masculinity threat not only report greater attachment to meat but express reduced willingness to consider vegetarianism or veganism, providing population-level evidence that masculine identity threat translates directly into dietary conservatism. Sumpter (2015) synthesizes the theoretical literature, arguing through both hegemonic and alternative masculinity frameworks that meat consumption is best understood as a socially regulated masculine performance rather than a mere dietary preference. Timeo and Suitner (2018) add an attraction dimension: meat-eating men are judged as more attractive to potential romantic partners, and conformity to dietary gender norms thus carries reproductive as well as social status incentives that reinforce masculine meat consumption. Roos et al. (1998), drawing on Finnish population data, provide baseline evidence that gender, socioeconomic status, and family structure operate together as determinants of food behaviour, establishing the structural context within which masculine dietary norms operate across social positions.

Even among adolescent boys, the above associations have been documented (Graziani, Guidetti and Cavazza, 2021; Kubberød et al. 2002). In Norwegian qualitative research, Kubberød et al. (2002) found that many young men associated meat eating with masculinity and physical strength, and plant foods with femininity, suggesting the meat-masculinity nexus is established early in the life course. This developmental trajectory is confirmed at population level by Mann (2021), who uses US National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data to show that gender differences in meat consumption do not emerge before age four, then increase through adulthood to peak between ages 51 and 65, suggesting the meat-masculinity link grows stronger as masculine identity becomes more entrenched across the life course. Liebman et al. (2003), in a study of rural adults in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho, provide comparable population-level evidence that men report significantly higher intakes of red meat and lower intakes of fruits and vegetables than women, with these disparities compounded in rural and low-income settings where masculine dietary norms are particularly entrenched. Peeters et al. (2022) demonstrate that the meat-masculinity nexus also operates through social interaction: using a mixed-methods approach, they show that gender differences in meat consumption are sustained partly through interpersonal social processes in which meat-eating is reinforced as a

masculine group norm and plant-based eating is subject to social sanction, establishing that dietary gender norms are co-produced and reproduced in dyadic and group social encounters and not only in individual identity decisions.

A second major pathway linking masculinity to dietary preference is the compensatory response triggered when masculine identity is threatened. A wide body of research shows that men reaffirm masculinity through food in moments of threat (Mesler et al., 2022; Leary et al., 2023; Mertens & Oberhoff, 2023), to the extent that initiatives aimed at reducing meat consumption can backfire among men (Pohlmann, 2021, 2022). The emotional intensity of this resistance is mapped by Hinrichs et al. (2022), who demonstrate that negative affect heightens gender differences in defensiveness toward plant-based diets. Thomas (2016) shows a perceived masculinity gradient across diets, omnivores seen as more masculine than vegetarians, who are seen as more masculine than vegans, creating a hierarchy of identity costs that shape men's openness to dietary change.

Race, class, sexuality, religion, and age substantially reshape masculine food identities. Brown (2020) shows that Black men in the United States draw on community and religious frameworks emphasizing restraint, "eat to live", producing a distinct racialized masculine relation to food. On the other hand, research on gay bear communities⁶ in São Paulo shows hyper-masculine food cultures centered on heavy eating (Unsain et al., 2020). Leslie (2017) also shows that queer farmers both contest and reproduce agrarian masculine ideals. Pohlmann (2021) identifies masculinity-threat effects concentrated among men aged 18–28, making this demographic both particularly vulnerable to and central for dietary change interventions. Graziani, Guidetti and Cavazza (2021) demonstrate, using implicit association tasks with Italian preschool children aged 4–6, that meat is already implicitly associated with male faces and vegetable dishes with female faces, indicating that the masculine coding of meat is socialized from the earliest years of childhood. Confirming the relevance of self-rated gender typicality rather than biological sex alone, Stanley, Day and Brown (2023) show in an Australian study that for men, greater identification as masculine, independent of sex, is associated with lower likelihood of reducing meat consumption or considering veg*nism⁷, and stronger endorsement of the belief that eating meat is natural, necessary, and nice.

6.6 Masculinity, Food System Working Conditions, and Vulnerability

The reviewed literature identifies two key mechanisms through which masculinity interacts with food system working conditions and vulnerability. The most pervasive is through the determination of which tasks are worth doing, which are worth rewarding, and which bodies should absorb the most difficult labor (Kansanga et al., 2019; Bjorkhaug & Blekesaune, 2007; Heggem, 2014). In food systems organized around commodity production and commercial exchange, masculine norms consistently reserve public-facing, transactional dimensions of the value chain, price negotiation, formal sales, contract management, for men. Tavenner and Crane (2018) demonstrate this with particular clarity: masculinity does not merely describe who engages in market activity, it actively defines market participation as the part of the value chain that matters, converting women's production labor into a structural precondition for male economic activity.

The second mechanism through which masculine norms shape food system working conditions is by embedding expectations within men themselves, expectations of risk-taking, endurance, and provider-duty, that render dangerous and exploitative labor not an external imposition but a condition for achieving masculine adequacy. Cole et al. (2015) show that men engaged in hazardous food-system work, deep-water fishing, heavy agricultural labor, pesticide exposure, are not merely

⁶ The gay bear community is a growing segment within the broader LGBTQ+ population that includes gay, bisexual, and queer men, along with some masculine nonbinary people, who embrace body diversity, body hair, and a rugged, traditionally masculine aesthetic.

⁷ An all-encompassing word for diets and lifestyles that include both veganism and the different types of vegetarianism

responding to economic incentives; they are enacting a masculine identity in which the voluntary absorption of occupational risk serves as evidence of masculine worth.

Hammersley et al. (2021) demonstrate in Irish farming that the masculine imperative to endure hardship without complaint transforms what might otherwise be recognized as occupational health risks, social isolation, physical strain, and chronic overwork, into markers of authentic masculine identity. In Benin, cultural pressures to provide adequately lead men experiencing food insecurity to profound shame and psychological distress, including in extreme cases suicidal ideation (Ragetlie & Luginaah, 2023). When economic precarity and masculine identity are thoroughly fused, the economic threats that food system restructuring generates are experienced not only as financial setbacks but as masculine crises, converting economic vulnerability into psychological suffering. For instance, agricultural deskilling⁸ simultaneously undermines traditional masculine farming identity and deepens material dependence on corporate service providers, producing a double precarity in which identity and livelihood are simultaneously made fragile (Bell et al., 2015). In sustainable and alternative agriculture settings⁹, farmers who do not embody hegemonic masculinity tend to face heterosexist microaggressions that they cannot address without risking economic relationships on which their livelihoods depend (Leslie, 2017; Poppi, 2024).

The intersection of masculine identity, alcohol, and food system vulnerability is particularly acute in fishing communities, where heavy drinking is embedded in the masculine occupational culture of the fishery itself (Kamali et al., 2016; Wandera et al., 2021; Kyei-Arthur and Kyei-Gyamfi, 2023; Sileo et al., 2016; Burgos-Soto et al., 2020). Kyei-Arthur and Kyei-Gyamfi (2023), in a mixed-methods study of 385 fishers in Elmina, Ghana, find that 59% consume alcohol regularly, with masculine norms, including peer pressure, social bonding among crews, and the performance of toughness, the primary structural drivers of alcohol use among fishers. Sileo et al. (2016), in a qualitative study of fishing communities on Lake Victoria, Uganda, document how the masculine peer culture of the fishery actively generates the normative context for alcohol use and multiple sexual partnerships: fishermen describe the landing site as a space in which behaviors “not from my home village” become normalized, with the masculine social world of the boat and the beach creating permission structures for risk that would be socially sanctioned elsewhere.

⁸ Agricultural deskilling is the loss of traditional farming knowledge and skills as farmers depend more on modern technology, commercial products, and standardized farming methods.

⁹ Alternative agriculture refers to farming methods that differ from conventional farming and focus on producing food in a more sustainable and environmentally friendly way.



CLIMATE SHOCKS, ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE, AND MASCULINE IDENTITIES IN FOOD SYSTEMS



7.1 Climate Vulnerability and Masculine Identity Disruption

The specific intersection of masculinity, climate shocks, and food systems remains underexplored in the literature. Research on gender and climate adaptation has focused predominantly on women's vulnerability and agency (Ashwill et al., 2011), leaving men's identity processes, and the implications of masculine norm disruption for household food security, gender relations, and sustainability transitions, comparatively neglected. The limited available literature shows that 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.

Cole et al. (2015) provide foundational evidence from an aquatic agricultural system in Zambia, where poverty, gender inequality, and rural masculine identity intersect in ways directly shaped by environmental variability. When resource depletion or climate shocks constrain productive activities, men's gender identity is challenged, with documented effects on conjugal relations and intrahousehold dynamics. Ragetlie and Luginaah (2023) extend this analysis in northwestern Benin, where food insecurity driven by climate variability shapes conjugal dynamics in ways that reveal masculine identity under pressure: food insecurity restructures the relational economy of marriage, with men whose food provisioning capacity is undermined facing delegitimation by their spouses and by the wider community as household heads and providers.

Ashwill et al. (2011) directly address climate change and gender in rural Bolivia, finding that climate shocks disproportionately affect the gendered division of labor in ways that exacerbate men's identity stress. Droughts and irregular rainfall patterns disrupted agricultural calendars





Environmental pressures that displace men from farming roles thus create a double bind: they open space for women's agricultural agency while simultaneously generating conditions for masculine identity crisis

(Galiè et al., 2013).

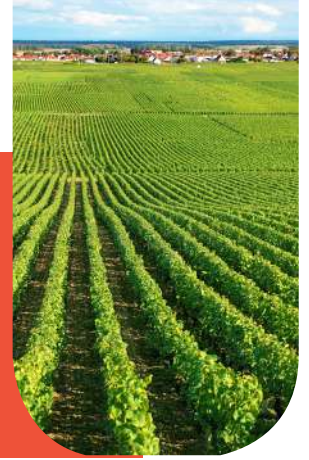
that had previously organized masculine and feminine work roles. Hammersley et al. (2021), in an Irish context, document how male farmers' identities are so thoroughly invested in land and production that threats to agricultural viability carry profound mental health implications.

Fisheries provide the most extensively documented case in which ecological change directly disrupts masculine food system identity in ways that cascade into food security and health outcomes. Mojola (2011), whose ethnographic work among Luo fishing communities around Lake Victoria in Kenya is explicitly structured as an ecology-gender-economy analysis, argues that fish stock declines did not merely reduce income but restructured the masculine economy of the fishery: fishermen who could no longer prove masculine adequacy through catch success displaced that performance onto conspicuous consumption, sexual prowess, and the transactional relationships with women traders that gave them continued status leverage. Fiorella et al. (2015) provide quantitative corroboration of this mechanism and showed that declining fish access not only increases the prevalence of fish-for-sex relationships but changes their terms, reducing women's ability to negotiate condom use, relationship conditions, or exit, because masculine gatekeeping concentrates leverage with male fishers precisely when fish are scarce and women's dependency is greatest. Oswald (2024) provides econometric confirmation using longitudinal facility-level data from Tanzanian shoreline communities: following months of fish catches, the incidence of fish-for-sex transactions rose significantly while women's ability to negotiate safer terms within those exchanges declined, providing causal evidence that ecological scarcity directly intensifies masculine resource leverage and worsens women's food security and health outcomes.

7.2 Climate Disruption as Catalyst for Gender Renegotiation

Climate shocks do not uniformly destroy masculine identity, they can also trigger processes of renegotiation in which existing gender arrangements are contested, adapted, or transformed. In Botswana's commercial urban agriculture sector, the feminization of certain agricultural activities following male out-migration, itself partly driven by rural livelihood stress, has produced contested gender positionalities in which women who have taken up food production in men's absence occupy a structurally ambiguous position (Hovorka, 2005).

In Nigeria's rice value chain, a sector directly affected by rainfall variability and flooding, formal climate-adaptive interventions, including improved seed distribution and irrigation programs, tend to reinforce male dominance by channeling resources and technology through existing masculine networks (Abdullahi, 2025). Environmental pressures that displace men from farming roles thus create a double bind: they open space for women's agricultural agency while simultaneously generating conditions for masculine identity crisis (Galiè et al., 2013). The "switched-on farmer" identity described by Coldwell (2007a) represents a case where environmental pressure has produced a masculinity more compatible with sustainable food systems. In contexts where climate shocks reduce household income, gendered power asymmetry becomes a site of heightened tension, with men who can no longer provision through farming seeking to maintain authority through control of reduced financial resources, with implications for household nutrition and food security (Loginova & Mann, 2024).



8.1 Alternative Food System Masculinities

Across diverse food systems, research shows that men do not uniformly anchor their identities in hegemonic masculine food norms; instead, multiple forms of masculinity organized around discipline, stewardship, ethical commitment, or communal health encourage markedly different food practices. In Belgium, De Backer et al. (2020) demonstrate that “new masculinity”, grounded in authenticity, self-awareness, and critical reflection on privilege, loosens the meat-masculinity link not by rejecting masculinity but by reshaping its content toward lower meat consumption and openness to plant-based diets. Comparable reconfigurations appear in other contexts: “dialogic” masculinities integrating environmental stewardship and collaboration into productive identity (Coldwell, 2007a); sustainability-oriented masculine identities emerging even within Danish slaughterhouses (Rutt & Tjørring, 2024); and shifts in the appreciation of women’s agricultural knowledge in Syria following cross-gender dialogues (Galiè et al., 2013).

In small-scale fisheries in Mexico, Salguero-Velázquez et al. (2022) identify a spectrum of masculine identities ranging from flexible traditional forms open to women’s participation to transitional masculinities explicitly incorporating gender equality. Based on their study of women in agricultural leadership positions in the Canadian Prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, Braun et al. (2024) demonstrated how younger women are challenging masculine leadership norms and the silence around harassment in agricultural systems, indicating relational cultural transformations within sectors still dominated by hegemonic masculinity. Leslie’s (2017) study of queer farming communities extends this trajectory further by reimagining farm family structures beyond heterosexual marriage and placing cooperation and care at the center of agricultural life. In fisheries, the most direct evidence for the transformative potential of dismantling masculine resource monopolies comes from Nathenson et al. (2017), who document a market-based intervention in a Kenyan Lake Victoria beach community in which women were supported to own and operate fishing boats, accessing the primary masculine resource directly. Within six months, women reported reduced dependence on fish-for-sex transactions, improved income and food provisioning, and increased bargaining power in market relationships, while male workers described the arrangement as economically beneficial.

In food consumption contexts, Greenebaum and Dexter (2018) extend the analysis of alternative masculine identities by showing that vegan men engage in hybrid masculinity, modifying values associated with veganism and femininity to align with traditional masculine standards, rather than abandoning masculine frameworks altogether. Nath (2011) similarly documents, through qualitative investigation of alternative food practices in Australia, that men who adopt non-mainstream diets negotiate complex relationships between food choice, gender identity, and social positioning, often asserting masculine credentials through other means when dietary choices mark them as gender-deviant. According to a study by Kollmayer et al. (2022), male vegans in Austria viewed themselves as more feminine than male omnivores, while maintaining similar levels of masculinity. This suggests that vegan men do not reject their masculine identity;

instead, they redefine it by incorporating traits traditionally associated with femininity. It also indicates that men can adopt vegan diets without feeling that they must give up their sense of masculinity. Therefore, efforts to encourage plant-based eating among men may be more effective when they allow masculine identity to coexist with new dietary values rather than requiring men to abandon it.

8.2 Masculinity and Domestic Cooking

The domestic kitchen, historically the most feminized site of food labor, offers another vantage point on shifting norms. Across diverse cultural contexts, men are cooking more than previous generations, and the cultural prestige of cooking, partly driven by the celebrity chef phenomenon, has created conditions in which male cooking can be a form of masculine identity expression rather than an identity threat (Szabo, 2019; Cairns et al., 2010; Berg, 2018; Fidolini, 2021). However, this shift is partial and asymmetric. Men cook as chefs, glamorous, skilled, and exceptional, rather than as domestic laborers, or within religious and cultural frameworks that frame foodwork as masculine provision rather than feminine care (Namie & Timmons, 2014; Berg, 2018; Cairns et al., 2010).

Sellaeg and Chapman (2008) show that men living alone develop pragmatic cooking competencies out of necessity, but their food ideals remain organized around a conventional masculine food framework centered on hearty, meat-based, simple preparations. Berg's (2018) study of masculine engagement with transnational cooking highlights how men's engagement with elaborate, culturally specific cooking practices is masculinized through its framing as skilled craft and community-sustaining performance, contrasting with the daily, invisible, obligatory domestic cooking that remains women's work. Fidolini (2021) examines men's engagement with cooking as health self-care, documenting Italian men reworking the relationship between masculinity, food, and bodily care. However, this health-oriented masculine cooking tends to be individualized and self-focused rather than care-oriented and other-focused, illustrating the limits of partial transformation.

8.3 Normative Change and Dietary Transition

Mechanisms of dietary norm change show parallel trajectories. Thomas (2016) finds that growing familiarity with vegetarian diets weakens their association with diminished masculinity, suggesting normalization through prevalence. Mycek (2018) shows that vegetarian and vegan men reinterpret plant-based eating to align with masculine identities, although Brady and Ventresca's (2014) "renaissance masculinity" reminds us that such reinterpretations often coexist with rather than reshape dominant norms. Generational and cultural dynamics further shape this terrain: Abdalla et al. (2023) find younger men less tied to traditional masculinity and more health-oriented; Pohlmann (2021) identifies masculinity-threat effects concentrated among men aged 18–28; and Cho et al. (2023) show that less traditional cultural framings of masculinity correlate with healthier meat-related dietary preferences at the population level. Cross-national evidence extends this picture: DeLessio-Parson (2017), studying Argentina, shows that vegetarianism functions as an act that destabilizes the meat-masculinity nexus through everyday social interaction, with men and women who adopt vegetarianism actively reworking gender norms through their food choices and the pushback they encounter, suggesting that dietary deviance, while socially costly, carries generative potential for norm disruption even in highly patriarchal contexts where the meat-manhood equation operates with particular force.



Increased female participation has not significantly disrupted entrenched masculine authority
(Hovorka, 2005).

Sporting contexts have begun to contribute meaningfully to this shift in some settings, with van der Horst et al. (2023) documenting increasing acceptance of plant-based diets among male athletes who frame discipline, ethics, and environmental concern as legitimate masculine traits based on a study that comprised largely European athletes. Marketing strategies that reframe plant-based products through performance and strength framings show measurable potential to reduce masculine resistance: masculine-themed marketing of meat alternatives measurably reduces resistance (Ouvrein et al., 2025), and Fonseca et al. (2025) provide evidence that product repositioning can shift consumer evaluations among previously resistant male demographics. Bogueva, Marinova and Bryant (2022) provide direct evidence of this dynamic in a food tourism and restaurant setting: their study of Sydney men who self-identified as meat-lovers found that when plant-based protein alternatives were presented in restaurant contexts framed around masculine gustatory experience rather than health or environmental rationale, the men's resistance was substantially reduced and their willingness to try alternatives increased, pointing to the critical importance of context and framing in overcoming masculine dietary conservatism.

In the digital sphere, Brookes and Chałupnik (2022) analyze discourse in a large online vegan community and find that vegan advocates strategically align veganism with hegemonic masculine norms, invoking tropes of strength, discipline, and moral authority, producing a counter-narrative in which the non-vegan man is reframed as transgressing masculine standards rather than upholding them. Graça, Calheiros and Oliveira (2020) showed, in a systematic review of gender differences in attitudes to veg*ns and plant-based diets, synthesize evidence from multiple countries showing that men consistently hold more negative attitudes toward vegetarians and vegans, express lower intentions to reduce meat consumption, and perceive greater social barriers to dietary change than women, while also noting that these differences are moderated by age, education, and cultural context, calling for more contextually differentiated approaches to dietary change communication. Oliver (2023) provides a qualitative window into the process through which vegan men navigate these barriers, showing through interviews with vegan male activists that they construct "redemption narratives" in which past meat-eating is reframed as a masculine error corrected through vegan commitment, thereby preserving or even enhancing masculine self-concept rather than conceding it.

8.4 Persistent Structural Barriers to Change

These shifts coexist with persistent structural barriers. In Philippine sugarcane farming, Eleazar et al. (2024) show that women assuming agricultural responsibilities due to male out-migration still struggle for recognition as farmers. In Botswana's commercial urban agriculture, Hovorka (2005) finds that increased female participation has not significantly disrupted entrenched masculine authority. Cole et al. (2015) report similar patterns in Zambia's aquatic agricultural systems, where changing labor divisions occur alongside continued ideological dominance of masculine control over resources and income. In northwestern Benin, Ragetlie and Luginaah (2023) document how women challenge unequal food-labor divisions yet simultaneously reinforce breadwinner norms by criticizing men's failures to provide, illustrating how gendered expectations are contested and reproduced simultaneously. These findings underscore that norm change is rarely linear or uniform, and that structural transformations in resource access and institutional power are required alongside shifts in cultural attitudes.

9

DISCUSSION

**9.1 Masculinities and Food Systems**

A central contribution of this review is the demonstration that the relationship between masculinities and food systems is bidirectional and mutually constitutive, not unidirectional. Food systems do not merely provide a backdrop against which pre-existing masculine identities are enacted; they actively produce, reproduce, and sometimes transform the masculine identities of the men who operate within them. This bidirectionality has important implications for theory and practice. It means that interventions targeting masculine norms in food systems will not succeed if they treat masculinity as a fixed individual-level variable that simply needs to be “changed.” Masculine norms are reproduced by and through the material, institutional, and symbolic structures of food systems, and durable change requires transforming those structures alongside shifting cultural attitudes.

Theoretically, the findings support the argument that neither a purely structural account (which treats masculinity as a function of economic arrangements) nor a purely cultural account (which treats it as a function of norms and beliefs) is sufficient. What the evidence reveals is a dynamic, recursive relationship in which material structures embed and reproduce cultural norms, which in turn shape access to and control over the material structures of food production, distribution, and consumption. This recursive quality explains both the persistence of gendered inequalities in food systems and the conditions under which change becomes possible.

9.2 Meat, Masculinity and Dietary Transition

The meat-masculinity nexus constitutes the single most extensively documented intersection in the literature and warrants specific discussion in light of its implications for dietary sustainability. The convergence of evidence across experimental, ethnographic, survey, and marketing studies is remarkable: across diverse cultural contexts and using diverse methodologies, the association between meat consumption and masculine identity is consistently documented, and the identity-protective mechanisms that sustain this association in the face of health and environmental arguments are well-characterized. This evidence base has direct implications for food systems policy aimed at reducing meat consumption. Straightforward information-based approaches, communicating the health and environmental harms of meat consumption, are unlikely to be sufficient, and may be counterproductive among men for whom the information is experienced as an identity threat. The evidence suggests that effective dietary change strategies must either work with masculine identity (reframing plant-based diets as strong, disciplined, and performance-enhancing) or address the underlying social structures that make meat consumption a necessary performance of masculine identity. The former approach is supported by the emerging literature on masculine-themed plant-based marketing (Ouvrein et al., 2025; Scholz & Lenhart, 2023; van der Horst et al., 2023); the latter requires the more challenging work of building social environments in which men’s social standing and identity are not contingent on dietary choices. The flexitarian transition¹⁰, gradual reduction rather than outright elimination of meat, represents a pragmatic pathway that is more compatible with masculine identity maintenance than full vegetarianism, and should therefore be actively promoted through masculinity-sensitive dietary communication as a realistic first step toward sustainable diets.

¹⁰ Without totally giving up animal products, flexitarian transition entails progressively consuming less meat and more plant-based foods. This strategy helps people to eat more fruits, vegetables, and grains while infrequently and in lower quantities consuming meat and dairy.

9.3 Intersectionality and Generalization

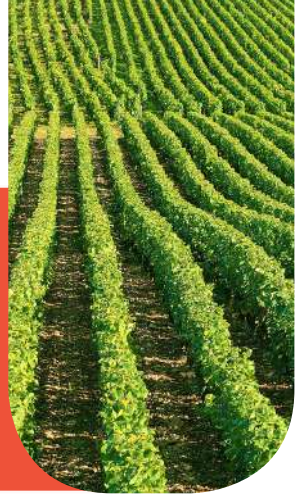
While the review's findings reveal broad structural patterns in the relationship between masculinities and food systems, the evidence also consistently demonstrates that these patterns are substantially modified by race, class, sexuality, religion, age, nationality, and postcolonial positioning and therefore may not apply cross-culturally. The hegemonic farming masculine ideal, the meat-masculinity nexus, and the breadwinner provisioning norm are all culturally specific configurations that take different forms in different contexts and are not straightforwardly generalizable across regions or populations.

This finding has methodological and political implications. Methodologically, it reinforces the importance of intersectional research designs that examine how multiple social positions simultaneously shape masculine food practices and identities, rather than treating gender as an isolated variable. Politically, it underscores the risk of universalizing interventions designed in high-income, Western contexts, where most of the research in this review was conducted. Approaches that work in one part of the world may not be appropriate or effective in other parts where different configurations of masculine norms, food systems structures, and intersecting inequalities prevail.

9.4 Methodological Considerations

The review reveals significant methodological heterogeneity across the evidence base, with implications for how findings should be interpreted and compared. Qualitative studies predominate in the agricultural and food system production literature, where ethnographic and interview-based methods are well-suited to capturing the situated, contextual dimensions of masculine farming identity. Experimental and quantitative survey methods predominate in the food consumption literature, where researchers have been able to measure identity-threat effects, willingness-to-pay, and dietary preferences with precision. Mixed-methods and participatory approaches are comparatively rare across both domains. This methodological distribution creates interpretive challenges when attempting to synthesize across domains. The mechanisms documented in laboratory or survey settings, masculinity threat, identity-protective reasoning, compensatory consumption, are not always directly mappable onto the institutional and structural dynamics documented in ethnographic field studies. Future research would benefit from designs that bridge these methodological traditions, combining the contextual depth of qualitative methods with the precision and comparability of quantitative measurement.





10.1 Understudied Regions

Geographic bias in the existing literature is among the most significant evidence gaps identified by this review. Studies conducted in high-income settings, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, and Australia, account for a disproportionate share of the evidence base, especially in the food consumer behavior domain. The Global South is substantially underrepresented relative to its demographic and food system significance. Within the literature that does address the Global South, sub-Saharan Africa is the most represented region, followed by South and Southeast Asia, with Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa, and Oceania receiving comparatively little attention. The Pacific Islands and Central Asia are almost entirely absent from the evidence base. These gaps should be read as, at least, partly shaped by the review's restriction to English-language publications.

This geographic concentration has important consequences. Findings from high-income settings, where food environments are characterized by industrial food systems, supermarket dominance, and high levels of processed food consumption, may not be applicable to low- and middle-income settings where subsistence agriculture, informal markets, and different food cultures prevail. The masculinities that shape food system dynamics in these contexts are likely to take different forms and be mediated by different intersecting inequalities than those documented in existing literature. Future research should deliberately target these underrepresented regions, using research questions and methodological approaches developed in dialogue with local researchers and communities rather than imported wholesale from high-income settings.

A specific regional gap with particular relevance to sub-Saharan Africa concerns the intersection of masculinity with ethnobotanical knowledge systems and gendered crop cultivation. The ethnobotanical literature on sub-Saharan Africa, particularly West and Central Africa, documents a rich tradition of gendered plant domains in which specific crops, cultivation practices, and botanical knowledge are exclusively assigned to men or women, with profound consequences for food system access, nutrition, and gender equity (Howard, 2003; Doss & Morris, 2002; Carr, 2008). Yet this literature has developed largely independently of the food systems' masculinities scholarship reviewed here. Integrating the two traditions would substantially enrich both: the masculinities framework provides theory for why masculine crop monopolies persist and resist change, while the ethnobotanical literature provides empirical detail on how they operate at crop, community, and household levels. Research in Amazonian contexts similarly reveals that gendered plant cultivation is embedded in cosmological and ritual systems that organize masculine and feminine authority in ways that standard food systems analyses do not capture (Abad Espinoza, 2025; Miller, 2019; Descola, 2001). These traditions represent a major underutilized resource for a more globally representative understanding of how masculinity operates in food systems.



The evidence base is notably concentrated at the production and consumption ends of the food supply chain, with processing, wholesale trade, retail, food service, and waste management receiving comparatively little attention.

10.2 Understudied Populations

Beyond geographic gaps, the evidence base reveals significant gaps in coverage of specific populations. Research on men's food practices and masculinities among indigenous communities is almost entirely absent, despite the centrality of traditional food systems to indigenous cultural identity and the well-documented health disparities faced by indigenous populations. Older men, despite facing distinctive intersections of masculinity and dietary change, including chronic disease management, changing social roles, and shifting bodily capacities, are largely absent from the literature. Men with disabilities and their distinct experiences of masculine food norms and food system access have received virtually no scholarly attention.

Research on masculinities and food systems in LGBTQ+ contexts is limited, with the existing literature dominated by a small number of studies on specific subcommunities (such as gay bears in São Paulo and queer farmers in New England). The masculinities of men engaged in the informal food sector, street vendors, informal agricultural workers, and domestic food workers, have received scant attention despite the enormous scale of this workforce, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Adolescent boys and young men, who are at a critical developmental juncture for the formation of dietary habits and gender identities, are similarly underrepresented, appearing primarily as targets of dietary behavior research rather than as subjects of masculinity-focused analysis.

10.3 Understudied Food System Sectors

The evidence base is notably concentrated at the production and consumption ends of the food supply chain, with processing, wholesale trade, retail, food service, and waste management receiving comparatively little attention. The masculinities of men working in food processing plants, a major sector of employment in both high-income and low-income countries, and the gendered dynamics of working conditions, labor organizing, and occupational health in this sector are largely undocumented in the academic literature. Similarly, retail food environments, supermarkets, wet markets, street food, have been studied primarily as sites of consumer behavior research, with less attention to how the gendered social dynamics of these spaces reproduce or challenge masculine norms.

The craft beer and brewing sector represents one food-adjacent production and consumption space that has attracted a growing body of gender scholarship yet remains under-integrated into the mainstream food systems masculinities literature. Research shows that both the production and consumption of craft beer are structured by masculine dominance: homebrewing operates as an almost exclusively homosocial, male activity (Thurnell-Read, 2022), women in the British craft beer industry report being perceived as lacking legitimate expertise as professionals (Land et al., 2025), and the physical spaces of craft consumption, taprooms, beer festivals, bottle-share clubs, reproduce masculine hierarchies through gatekeeping and gendered assumptions about taste (Nanney et al., 2020). This body of scholarship is directly relevant to food systems masculinities analysis because it demonstrates how masculinity operates across the full production-to-consumption chain of a beverage industry, and because craft beer has expanded rapidly across the Global South in recent decades, raising questions about how these dynamics interact with local gender norms and masculinities in contexts like Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa, where Dumbili (2022) has documented the gendering of commercial beer brands as masculine products.

Food tourism and culinary tourism constitute a further largely unstudied intersection with masculinities. The existing scholarship on food tourism is predominantly concerned with economic drivers, destination marketing, and tourist motivations, with gender treated, where it appears at all, as a background demographic variable. Okumus, Dedeoğlu and Shi (2021) demonstrate that gender and generational cohort are significant antecedents of food neophobia and neophilia among Chinese travelers, with implications for how tourists engage with unfamiliar local foods; yet neither study systematically examines the masculine identity dimensions of adventurous food consumption. The figure of the masculine food adventurer, the gourmet who enacts status, worldliness, and risk-tolerance through culinary exploration, has cultural salience in food media and food tourism marketing, but has received almost no systematic empirical attention in the food systems masculinities literature. Research on how masculine identity shapes food tourism behavior, how food tourism spaces are gendered, and how culinary adventure is commodified through masculine tropes represents a priority gap for future scholarship. Foundational tools for this agenda are beginning to emerge: Çınar, Karinen and Tybur (2021) show that food neophobia varies systematically across meat and plant dimensions and is differentially related to masculinity, providing a psychometric instrument for disentangling gendered food adventurism in tourism contexts. De Boer, Schösler and Boersema (2013) further document that motivational differences shape men's and women's orientation toward novel protein sources differently, with implications for understanding how gendered food adventurism operates in culinary tourism encounters with unfamiliar foods.

The masculinity dimensions of food waste, who decides what is discarded, how waste is valued, and the gendered dimensions of food recovery, are almost entirely absent from the literature. Food system governance, at both national and international levels, has received some attention through the work of Tarjem and Tufan (2023) and Hillenbrand and Miruka (2019), but the gendered dimensions of food policy deliberation, standard-setting, and international agricultural trade governance warrant substantially more investigation. Digital food environments, social media, food delivery platforms, online grocery, represent an emerging frontier that has received almost no attention from a masculinity perspective.

10.4 Empirical Data Deficits

Several substantive domains are identified as having limited empirical data. The relationship between masculine norms and food waste behaviors, including over-purchasing, plate waste, and attitudes toward food recovery, has not been systematically studied. The mechanisms through which men's breadwinner anxiety shapes household food security strategies during economic downturns or food price crises is documented only in a small number of studies and has not been subject to systematic empirical investigation. The long-term health consequences of masculinity-driven dietary patterns, particularly the health costs of meat-heavy diets endorsed by masculine norms and the long-term barriers to dietary change posed by masculine identity, are inferred from cross-sectional data but have not been established through longitudinal research.

The masculinity dimensions of food sovereignty and food justice movements are also inadequately documented: existing research focuses primarily on women's leadership and women's rights in these movements, with less attention to how men's participation, motivations, and masculine identities within these movements shape their trajectories and outcomes. The intersection of digital masculinities, online masculine cultures, influencer food content, masculine food branding in social media, and food system dynamics represents an entirely novel research frontier that warrants urgent attention given the growing influence of digital platforms on dietary norms.



10.5 Methodological Challenges and Recommendations

The evidence base reflects several persistent methodological challenges that future research should address. First, masculinity is operationalized inconsistently across studies. Experimental studies typically use validated scales such as the Male Role Norms Inventory or the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory, while ethnographic studies use more holistic, context-sensitive conceptualizations. This inconsistency makes cross-study comparison difficult and contributes to confusion about what, precisely, is being measured when researchers refer to “masculinity” as a predictor of food system behaviors.

Second, the evidence base is predominantly cross-sectional. Longitudinal research designs are needed to understand how masculine identities and food practices co-evolve over time, how interventions produce durable norm change, and how structural transformations in food systems, commercialization, mechanization, climate change, interact with masculine identity processes over extended periods. Third, participatory research methods, in which research questions, instruments, and analysis are developed in collaboration with the men and communities being studied, are underrepresented in the literature. Such approaches are particularly important for ensuring that research conducted in the Global South reflects local knowledge systems and priorities rather than imported analytical frameworks.

Fourth, the literature largely lacks research designs capable of establishing causal mechanisms rather than correlational patterns. While the identity-protective reasoning mechanism is well-supported by experimental research in consumer behavior, it has not been rigorously tested in real-world food system contexts or in the agricultural production literature. Integration of experimental and ethnographic methods, for example, through embedded experiments within ethnographic field studies, could provide a path toward stronger causal inference. Fifth, there is a need for multi-level research designs that simultaneously capture individual-level masculine identity dynamics, household-level gendered food practices, community-level food norms, and structural food system features, and examine how these levels interact. Such designs are analytically complex but necessary if research is to move beyond documenting correlations to supporting transformative food systems and gender policy.

10.6 Complementary Insights from Expert Interviews

The evidence gaps identified through the literature synthesis above were independently corroborated, and in several respects extended, by the expert interviews conducted as part of this review. Because these interviews drew on practitioner, donor, policy, and research experience globally, they offer a valuable, practice-grounded complement to a review process that is, by design, limited to published, peer-reviewed, English-language scholarship. Read together, the two sources of evidence, literature and expert interview, converge on several priority gaps, lending greater confidence that these are genuine, high-priority evidence needs rather than artifacts of the review's search strategy or disciplinary scope.

On monitoring and measurement, interviewed experts described current indicators as poorly suited to capturing change in masculinities or gender norms. Standard program metrics, participation counts, income change, or nutrition indicators such as Individual Dietary Diversity Scores and Minimum Acceptable Diet, were consistently described as capable of demonstrating programmatic reach but not of measuring shifts in household power relations, caregiving involvement, or masculine identity. More specialized diagnostic tools, including the Social Norm Exploration Tool, the International Men and Gender Equality Survey, GENNOVATE, the Social Norms Analysis Plot, and ALIGN-type resources, were seen as useful in principle but too complex, academic, or resource-intensive for routine use by field teams. Respondents recommended developing simpler, food-systems-specific indicators, for example, tracking change in meat and alcohol consumption, father involvement in childcare, joint household decision-making, or reductions in domestic conflict, and cautioned that reliance on men's self-reports alone can be misleading, underscoring the value of triangulating with women's and other household members' accounts. This directly reinforces, and adds practical texture to, the methodological recommendations on measurement and operationalization set out in Section 10.5.

On the heterogeneity of masculinities, interviewees repeatedly cautioned that food systems programming still tends to approach men as a uniform category, overlooking differences by age, class, livelihood, seniority, marital status, and identity, including the distinct pressures facing young men, male fishers, informal food vendors, and LGBTQ+ individuals. This corroborates, from a practitioner's vantage point, the intersectionality gaps identified independently in the academic literature (Sections 10.2 and 11.1). Experts working in fisheries specifically linked economic precarity and occupational risk to hypermasculine coping strategies, including alcohol use, violence, and long-term labor migration, suggesting that reducing economic and occupational instability may itself be an underused lever for norm change in this understudied sector.

Interviewed experts also flagged conceptual gaps that closely mirror those identified in the literature: limited attention to positive dimensions of masculinity, such as provider, protector, and caregiver roles, as potential entry points for change; thin evidence on the symbolic meanings attached to food and on masculinity as an identity in its own right, distinct from its instrumental role in supporting women's empowerment; and a persistent gap in evidence on men's own experiences of masculinity, care work, and wellbeing within food systems. Programme-facing respondents further called for stronger evidence on how women's land rights and tenure security interact with household food security and resilience through a masculinities lens, an area the literature likewise treats only partially (Section 6.1). Respondents attributed these gaps to a combination of factors that extend beyond the academic evidence base: sensitivity around the topic of masculinities, anticipated resistance from men, short project cycles and results pressure that favor visible, quickly measurable outputs for women and children, and a persistent lack of shared language or practical models for working on masculinities without appearing to displace women's empowerment goals.



11

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD



11.1 Overarching Insights

This review has synthesized a substantial and growing body of interdisciplinary evidence documenting the multiple, consequential ways in which masculinities and food systems are intertwined. Five overarching insights emerge from this synthesis.

First, masculinities are constitutive of food systems, not merely influential on them. They shape who controls land, livestock, technology, market access, and institutional authority; they determine which foods are valued, which are denigrated, and which bodies are privileged in food access; and they define whose labor is recognized, rewarded, and protected within food supply chains. These are not peripheral effects of masculine norms but structural features of how food systems are organized and governed. Addressing gender inequality in food systems thus requires not merely changing men's individual behaviors or attitudes but also transforming the institutional and material arrangements through which masculine authority is reproduced.

Second, food systems themselves actively produce and reproduce masculinities. The organization of agricultural labor, the marketing of food products, the design of extension services, the structure of cooperative and market institutions, and the cultural elaboration of food symbolism all generate gendered meanings and identities that men internalize, enact, and compete over. This productive function of food systems means that gender-transformative change will require redesigning food system institutions and not merely challenging individual men's attitudes.

Third, the relationship between masculinities and food systems is not static but is contested, variable, and amenable to transformation. Alternative farming masculinities, dialogic farmer identities, health-conscious masculine food practices, and plant-based diets framed through performance and strength all represent documented pathways through which masculine norms are being renegotiated in ways that are more compatible with food system sustainability and gender equity. These spaces of transformation are fragile, partial, and unevenly distributed, but they demonstrate that hegemonic masculine food norms are not immovable.

Fourth, intersectionality is indispensable to analysis. Race, class, sexuality, religion, age, and postcolonial positioning all substantially modify how masculine norms operate in food systems, which foods are coded as masculine, which forms of agricultural labor are understood as masculine work, and which men face the greatest vulnerability or have the greatest capacity for change. Universal claims about "men" and food systems, without attention to these intersecting social positions, risk reproducing the very homogenizing assumptions that feminist scholarship has long challenged.

Fifth, critical evidence gaps remain that substantially constrain the review's ability to support policy-relevant conclusions across all food system contexts and populations. The concentration of research in high-income, Western settings; the underrepresentation of food system sectors between production and consumption; the focus on English-language studies; the absence of longitudinal data on norm change; and the limited use of participatory and intersectional research designs all limit what can currently be concluded with confidence.

Sixth, these conclusions, derived from a systematic synthesis of peer-reviewed literature, found striking resonance in interviews conducted with 12 experts working across food systems, agriculture, and gender programming, policy, research, and philanthropy worldwide. Despite drawing on an independent body of evidence, practitioner and expert accounts converged with the literature on several central points: that masculinities are embedded within, rather than incidental to, food systems programming; that men respond best when engaged as partners rather than as targets or obstacles; and that durable norm change requires attention to both individual behavior and the structural and institutional levers that sustain masculine authority. Where interview accounts extended the literature, most notably on monitoring and measurement gaps, the heterogeneity of “men” as an analytical category, and practical entry points such as fatherhood and other life-course transitions, these complementary emerging findings are addressed in Section 10.6 and in the recommendations below.

11.2 Implications for Policy and Programming

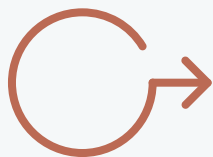
The evidence synthesized in this review supports substantive recommendations for policymakers, program designers, funding agencies, and institutional actors committed to building food systems that are equitable, sustainable, and nutritionally adequate for all. These implications are organized across six programmatic domains: organizations that design and fund food system programs; climate and resilience programming; food system work and value chains; youth engagement; conflict, displacement, and humanitarian settings; and public health.

Within Organizations that Design and Fund Food System Programs



In food production and agricultural development, the most important implication is that extension services, credit programs, training initiatives, and technology transfer systems must be redesigned to disrupt, rather than reinforce, masculine gatekeeping of agricultural resources and opportunities. This requires not only including women as beneficiaries but explicitly targeting the institutional norms and structural arrangements that sustain masculine authority over high-value agricultural activities. Organizations should promote internal gender diversity and inclusion audits that go beyond headcounts to examine how masculinity norms shape organizational culture, decision-making, and program design. The goal is to identify, support, and amplify masculine identities that are compatible with gender equity across different food system components, while actively addressing those that are not.

In food policy and governance, the masculinity dimensions of food system decision-making, in cooperatives, producer associations, commodity boards, and national and international policy bodies, need to be acknowledged and addressed through gender-responsive governance reforms. These reforms must go beyond numerical representation of women in leadership to address the masculine norms embedded in the cultures, procedures, and credentialing systems of food governance institutions. Critically, robust monitoring and measurement frameworks are overdue in this space: most current food system monitoring efforts do not track how men's gender norms shape what gets grown, eaten, sold, decided, or ignored. Masculinity-sensitive indicators should be built into the research and evaluation architectures of food system interventions from the outset, so that the norms driving practices and behaviors are clearly understood rather than assumed.



Climate and Resilience Programming

Climate change constitutes an identity threat as much as an economic one for men whose sense of self is built on productive capacity and provision. Programs that fail to account for this dynamic will continue to encounter slow uptake and resistance. Men's willingness to adopt new farming practices, move in search of work, or change how they earn a living is often shaped by what their community considers a "real man." Climate programs need to engage this reality directly rather than treating behavioral change as a purely technical challenge. Gender norm analysis should be built into every climate adaptation design from the start, not added on as an afterthought, and programs should include an explicit focus on identifying and amplifying masculine identities that are compatible with climate-adaptive practices. The "switched-on farmer" models documented in the literature represent men who have reframed environmental stewardship as an expression of masculine competence; these figures should be deployed as peer change agents and community legitimators for climate-adaptive practices.

Mental health and stress-management components should be integrated into climate programmes, given that climate-related losses, of harvest, livestock, land, and livelihood, directly threaten masculine identities tied to provision and can precipitate psychological crisis with downstream consequences for households, relationships, and gender-based violence risk. Interventions should be designed to support men through these identity transitions rather than inadvertently deepening the sense of failure that defensive masculine responses often express.

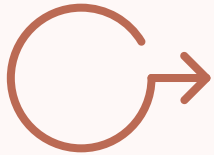


Food System Work and Value Chains

Men and women do not experience the same jobs, wages, or authority across food systems, and programs must squarely address this rather than treating labor force participation as a proxy for equity. The evidence shows that mechanization and commercialization routinely transfer power and profit to men; programs need to track and tackle this dynamic before it happens, not after the fact. This requires prospective gender impact assessment built into the design of any food system commercialization or technology program, asking explicitly who ends up with the money, the decisions, and the risks, particularly when crops or sectors become profitable. Where masculine gatekeeping of agricultural resources, technology access, and market participation is identified, programs must actively intervene to redistribute access rather than assuming that market growth will neutralize gender inequity.

“Men’s willingness to adopt new farming practices, move in search of work, or change how they earn a living is often shaped by what their community considers a “real man.”

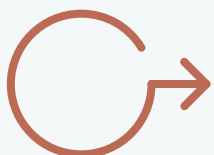
“ *When conflict deprives men of land, income, or the provider role, the identity crisis that follows carries real consequences for gender-based violence risk, household dynamics, and food security outcomes.* ”



Youth Engagement

Masculine identity is actively negotiated during adolescence through food choices, farming and migration aspirations, and emerging understandings of what it means to be a provider or breadwinner. This makes youth a critically underutilized entry point for gender-transformative change. Schools, vocational training institutions, youth farmer networks, and sports programs all offer opportunities to engage young men before harmful patterns become habit, around caregiving, nutrition, environmental responsibility, and shared leadership in food systems. The evidence is clear that intervening early is significantly more effective than attempting to change entrenched masculine identities among adults who are already embedded in powerful food system roles and may have strong incentives to resist change.

Complementing youth engagement, there is also value in working with older adults, particularly those whose identities and status are closely tied to land and livestock, to publicly endorse climate-adaptive and gender-equitable behaviors. When respected masculine figures in a community visibly adopt new practices, the social permission for others to follow is considerably widened. This peer-legitimation function is an underutilized resource in food system programming.



Conflict, Displacement, and Humanitarian Settings

When conflict deprives men of land, income, or the provider role, the identity crisis that follows carries real consequences for gender-based violence risk, household dynamics, and food security outcomes. Humanitarian food programs must bring men in, not to restore their authority, but to support healthier ways of coping with and contributing to household and community wellbeing under conditions of acute stress. This means integrating mental health and psychosocial support into food security responses, recognizing that the emotional dimensions of masculine identity disruption have material consequences that food distributions alone cannot address.

A critical caution applies here: interventions and programs must be carefully designed to avoid inadvertently reasserting harmful masculine control or pushing for rapid role changes that generate household conflict or violence. Programming should be evidence-driven and grounded in sustained community engagement, with household-level and community-level collaboration as the explicit goal, not a reshuffling of authority that produces backlash. Safety monitoring and conflict-sensitivity analysis should be embedded in program design.



Public Health Interventions and Food Environment Programming

In food environment and dietary change programming, the evidence strongly supports the conclusion that information-based approaches to dietary change will be insufficient for men whose dietary choices are organized as identity performances. The food industry actively markets masculine identity through meat, alcohol, oversized portions, and processed foods, and telling men to eat better hardly works when healthier food feels like a threat to that identity. Effective dietary change strategies must either work with masculine identity, reframing sustainable, plant-based, or health-promoting diets as consistent with masculine values of strength, responsibility, and care, or engage men in the critical reflection on masculine norms that underlies genuine dietary transformation. Marketing, public communication, sports partnerships, and peer-network engagement strategies all have roles to play, but they must be designed around the identity dynamics at stake rather than the nutritional content of the message alone.

Regulatory frameworks should name and address gendered food marketing as a public health issue. Private sector engagement, in food advertising, product design, and digital and traditional media, should be oriented toward normalizing healthier, more sustainable ways for men to eat and live, rather than continuing to commercially exploit masculine identity anxieties. This requires both voluntary industry commitments and, where these are insufficient, regulatory pressure.

In food security and nutrition programming, the masculine breadwinner identity and its consequences for intrahousehold food allocation, coping behavior during food crises, and men's engagement with food security programs must be taken seriously..



Research, Knowledge Production, and Evidence-Based Programming

Across all these domains, the effectiveness of programming depends on the quality of the evidence base and the strength of the partnership between research and implementation. Food system donor agencies and intervention designers should ensure that programming and research go hand in hand rather than running in parallel tracks that rarely intersect. This requires moving beyond treating gender as synonymous with women's participation and instead incorporating systematic analysis of masculinities into food systems research and intervention development as a matter of standard practice. Agencies should fund and promote context-sensitive, mixed-method, and comparative studies that examine which masculinity-focused strategies travel across contexts, including different regions and rural-urban settings, and research that is capable of identifying and supporting the scaling of effective gender-transformative strategies across different food system domains.

Stronger collaboration and learning partnerships between development agencies, universities, and local research institutes are essential to document how engaging men changes program outcomes over time. The goal is to ensure that evidence on

 *Food system donor agencies and intervention designers should ensure that programming and research go hand in hand rather than running in parallel tracks that rarely intersect.*

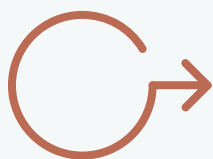
masculinities, and gender more broadly, is developed, understood, and translated into program models, implementation strategies, and policy frameworks that are both contextually grounded and operationally effective. This requires sustained investment in building research capacity within the regions where food system programs operate, not just commissioning studies from outside them.

The evidence synthesized in this review supports several substantive recommendations for policymakers, program designers, and institutional actors committed to building food systems that are equitable, sustainable, and nutritionally adequate for all. In food production and agricultural development, the most important implication is that extension services, credit programs, training initiatives, and technology transfer systems must be redesigned to disrupt, rather than reinforce, masculine gatekeeping of agricultural resources and opportunities. This requires not only including women as beneficiaries but explicitly targeting the institutional norms and structural arrangements that sustain masculine authority over high-value agricultural activities.

In food policy and governance, the masculinity dimensions of food system decision-making, in cooperatives, producer associations, commodity boards, and national and international policy bodies, need to be acknowledged and addressed through gender-responsive governance reforms. These reforms must go beyond numerical representation of women in leadership to address the masculine norms embedded in the cultures, procedures, and credentialing systems of food governance institutions.

In food environment and dietary change programming, the evidence strongly supports the conclusion that information-based approaches to dietary change will be insufficient for men whose dietary choices are organized as identity performances. Effective dietary change strategies must either work with masculine identity, reframing sustainable, plant-based, or health-promoting diets as consistent with masculine values, or engage men in the critical reflection on masculine norms that underlies genuine dietary transformation. Marketing, public communication, sports partnerships, and peer-network engagement strategies all have roles to play.

In food security and nutrition programming, the masculine breadwinner identity and its consequences for intrahousehold food allocation, coping behavior during food crises, and men's engagement with food security programs must be taken seriously. Programs that ignore or inadvertently reinforce masculine provisioning norms risk being resisted by men whose identity is threatened by accepting assistance, while interventions that engage men as partners in household nutrition, with appropriate attention to the gender power dynamics within households, show greater promise for improving nutritional outcomes.



Complementary Perspectives from Expert Interviews

The policy and programming implications above are drawn primarily from the peer-reviewed literature. Interviews with 12 experts working across food systems, agriculture, and gender programming, policy, research, and philanthropy (Section 3.6) offer a complementary, practice-grounded perspective that reinforces and extends these implications. Across both community-based implementers and policy-level respondents, there was strong convergence on what works: participatory approaches, including participatory theatre, community dialogue, Positive Deviance, Social Behaviour Change, father-to-father groups, and cooking demonstrations, were consistently described as more effective than prescriptive messaging because they let men and communities identify problems and solutions themselves. Structured husband-school and positive-masculinity models, such as GIZ's ProSAR/PrAda programming in south-eastern Madagascar, and nutrition and agriculture interventions that engaged men in supporting women's adoption of new practices, such as sweet potato farming programming in Bangladesh, illustrated how these approaches translate into practice. Respondents also highlighted life-course transitions, particularly fatherhood, as unusually promising entry points, citing the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre's Bandedereho programme, which works with couples during pregnancy and early parenthood, as a model worth wider replication.

On actors and entry points, interviewees reinforced the review's finding that masculine authority in food systems is reproduced across household, community, and institutional levels (Section 5.4), and that effective programming therefore requires coordinated engagement across all of them, from chiefs, religious leaders, mothers-in-law, and grandmothers at the community level, to farmer organizations and extension workers, to ministries, agribusinesses, procurement systems, and civil society advocacy such as HeForShe at the institutional and policy level. Respondents were emphatic that engaging men only at the household level without accompanying institutional reform, or pursuing institutional reform without community legitimacy, limits sustainability; the two levels were repeatedly described as complementary rather than competing priorities.

Respondents also offered a practical caution for implementers: framing that leads with terms such as "patriarchy," "harmful masculinities," or explicit feminist language can trigger defensiveness and status-loss anxiety among men, particularly where they feel blamed or excluded. Programs were described as more effective when they connected gender-equitable change to outcomes men already valued, family nutrition, household livelihoods, food security, or professional standing, built trust gradually, allowed men to choose feasible actions voluntarily, and worked through trusted peers and locally respected role models rather than imposing top-down messaging. This is consistent with, and adds practical specificity to, the review's broader finding that information-based approaches to behavior change are insufficient where masculine identity is at stake (Section 9.2, Section 11.2).

Interviewed experts converged on several recommendations directed specifically at donors and development agencies. First, masculinities engagement should be resourced as an integral, long-term component of food systems programming rather than an optional or secondary add-on, with funding structures and results frameworks flexible enough to accommodate the slower, relational nature of norm change. Second, agencies should invest in staff capacity and self-reflection on masculinities and integrate a masculinities

lens into project design from the outset rather than retrofitting it once a program is underway. Third, given the measurement gaps described in Section 10.6, agencies should prioritize investment in practical, field-usable indicators and monitoring systems capable of tracking change in masculine norms alongside conventional food security and nutrition outcomes. Fourth, respondents called for stronger investment in disseminating practical tools, manuals, and documented program experience across organizations, so that implementers can build on existing knowledge rather than repeatedly starting from scratch. Finally, respondents were consistent in framing masculinities-focused programming as complementary to, and not in competition with, women's empowerment agendas, a framing this review's findings strongly support.



11.3 Way Forward

The research agenda implied by this review is substantial. Priority research areas include: longitudinal studies of how masculine food identities and practices change over the life course and in response to food system transformations; participatory research in underrepresented regions, particularly the Middle East, Oceania, and Latin America, that builds local research capacity and generates context-relevant evidence; intersectional analyses that examine how multiple social positions simultaneously shape masculine food practices and food system dynamics; research on understudied food system sectors, including food processing, retail, waste, and governance; and studies of the masculinity dimensions of digital food environments.

Methodologically, the field would benefit from greater investment in research designs that bridge qualitative and quantitative traditions, combine individual-level and structural analysis, and can establish causal mechanisms as well as documenting correlational patterns. Interdisciplinary

collaboration, between gender studies, agricultural economics, nutrition, sociology, and development studies, is essential and should be actively incentivized through funding priorities and research design requirements.

Translating these findings into practice requires concrete action across several programmatic domains. In food production and agricultural development, extension services, credit programs, and technology transfer systems must be actively redesigned to disrupt masculine gatekeeping of resources rather than reinforce it, incorporating masculinity-sensitive monitoring indicators from the outset so that shifts in gender norms, not just women's participation rates, are tracked and evaluated. In climate and resilience programming, gender norm analysis must be built into adaptation designs from the start, with "switched-on farmer" models deployed as peer change agents and mental health and psychosocial support integrated to help men navigate the identity disruptions that climate loss inflicts. Food system commercialization and value chain programs must include prospective gender impact assessments asking explicitly who captures income and decision-making authority as sectors become profitable and must actively intervene to redistribute access where masculine gatekeeping is identified. Youth engagement, through schools, homes, vocational networks, and sports programs, represents a critically underutilized entry point for norm change, best combined with peer legitimization strategies that recruit respected older masculine figures as visible endorsers of gender-equitable and climate-adaptive practices. Humanitarian and conflict-response programs must bring men in as partners in household wellbeing rather than restoring masculine authority, with mental health support embedded in food security responses and conflict-sensitivity analysis built into program designs. Finally, public health and dietary change programs must move beyond information-only approaches, instead reframing sustainable and health-promoting diets as consistent with masculine values of strength, discipline, and responsibility, pursuing regulatory action on gendered food marketing, and promoting the flexitarian transition as a masculinity-compatible pathway toward dietary sustainability.

Institutionally, the findings of this review support the case for integrating a masculinity-sensitive analytical lens into the gender mainstreaming frameworks of major food system actors. Such a lens would complement, not replace, the existing emphasis on women's empowerment, adding the analytical dimension necessary to understand and address the structural role of masculine norms in sustaining gendered inequalities in food systems. The goal is not to shift attention from women to men, but to develop a more complete understanding of how gender operates in food systems, an understanding without which truly gender-transformative food policy will remain elusive.

Consistent with these programmatic implications, the experts interviewed for this review (Section 3.6) specifically emphasised the need for donors to treat evidence generation and program dissemination as linked priorities: investing not only in new research on masculinities in food systems, but in practical, field-usable measurement tools and in platforms for sharing programme learning, tools, and manuals across organizations, so that the field builds cumulatively rather than repeatedly rediscovering the same lessons in isolated pilots.

In summary, masculinities are central to the challenge of building equitable and sustainable food systems. Men's control of land and productive resources, men's patterns of food consumption, men's resistance to or embrace of dietary and agricultural 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 address. Taking masculinities seriously, analytically, programmatically, and politically is a prerequisite for its effectiveness.

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Appendix 1: PRISMA Flow diagram for the scoping review

