



The Role of Agricultural Collectives in Gender Transformative Food and Water Systems

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Acronyms

CARE	Cooperative Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CEFM	Child, Early, and Forced Marriage
CO	Country Office
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FFBS	Farmer Field Business School
FFS	Farmer Field School
GAP	Good Agricultural Practices
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEF	Gender Equality Framework
GTA	Gender Transformative Approach
KII	Key Informant Interview
SAA	Social Analysis in Action
SFtW	She Feeds the World
VESA	Village Economic and Social Association
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association

1

Introduction

Agricultural collectives^A are one of the most important platforms across the globe for small-scale farmers and their households and communities to democratically organize around common goals for prosperity and well-being. To support CARE's commitment to fulfilling the rights to food, water and nutrition security for women and youth small-scale producers and their families, CARE and partners implement programmes that support competitiveness, gender transformative change, and social solidarity of farmers by establishing and strengthening business-oriented farmer collectives, often with the integration of approaches for gender justice^B. Drawing on programmatic learnings, in addition to the lived experiences of members throughout the world, CARE believes that collectives play a significant role in building social cohesion and strengthening individual and collective agency; advancing access to and control over resources; changing harmful and discriminatory gender norms; engaging governance structures to change laws; advocating for policy and practices that uphold women's economic, social and political rights; and, driving socio-economic development by providing structures for actors to collectively advance their common interests.

While CARE has an extensive body of research around the ability for certain types of collectives, such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), to empower women and improve well-being, research gaps remain pertaining to how well agricultural collectives *holistically* address the drivers of systemic inequalities. This research seeks to fill that gap by specifically looking at how agricultural collectives involved in CARE programming in five countries (Guatemala, Ghana, Ethiopia, Georgia, and Bangladesh) contribute to six change areas defined in CARE's She Feeds the World programmatic framework (SFTW). These change areas include women's empowerment, increasing women's access to and control of productive resources, enabling women's access to inclusive markets, improving nutrition, promoting social protection, and multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers. Through this framework, CARE hopes to better understand and identify the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of agricultural collectives in impacting these fundamental pathways to gender-transformative change in food and water systems. The data and conclusions outlined in this research comprise three different forms of inquiry:

A Though there are important differences between collectives and cooperatives, our use of collectives here and throughout the paper includes cooperatives.

B While this paper uses the binary classifications of man and woman, these terms do not encompass the broad range of gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations that have been experienced throughout human history. This range includes identities such as 'yan daudu, Quariwarmi, Hijra, and Mâhû, which are grounded in a specific cultural context and may not be captured in Euro-American terms like transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer.

- A literature review of existing evidence regarding the ability for agricultural collectives to affect change as defined in the SFTW framework;
- Key Informant Interviews with collectives participants, CARE staff, and relevant multi-sectoral CARE partners from the aforementioned five CARE Country Offices;
- Literature reviews of each CARE Country Office's own programmatic evidence regarding the ability for agricultural collectives to affect change as defined in the SFTW framework (contained in Annex B).

1.1 Rationale for Comprehensive Evaluation of Collectives in Food and Water Systems

In a world of ever-increasing inequality, unjust and broken food systems coupled with pressures of conflict, biodiversity loss and increasing climate change, one in three people globally remain malnourished.¹ The inter-related challenges of income inequality, environmental degradation, global pandemics, poor nutrition practices, lack of platforms for direct democracy and grassroots political power, climate and demographic changes, declining productivity, inadequate health and water and sanitation services, unsustainable consumption and diet patterns, and ineffective policies to regulate corporate exploitation of human and natural resources all compound into economic and social failures that are difficult to solve. This trend, if not addressed, will result in over 1.2 billion food insecure people by 2050, with the risk of hunger increased by up to 20%.²

These challenges to social justice are perpetuated through gender inequality and social exclusion. Gender discrimination remains one of the most perverse causes of inequality and marginalisation globally despite major gains in the last two decades.³ CARE works to address the root causes of gender inequality by working directly with women to strengthen their skills and confidence in sustainable agriculture practices, financial inclusion, market engagement, challenging harmful gender norms, and food, water and nutrition security – while also engaging with men and boys to support efforts for greater equality. These approaches also seek to address the social exclusion created by gender inequality where women and girls are involuntarily excluded from their society's political, economic and societal processes, which prevents their full participation in the society in which they live.⁴ Achieving



Naniye Getu washes her face in Digib Gulana Middle School, east Belessa, Amhara region, Ethiopia. The water tabs are made available for the school by SWEEP project implemented by CARE. ©Alexandra Zawadil/CARE

gender equality and social inclusion are both necessary conditions in ensuring human rights and social justice, and it's critical to understand how to work towards these goals in pursuit of just, sustainable, and gender-transformative food and water systems.

CARE's work with groups such as collectives facilitates dialogues that build consciousness of inequalities and skills for collective action. Through group conscientization and collective empowerment, inequalities can be overcome and CARE can better achieve its mission to save lives, defeat poverty, and achieve social justice.⁵ Thus, CARE's work with collectives to build group conscientization and collective empowerment is an important pathway to address the deep structural power and relational barriers that create and reinforce gender and socioeconomic inequalities. The strategic relevance of this evaluation to SFTW, and to CARE's Agenda 2030 goals is thus significant as CARE seeks to consolidate and build on its extensive learning that positions collectives as the foundation for social justice.

2

Conceptual Frameworks

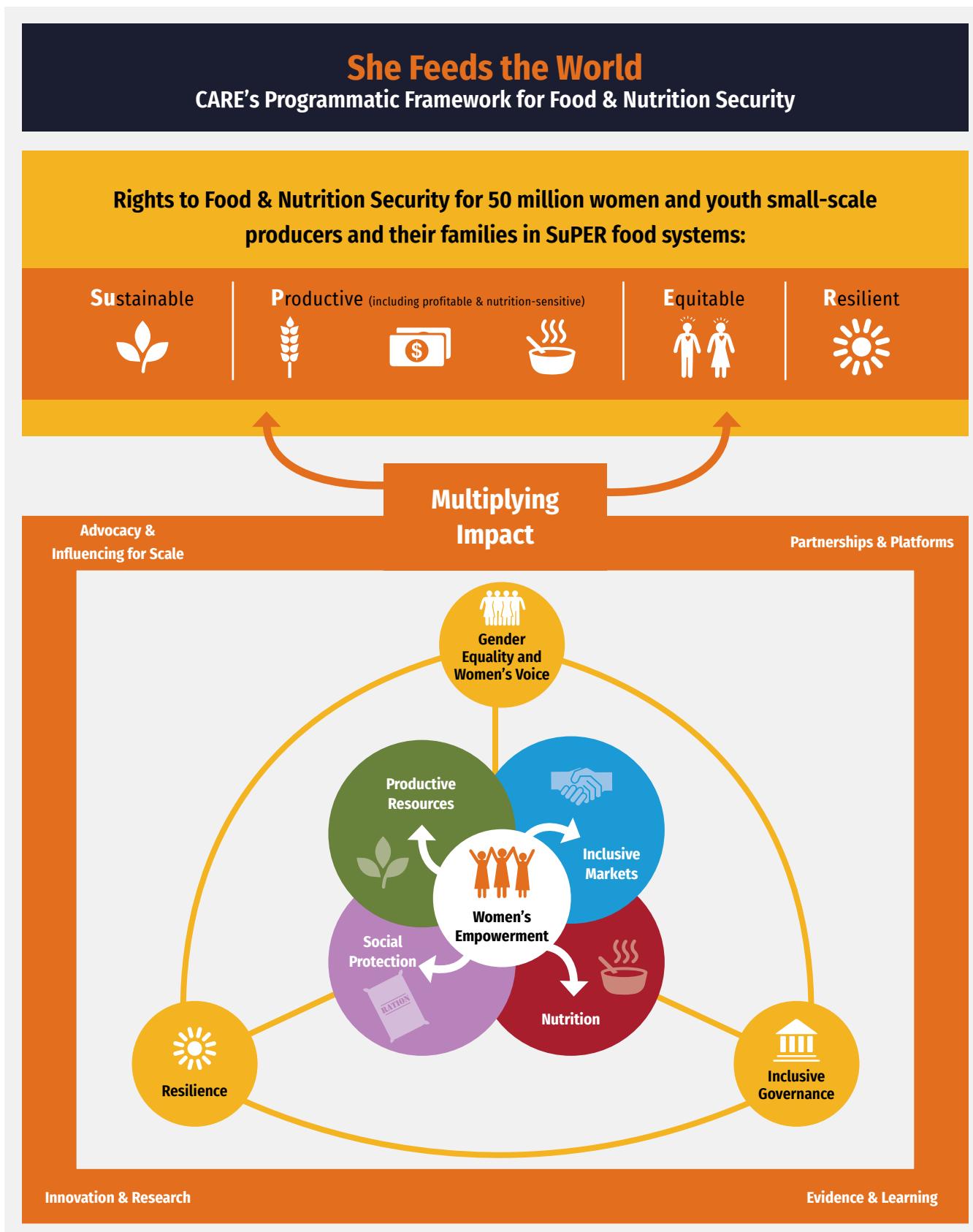
2.1 She Feeds the World Framework

CARE's SFtW framework seeks to contribute to the realization of the rights to food, nutrition and water security of women, small-scale producers and their families, in terms of greater sustainability, production, income, nutrition, equality and resilience. The SFtW framework integrates interventions that incorporate gender, governance and resilience as a common approach across six thematic areas: women's empowerment; productive resources; access to markets; nutrition; social protection, and multiplying impact. SFtW uses evidence-based research and innovations to build strategic partnerships, advocacy and influence strategies that fuel structural changes and scale up proven approaches to improve women's food, water and nutrition security. The three elements of this approach are: strengthening gender equality and women's voice; promoting inclusive governance; and increasing resilience. SFtW prioritises addressing the main underlying causes of poverty and social injustice that are systemic globally, and achieve just and sustainable food and water systems through collectively addressing injustices and building systems that serve the needs of entire populations. Figure 1 below illustrates the SFtW programmatic framework and related approach.



Women farmers who took part in the Partners for Resilience program, gained confidence and began making their own decisions. ©Makmende Media/CARE

Figure 1: She Feeds the World Framework

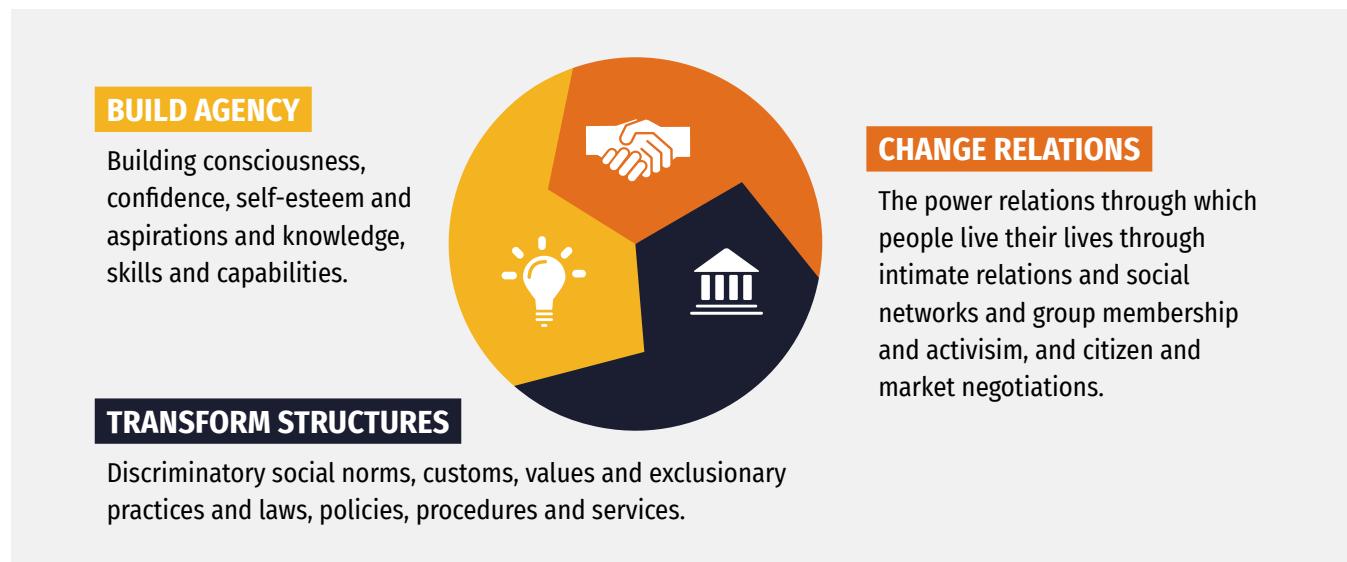


2.2 Gender Equality Framework

In order to build solidarity and advance gender equality, approaches used in engaging with collectives should address the deep structural power and relational barriers of certain countries/contexts. Gender-transformative change requires good governance, including space to reflect on gender and power dynamics and inclusiveness. Interests within and

between group members and leaders, as well as shifting power dynamics in collectives, also require attention. Consequently, CARE's Gender Equality Framework (GEF), outlined in Figure 2 below, also guides the structure and methodology of this research as a useful frame for understanding how gender inequalities are created and reinforced in political, socioeconomic, community, and household structures.

Figure 2: Gender Equality Framework



The GEF comprises three domains for women's empowerment: **build agency** to strengthen the ability for people of all gender and life stages to make choices and act upon them (similar to autonomy but more comprehensive); **change relations** of equality such as values, customs, and practices between people; and **transform structures** to enable systemic changes in both formal and non-formal enabling environments so that people of all gender realize the full potential in their public and private lives and are able to contribute equally to, and benefit equally from, social, political and economic development. At the center of all three dimensions are norms (socially accepted ways of behaving) which influence all components. In order to understand power and empowerment within collectives, this research examines agency, structures and relations. Thus, the evaluation will also be guided by the inherent assumptions of CARE's Theory of Change:

- I. Individual agency is a key part of empowerment whereby conscious and empowered individuals of all genders take steps to achieve their rights;
- II. Gender equality must include men and boys as well as women and girls and people from different gender identities to make necessary holistic changes;
- III. Gender inequality intersects with other forms of oppression and discrimination based on unequal power relations such as disability, racism, class, location, age, sexual orientation, caste, religion and colonial history among others;
- IV. Government actors are primary players as duty bearers responsible for following through on national and international commitments to gender equality;

- V.** Civil society has the crucial role of supporting and advocating for women's rights and holding duty bearers accountable;
- VI.** Resistance and backlash against women's rights are to be expected and thus change for women's rights is long-term and will involve setbacks and follow a non-linear pathway.⁶

Recognizing that achieving gender equality and women's empowerment requires transformative change, these evidence-based frameworks (SFtW and GEF) seek to link women to resources, markets, political participation, structural changes to discriminatory policies, processes and norms, improved family nutrition and food and water security, and practical approaches to break down the barriers that trap small-scale women producers and their families in poverty.



Aklima Begum, is a widowed grandmother who supports herself and her family. Through The SHOMOSTI program supported by CARE she is now fattening livestock and selling her cattle at higher profits direct to market. ©Josh Estey/ CARE

3

Background

3.1 Historical Basis of Collectives in Agriculture

The history of agricultural collectives is rich and complex, taking different forms as communities across the world and throughout human history adapted to the political, socioeconomic, and environmental conditions that defined their livelihoods. Iroquois tribes in North America, for example, held and worked land on a communal basis and shared the benefits collectively⁷, while evidence of similar examples of communal cultivation and benefit-sharing have been discovered in many ancient societies and Indigenous communities.⁸ Modern iterations of agricultural collectives emerged during the transition from feudalism to capitalism as revolutions and peasant uprisings, particularly in socialist and formerly colonized countries, led to the redistribution of land from wealthy landowners⁹ to landless peasants. Some of these land reform policies facilitated the arrangement of voluntary and traditional forms of collective farming, contrasting with the state-mandated agricultural collectivization adopted most notably in the policies of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.¹⁰ However, new agriculture policy and programs influenced by globalization, free trade and structural adjustment programs promoted by agencies such as the World Bank, colonialism, the rise of multinational agribusinesses, and neoliberal¹¹ ideology emphasize deregulation and privatization, which has and continues to undermine both state-mandated and voluntary forms of agricultural collectives.^{12,13} Many forms of contemporary collectives such as producer groups and farmers' cooperatives have formed specifically to address inequalities created

through the globalization of agriculture and the emergence and dominance of agribusiness, such as gaps in financing and access to credit, inequality in land tenure and ownership, and insufficient markets for locally-sourced food.

Despite the complex and politically contested development of agricultural collectives in the 20th Century, many forms of cooperatives, collectives, and producer groups persist, often with the help of governments and INGOs who recognize their systemic benefits to small-scale farmers. For Indigenous Peoples, collective and communal action continues to hold significance in its ability to reduce inequality through resource sharing and economic inclusion, enhancing rural growth and development, creating social capital and reducing violent conflicts, sustaining Indigenous socio-cultural values and practices, promoting natural resources management, creating sustainable and agro-ecological food systems, and enabling participation in decision-making spaces.¹⁴ Collectives are particularly important for Indigenous Peoples and local communities because they reinforce collaboration, cultural history and collective identity, which has often been disrupted through colonial interventions that prioritized private property, competition, and individualism. Indeed, the emphasized role of the individual, brought about "from feudal to capitalist modes of production," in contemporary science, governance, economics, and development programming still prioritizes Western and colonial forms of knowledge at the expense of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.¹⁵

Agricultural collectives can provide benefits to members across different scales of governance and market sectors^{16,17}. Collectives can improve market outcomes through increased

bargaining power, both locally and through networks of cooperatives, which in turn facilitate increased incomes, fairer prices, and better access to markets, inputs, and agricultural extension services.¹⁸ Agricultural collectives have also exercised significant influence on governments to change many of the foundational policies that create inequities for small-scale farmers, such as market regulations, land tenure, territorial development, and citizenships and human rights.¹⁹ Collectives similarly play an important role in increasing members' access to data and information such as climate information services by increasing awareness and uptake of climate information among female members during discussions where women can learn from each other and develop trust in the information.²⁰ Based on data from 156 countries, the International Organisation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives estimates that in 2017 employment within the scope of cooperatives, comprising mainly self-employed producer-members, concerns over 252.2 million people, roughly 9% of the world's employed population, the vast majority being in agriculture.^{21,22}

Many of these small-scale farmers are women with limited access to and control over productive resources, and landless agricultural labourers.²³ While women make important

contributions to agriculture globally, in development policy and planning for agriculture, their interests and experiences continue to be excluded, misinterpreted or incorporated with those of men.²⁴ Globally, women continue to face extensive gender-based discrimination and disadvantage in agriculture that include: less access than men to productive resources and services; less access to credit; limited control over household incomes; gender-based violence; limited or no participation in household decisions related to agriculture and production; and less access to agriculture inputs, extension services, resources, and markets among others.²⁵ The effects of colonialism, "and imported Abrahamic religions that propagated ideologies of gender inequality and the confinement of women to the family sphere,"²⁶ also reinforce forms of discrimination today, manifested in gendered divisions of labor, inequities in accessing resources and barriers to participation. Understanding gender inequality through a decolonial lens reveals how "discrimination was integral to early colonialism, and also now through development interventions led by global North actors that, in targeting these very inequities,"²⁷ create dependencies between countries receiving aid (many of which were formerly colonized) and the national and international development agencies in the Global North.



Afaf was the first farmer and woman to grow baby cucumber in the West Bank. Along with her family she is now recruiting her own staff to help the business grow. ©Arouri/CARE

Many of the countries in the Global South are experiencing a highly gendered agrarian transition as men out-migrate in large numbers for off-farm jobs leading to the feminisation of agriculture.^{28,29} The subsequent effects are low agricultural growth and poor management of natural resources due to the increased household care burdens of women, de facto female-headed households from marital breakdown, widowhood and de jure female-maintained households.³⁰ Although the feminization of agriculture has become a recent phenomenon, women are not adequately supported to maintain their family agriculture business and ensure it is dignified, productive, and sustainable. Many of these women are illiterate or have lower levels of literacy, possess few skills beyond farming and their population is rising as farm-sizes diminish with most utilising less than 1 hectare.³¹

These women constitute most of the landless, even when born or married into landed households. Gendered intra-household differences in wealth allocation and reproductive roles worsen the situation. Many of these women are working as unpaid family ‘helpers’ and remain excluded from significant livelihood opportunities.³² Further, until the last decade, there has been very limited recognition of this demographic shift resulting in the feminisation of agriculture and its implications for rural and agricultural development.³³ Discriminatory legal and cultural norms further inhibit the ability for women to participate equally in agricultural activities, such as in communities dominated by lines of patrilineal inheritance where the children, not the wife, inherit land even after the death of a husband.³⁴ Participation in agricultural collectives offers a myriad number of ways to address the many gender-based inequalities faced by small-scale women farmers, and a promising pathway to reverse the threats inherent in the feminization of agriculture.

Such collectives play a significant role in building social cohesion, advancing access to and control over resources, enhancing women farmers’ skills and capacities to become viable farmers, engaging governance structures and overcoming structural barriers to effectively run agricultural enterprises, building the agency and confidence of women to engage in policy advocacy for socio-economic development and the protection of rights, and creating platforms for actors to collectively advance their common interests.

3.2 Definition and Categorization of Agricultural Collectives

3.2.1 Top-Down Collectives

Collectives have traditionally focused on agriculture and can be divided into two types: production collectives involving joint cultivation and service collectives for credit and savings, inputs or marketing.³⁵ Joint cultivation was associated with social collectivisation in USSR, China, Northern Vietnam and Eastern Europe and some non-socialists countries such as Ecuador, Nicaragua, Ethiopia and Tanzania (Ujamaa Policy). Israel also practised joint cultivation involving both men and women as a way of enhancing productivity, during the 1960s-1970s. Bina (2010) points out that production collectives generally failed in comparison to service collectives and identifies five features of social collectivisation which contributed to negative outcomes: large tracts of land for production enterprises; coercion and pooling of small-scale farmers’ farms; mandatory requisition of agricultural produce; exclusion of farmers’ voice in decision-making; and concealed gender inequalities and socio-economic exclusion.³⁶ In most production collectives the family was the participating unit and consideration of gender effects was almost non-existent. Women were embedded in traditional roles and positions of disempowerment with membership limited to one person, typically the male household head, and where women became direct members it was on unequal terms.³⁷ Some of these failing features are present in current collectives and continue to be barriers to policy reform in collective approaches in diverse rural contexts.³⁸

3.2.2 Bottom-up Collectives

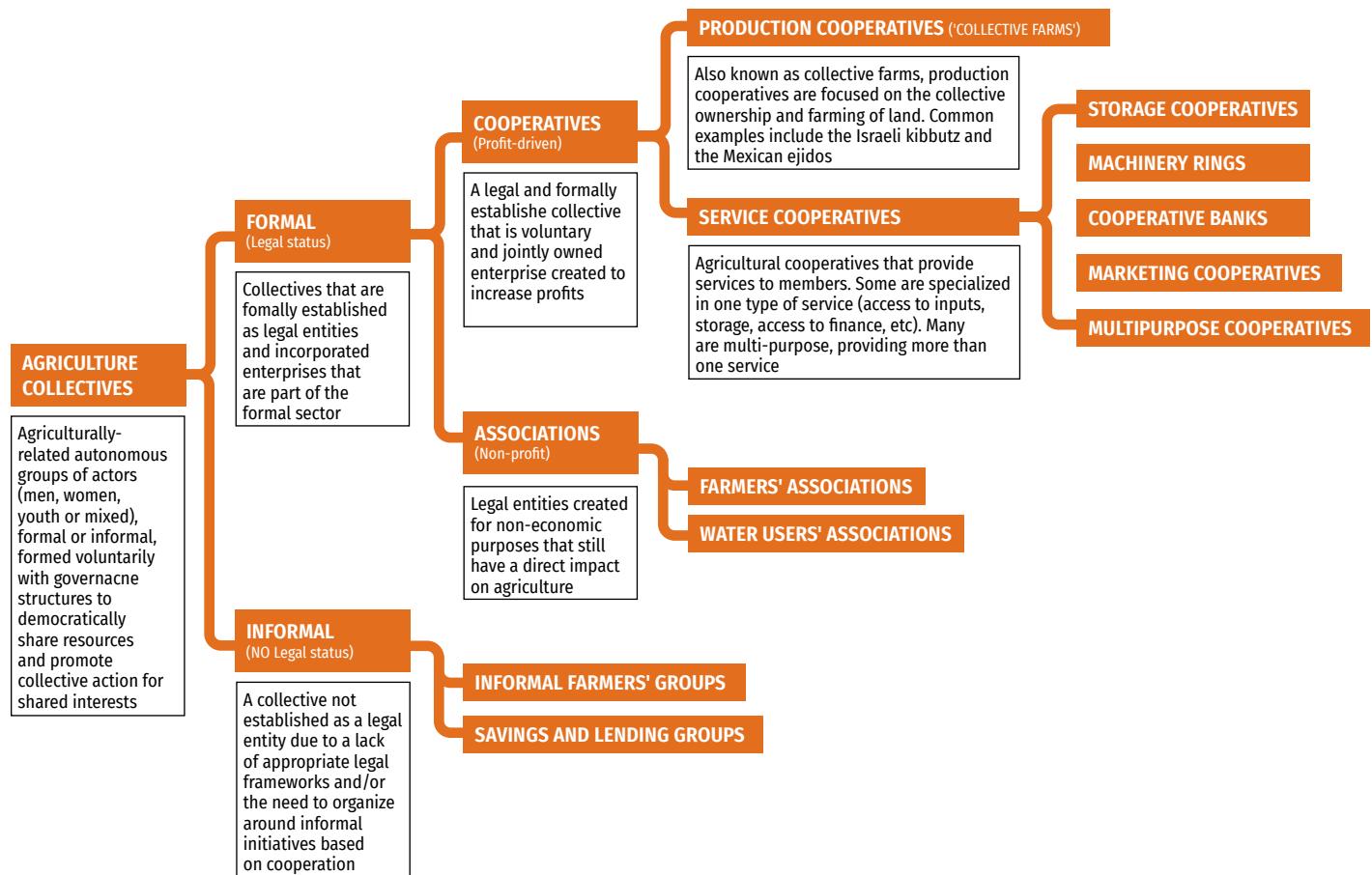
The typology for ‘bottom-up’ forms of collectives fulfils the tenets of human rights approaches and is framed around seven principles; 1) voluntariness; 2) democratic control and participation of members in decision-making to ensure accountability; 3) equitable contribution and distribution of economic resources; 4) autonomy and independence; 5) provision of education, training, and information; 6) cooperation between cooperatives to take advantage of networks and scale benefits; 7) support for the sustainable development of their local communities.³⁹ Though many countries introduced measures of de-collectivization in response to the perceived failures of top-down collectivization

in the mid to late-20th century, many farming families continued to work together in reformed collective institutional arrangements or formed new bottom-up groups.

Collectives also came to be defined differently to avoid comparisons with top-down collectivization, as “many development actors preferred to use terms like member-based organisations, farmers’ groups, people’s organisations, producers’ associations, neighbourhood clubs, self-help organisations and sometimes alternative associations in industrialised countries, in order to emphasise the importance of people’s real participation and commitment.”⁴⁰ Currently, collectives are increasingly using bottom-up approaches and incorporating crucial elements of human rights approaches, in particular gender equity, social inclusion, intersectionality, transparency, participation and empowerment of disadvantaged and marginalized groups.⁴¹ This renewed approach to collectives was formally recognized by the ILO in 2002 through its Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, in addition to the UN’s International Year of Cooperatives in 2012.^{42,43}

The function of these collective organisations can range from joint investments such as financial ventures to physically indivisible inputs such as machinery for hire in agricultural production, land pooling especially for the landless, common pooled natural resource-based collectives such as Water User Associations (WUAs), to food security and nutrition social protection collectives and joint cultivation by small-scale producers. Overall, communities, governments, and CARE and other development agencies have implemented programs using various types of collectives: Self-Help Groups (SHG), Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA), natural resource user groups and Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), among others. This programming has seen the emergence of hybrid forms of collectives, such as Village Economic and Social Associations (VESAs) in Ethiopia, and Farmer Empowerment Marketing Associations (FEMAs) in Ethiopia and Ghana. The diagram below illustrates and describes the different types of agricultural collectives and their different mandates and benefits for small-scale farmers.

Figure 3. Types of Agricultural Collectives



Because the nature of agricultural collectives is often broad and poorly understood, it's important to have a clear definition of what a collective is in practice. For the purpose of this research and literature review, agricultural collectives are defined as agriculture-related autonomous groups of actors (men, women, youth or mixed), formal or informal, formed voluntarily with governance structures to democratically share resources (time, labour, money and other assets) and promote collective action for shared interests. Informal collectives are distinct in that they are not established as legal entities due to a lack of appropriate and accessible legal frameworks for registering collectives and instances where collectives are formed for "more informal initiatives based on

cooperation among people, such as community-level mutual help activities, farmers' groups, neighbourhood groups or alternative grassroots movements or associations."⁴⁴ Through offering opportunities for rural actors and opposing the top-down consequences of collectivization including mass repression, enforced grain requisition, top-down decision-making, and disregard for gender equality and socio-economic exclusion, bottom-up collectives can be seen as a renaissance for collective action in the development arena. Currently, some bottom-up collectives are formed based on gender composition and can comprise women only, men only and mixed (men and women), with leadership from either gender.



In Tanzania, CARE is partnering with both the private and public sectors to support the scaling of VSLAs by strengthening collective action. Through training VSLA members learn new efficient modern methods of farming, as well as how to market their products. ©Phil Kabuje/CARE

4

Methodology for Key Informant Interviews

4.1 Data Collection Methodology and Limitations

Data collection for this research occurred from December 2020 – June 2021, and was administered by each CARE Country Office (CO). COVID-related restrictions meant that initial data collection methods, including in-person focus group discussions, were not possible. Instead, data collection comprised in-person and remote Key Informant Interviews with CARE staff, and relevant government, private sector, non-governmental stakeholders, and members of CARE

agricultural collectives in order to develop an understanding of how well these collectives strengthen gender equality, promote inclusive governance, increase resilience, and meet the needs of collective members. The five CARE Country Offices that participated in the research were chosen based off of their extensive experience working with established collectives, the history of collectives more broadly within each country, and the diversity of collectives represented in each context. The table below provides a breakdown of the interview sample along with key goals for each constituent group.⁴⁵

Country	Key Informant Interviews	
	CARE Staff and Partners	Collective Members
Ethiopia	17 (sex not disaggregated)	45 (sex not disaggregated)
Ghana	9 Female/20 Male	45 Female/9 Male
Georgia	5 Female/8 Male	16 Female/7 Male
Guatemala	6 Female/4 Male	44 Female/10 Male
Bangladesh	1 Female/7 Male	46 Female

4.2 Scope of inquiry

The scope and structure of the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were also guided by the She Feeds the World and Gender Equality Framework, particularly the six change areas defined in SFtW. All of the questions posed in the KIIs were structured to glean information about different outcomes related to each change area:

Women's Empowerment:

- Women's levels of participation in different typologies of collectives and their confidence to engage in agriculture and market systems.
- Women's ability to better influence and/or control intrahousehold decision-making in agriculture and within their collectives.
- The impact of gender relations on increased voice and power within households, communities and markets.
- The role of engaging masculinities to address gendered social norms and barriers to women's engagement in collectives and market systems.

Increasing women's access to and control of productive resources:

- Improved access to agricultural and productive resources, and assets, with key emphasis on; land, water, inputs, information and technologies and access to finance.
- Ability for collectives to improve women's control over assets and productive resources.
- Comparison of women engaged in collectives versus those not, and how collectives have enhanced women's access to agro-advisory services including climate change to improve agriculture.

Enabling women's access to inclusive markets:

- Capacity of collectives to improve women's access to input and output markets to unlock greater production and expand profits from small-scale agriculture.
- Potential of collectives to enhance women farmers' ability and confidence to participate and negotiate better market outcomes, and decision-making in market systems.

- The capacity of groups to serve as a platform for establishing links with key stakeholders, service providers, private sector market actors and other institutions.
- The potential role of collectives in facilitating members access to inputs and markets more reliably.

Improving nutrition:

- The potential of collectives to improve household nutrition and the possibilities of determining the impact of collectives on nutrition and the related implications for value chain identification.
- The prospects of the engagement of both men and women in collectives contribute to improved health and nutrition through both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive activities.

Promoting social protection:

- The role of collectives in assisting vulnerable households in securing sustainable and resilient pathways for food and water security
- The role of collectives in social safety net programming (food aid, school feeding programs, vouchers, cash among others).
- The potential of collectives to be used to facilitate households to transition from safety net or social protection schemes to sustainable, gender-transformative livelihoods.
- The role of collectives in supporting women and engendering solidarity in instances of Gender-Based Violence

Multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers:

- Strategic alliances and partnerships, policy advocacy, research and innovation needed by CARE at micro, meso and macro levels to build and engage collectives that lead to gender-transformative food systems that account for the needs of women farmers.
- The capacity of relations between and within different types of collectives to create greater coordination and effectiveness.

- Assessing the opportunities and challenges of collectives so to develop and strengthen their capacities as sustainable community institutions, before CARE's exit.
- Understanding the resources necessary to help collectives achieve scale through partnerships.
- Identify sample indicators that could be used to measure the effectiveness of collectives for sustainable, gender-transformative change.

It's critical to note that the key findings for each Country Office are inextricably tied to their local contexts, each one a unique and complex web of varied histories, enabling environments, forms of governance, socioeconomic barriers, and forms of programming. While certain types of collectives, such as VSLAs, are found in many of the different countries, their mandates and resources are influenced by the CARE programming they engaged with, resulting in findings that cannot be understood without providing the necessary background. Thus, a brief explanation of the relevant CARE

CO programming and policy environments is provided for each CARE CO. Even with this understanding and knowing that this paper provides generalized recommendations from the experiences of the five countries, we acknowledge that comparison among these different countries is difficult and often imprecise.

4.3 CARE CO Literature Review

In addition to the KIIs, CARE Country Offices prepared written reviews and syntheses of their internal learnings and evidence on the added value of agricultural collectives in terms of their contributions to the She Feed the World Framework change areas (contained in Annex B). Because this study sought not to replicate existing evidence, but produce new learnings, it was vitally important to understand the existing evidence strengths and gaps regarding each CARE CO's understanding of how well agricultural collectives promote and create gender-transformative food systems.



Crab Farmer Tisha Rani Halder, who has beenffited from the Crab Culturr Practices program in Bangladesh kisses her son Anup Kuma.
©Tapash Paul/CARE

5

Key findings

5.1 Bangladesh

5.1.1 Background

With a population of nearly 168 million, Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world, with a history of frequent natural disasters such as cyclones and floods. While it has shown remarkable improvement in human development and a significant poverty reduction, there are still numerous challenges in empowering the most vulnerable, particularly women and girls. For decades, CARE Bangladesh has worked to strengthen livelihoods and dignified work, food and nutrition security, inclusive governance, sexual and reproductive health, ending violence against women and child marriage, pro-poor market engagement, disaster and climate risk reduction and emergency response. Agricultural collectives of diverse types play a pivotal role in nearly all sectors of CARE Bangladesh's programs, most notably in the projects Where the Rain Falls, SHOUHARDO II, and Pathways SAMMOW.

In Where the Rain Falls, mixed gender Farmer Field Schools (FFS) were leveraged as a collective platform to engage women farmers by integrating gender-transformative approaches such as Gendered Adaptive Action Plans, gender norms and trend analysis, and mapping the mobility of women. For example, women security committees were formed in each FFS to increase the ability for women to travel safely. Men were also engaged in FFS to better support women and reduce their time poverty from gendered domestic care responsibilities.

As climate resilience was a central outcome area for WtRF, FFS were critical in introducing climate-smart agricultural techniques, which were often scaled most successfully by women farmers largely on account of their social networks within and between communities.

Working with existing and mobilizing new Empowerment, Knowledge and Transformative Action (EKATA) groups was a pivotal strategy in both SHOUHARDO II and Pathways SAMMOW. EKATA groups are women-only or mixed gender collectives that provide a platform to develop the confidence, self-esteem, and skills of women while creating an enabling environment for the inclusion and participation of women in development processes. Because they are easily adaptable platforms, EKATA groups were leveraged to support the women's empowerment and food security goals of both programs by increasing income for women through FFS training, educating members on their labor rights, and facilitating EKATA forums on women's rights and fair wages at multiple levels of government. Examples like these demonstrate how CARE Bangladesh works to increase the impact of collectives such as EKATA and FFS by broadening their mandates to holistically address food and water security and nutrition, women's labor rights and economic empowerment, and discriminatory norms at all levels.

5.1.2 Women's empowerment

Since becoming members of a mixed-gender collective, male members (boys and men) of the collectives participate in activities related to gender equality. For respondents whose

collectives included male members, respondents highlighted ways that men and boys in the collectives actively participate in gender equality activities: participating in village protests using processions to advocate for gender equal pay and elimination of gender-based violence (GBV); lobbying directly to community leaders to guarantee equal rights for women and men in the agriculture collectives and larger community; championing for support to women who are survivors of gender-based violence; and working collectively with women to end child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) and promote increased access to education to children, especially girls.

Since development of mixed-gender collectives, women and men sit physically together in the same room and jointly problem-solve and make decisions. Most respondents from mixed-gender collectives mentioned that the development of the collectives has led to women and men sitting together physically in the same room to discuss issues, problem-solve, and make joint decisions related to farming like production-related problems and ways to increase production, improve price negotiations, and ensure equal wages. Neither sitting together physically nor jointly resolving problems and making decisions in agricultural activities took place prior to the development of the collectives.

Collectives have contributed to increased sharing of household responsibilities between women and men. Several respondents reported that after engaging in participatory gender awareness learning and reflection activities, men now assume some domestic and care responsibilities to alleviate the time burden of women. Examples of new roles that men assume are attending the fire for cooking, fetching water from the well, serving meals to temporary laborers, cutting wood, feeding livestock, and taking care of the children.

Collective membership provides women with increased freedom of movement and decision-making autonomy. Most respondents mentioned that since being a member of the collective, they are now able to move independently with the consent and sometimes without the consent of their husbands to visit relatives, go to the market or community health clinic, attend a school meeting, etc. One respondent describes:

"I feel that I am much braver than before; I can travel easily to the market and to other institutions."



Halima Begum, a beneficiary of the SHOMOSTI project has received better yields by planting vegetables using pheromone traps. ©Tapash Paul/CARE



Sumi Akhter (25) from Cholitabari, Union Nandirgaon, Sylhet district is now a successful duck farmer. The Shomoshti project supported to improve her skill on duck rearing and starting from only two ducks she is now rearing 15 and having more income. ©Akram Ali/CARE

Membership in collectives has also led to most women enjoying increased involvement in family decision-making through discussion and mutual agreement with male members of their household on family matters like children's marriage. As one member stated,

"I can now make decisions because I am part of a group."

Some interviewed women noted that their autonomy to make decisions about educating their children, financial decisions, selecting the clothes they want to buy and wear, planting and selling crops, and family planning has increased since participating in the agricultural collective. Others expressed how they felt their decision-making autonomy and power at the community-level have also increased.

Women have gained self-confidence to use their voice, be heard, and assert their rights through participation in collectives. Women participants noted that participating in collective meetings gave them the opportunity to share their opinions and join new organizations, leading to increased confidence to communicate with people of different spheres. They mention the ability to talk with representatives from NGOs, the Agricultural and Livestock Office, seed companies, and the *Union Parishad*, which are the rural councils and smallest administrative units in Bangladesh. According to one member:

"Earlier I used to feel scared to talk, but now I don't. Now the members know me and I can communicate with government and non-government organizations very easily."

Several respondents mentioned that training and awareness-raising activities focused on learning about their rights, the law, and where to seek justice, including in cases of GBV. This knowledge has bolstered the self-confidence of women, especially those who are young. In turn, respondents report that their opinions and suggestions are now heard, valued, and respected. One respondent explains,

"Previously, only men's words counted. However, now women's words are important because women are learning about laws and rights. Our knowledge and dignity are increasing."

Gender transformative activities and awareness-raising offered through collectives helped change some traditional attitudes and perceptions about women's roles in society. According to a community partner respondent, the training and activities of the collective have helped to create new community attitudes that support women's participation in public settings. Examples include a new acceptance of women and men sitting together physically to discuss matters, outside organizations now addressing and engaging women collective members, and increased acceptance of women working in the agricultural fields and talking to men who are not from their households. Male farmers are becoming more receptive to the needs and leadership of women due to participation in collectives and the *Union Parishad* is now willing to acknowledge women as farmers. However, continued constraints include resistance from local elders to allowing girls and women to have free movement, including to the agricultural fields and the markets.

5.1.3 Increasing women's access to and control over resources

Women's livelihood opportunities and earnings have increased through participation in collectives. This, in turn, has led to increased access and control over household income. The majority of respondents find that membership in an agricultural collective has increased their livelihood opportunities and earnings. Several respondents improved their earnings through collective negotiation of their wages for agricultural labor. By negotiating collectively, they have been able to increase their daily wages. Women report an increase in earnings primarily as a result of employing new business and agricultural knowledge gained from training provided through their membership in a collective. Employing this new knowledge led to lower costs for inputs and increased production of agricultural products to sell. In turn, they report being able to generate higher profit margins, save, and reinvest in their agricultural enterprise to buy needed inputs, equipment, and/or land. As result of their involvement in earning income for the household, they are able to decide autonomously how to use their income. One woman's experience captures this process:

"I save tk. 5,000 from selling eggs and vegetables that I grew after joining the farming collective....I gave the money to my husband to buy a goat. Later I sold the goat and gathered money from savings and bought a cow worth tk. 15,000. In 2017, I started cultivating as a sharecropper on 1 bigha of land. Eventually in 2018, I sold the cow and borrowed tk.110,000 from an NGO to buy a power tiller. I took more land on lease and involved my husband in its cultivation. He was able to quit his job as a rickshaw puller. Now I cultivate 5 bighas of land as a sharecropper and take 15 percent of land on mortgage. I also now earn approximately tk 20,000-30,000 of income per month from renting my power tiller."

Women have increased control over use of household resources and assets since becoming a member of a collective. Women report increased control over agricultural resources, allowing them to make decisions about buying and selling assets like poultry, goats, cattle, agricultural inputs, and land, to a lesser extent.

Women have greater access to quality and fairly priced agricultural inputs because of their participation in collectives. Training provided through the agricultural collectives has taught women members about how to produce valuable inputs like seeds and fertilizer to eliminate the need to purchase them. They received training on seed collection and composting to make organic fertilizer. They also learned the importance of comparing prices of inputs and how to negotiate fair prices. The training also provided them with tips and tools to determine the quality of livestock and other agricultural inputs.

Dependence on informal loans, which is extremely exploitative, has reduced as collectives provide access to credit and capital using both microloans and alternatives financing means. In some cases, collectives provided the opportunity for women members to borrow increased loan amounts from microfinance institutions. One respondent reported that her collective eliminated the use of loans among members by executing a joint investment plan among its members. Due to introduction of group savings and other Income-Generating Activities, respondents' access to credit and income earning has increased, thus leading to less dependence on informal credit. Access to formal microfinance has also increased and collectives have been able to take larger loans without collateral because of their greater acceptance in society, the members' expanded business skills, and members who reported helping each other connect with different financial institutions to get larger amount of credit. Women members have also shifted away from taking loans for subsistence, using them instead to reinvest in their agricultural enterprises.

Access to land has increased for women members of collectives. Women report having increased land to cultivate because of their membership in a collective. Training provided to women raised awareness of the amount of khas land, or government owned fallow land, around their home that could be cultivated. The increased income generated by cultivating the fallow land also has led to many women purchasing additional land with a mortgage.

Through collective membership, women have been able to purchase equipment to access water and have received water, sanitation, and hygiene training. Respondents report that their access to irrigation has increased because they were able to purchase a "shallow machine" – a diesel



Jorna Begum, Beneficiary, KRISHI UTSHO works as a one stop service, especially for the smallholder farmers by providing them with their desired necessities through their chain of rural input supply shops. ©Tapash Paul/CARE

engine that helps pump water – made possible through the increased income generated in part by their membership in an agricultural collective. Their and their families' knowledge and awareness of good hygiene and sanitation practices (e.g., washing hands after using the toilet and before eating, wearing shoes to toilets, etc.) has increased through training received through the collective. This training provided the needed impetus for most women's households updating their toilet facilities from a simple dug-out hole in the ground to using ring slabs, leading to improved toilet facilities. Respondents from one collective emphasized that members were able to collectively advocate to the *Union Parishad* on the need to address arsenic in their drinking water, which led to receiving funding for three tube-wells that now provide arsenic-free potable water.

Through collectives, women farmers have participated in trainings on new farming knowledge, practices, and technology and have increased contact with agricultural extension services. Collectives provide a space for women to learn new farming practices and experiment with new technologies. Women identified a number of new practices and technologies used as a result of training received through the collectives: crop rotation and year-round cultivation, planting two crops at the same time, organic and climate-change friendly farming practices (e.g., compost fertilizers, use of natural predators like to control pests), climate-tolerant paddy cultivation (e.g., use of drought resistant and flood

tolerant crops, cultivating in sacks that can be moved in case of flooding), cultivation of high yielding vegetables, seed bed preparation, land pile system for improved vegetable farming, growing vegetables in high lands, and sandbar cropping. Respondents also reported access to new knowledge related to livestock (e.g., proper breeding, feed, and overall care).

Since becoming members of agricultural collectives, women have also increased access to agricultural extension services by maintaining contact with extension services agents over the phone. They have also established strong relationships with the agricultural office and non-traditional departments like meteorological departments, which are helpful for gaining information that contributes to increased production.

5.1.4 Enabling women's access to inclusive markets

Membership in collectives provides an avenue for women to sell products cooperatively at market and secure better profit margins. Women have accessed training about getting products to market through membership in collectives. This has provided needed knowledge on the collective purchase of inputs and, in turn, sale of products. When women producers sell their products collectively, they save on overhead costs like transportation to markets and are also able to negotiate higher prices for their products. This, in turn, has improved their profit margin.

However, women's limited mobility acts as a key constraint to most young women accessing markets, but other members of the collectives support these women's inclusion. Some women, especially young women, continue to have limited mobility because of social norms that prevents them from being at the market, which keeps them from going to the market themselves to sell products. However, being part of a collective has allowed them to access the markets by giving their products to other members who can go to the market to sell the products collectively.

Men have greater access than women to informal networks that provide essential market information. Bangladesh society still considers men as the primary decision makers. Therefore, stakeholders with market information like agricultural extension service agents and private sector actors (e.g., fertilizer dealers) go to men to provide and exchange information. Men typically have more mobility to go to markets to collect information and have greater access to mobile phones to connect with sources of information. This information is then shared with women in the collective. Women-only collectives do not benefit from this increased amount of market information that continues to be largely controlled by men.

Projects that supported collective development did not focus on market inclusion and other vertical linkages. The projects that provided funds to help start agricultural collectives that engaged women focused greatly on agricultural know-how but little on how women could have equal access to markets for their products. As a result, when projects ended, there were no formal or informal linkages made with private and public sector actors that could increase women's inclusion in markets beyond the project's end.

The environment in the markets is not conducive to gender equal participation. Interviews with CARE Bangladesh staff and partners noted that there were still patriarchal systems in place that prevent women from fully benefiting from the market, although access to markets and services has significantly improved. Women have greater access to agri-inputs or financial services, however only about half reported access to the nearest point of sale. Women's participation in market committees is very low, market spaces in rural areas are typically operated by influential men, and women have little training in negotiation skills and few financial resources to establish their shops in the market. In addition, few women have groceries shops nearby their house or nearby their communities. Women's active engagement in the market is also restricted by harmful social norms and security issues.



As an agent of the KRISHI UTSHO program Rangpur, Josna Begum, who not only received benefits herself, but has also helped the people of the rural communities through this program ©Tapash Paul/CARE.



Rokeya Begum is a successful entrepreneur who has benefitted from the KRISHI UTSHO program. ©Tapash Paul/CARE

5.1.5 Improving nutrition

Women participated in nutrition training provided through collectives, and accordingly have gained knowledge about nutrition that they continue to put to practice. Key informants mentioned they continue a number of nutrition activities and practices they learned as members of an agricultural collective. These include maintaining home vegetable gardens, washing vegetables before cutting them, cooking them on low heat, eating fresh and clean food, and eating yellow fruit. Women members also have continued informal discussions on how to improve their household nutrition. The training also included information about how to support nutrition of pregnant and lactating mothers. Because of this training, pregnant and lactating mothers are more frequently accessing iron tablets, vitamins, and vaccines. Women report putting in practice their new knowledge on nutrition to make nutritious meals for infants and pregnant and lactating mothers.

Some male attitudes about women's nutrition have changed. Men's attitudes towards women's diets have been changing since women's inclusion in agricultural collectives. They are taking more responsibility for ensuring everyone's access to nutritious meals.

5.1.6 Promoting social protection and mitigating harmful effects

Collectives support creation of social protection through group savings. Savings groups created within collectives is an important social protection feature identified by some respondents. Even when collective savings is not a feature of a given collective or has not continued since the collectives stopped functioning, women noted they are able to save money and purchase assets like poultry, goats, and cows.

Women have become collaborative through their membership in collectives, including during times of crisis. Key informants explained that cooperation has grown among women in communities where there is a collective. Female members help each other to produce and harvest collectively. During times of scarcity, women support each other with daily needs and household activities. They give each other advice and support each other to resolve problems that range from agriculture production challenges to GBV. In the latter case, the women often come together as a group to support the women facing GBV and help them get the resources they need. Overall, being

part of a collective has made women more empathetic towards each other. One respondent explained that,

"After working in the collective, feelings of compassion among the members during times of food scarcity and [crisis and shocks] have developed."

Respondents also report that they support each other during times of crisis by sharing food, cash, and other basic necessities with each other. They also prepare collectively for potential natural disasters through efforts like having savings set aside and keeping dry food on hand at home before the wet season brings flooding.

Membership in collectives connects women with social safety nets and other governmental/non-governmental services during times of crisis and food scarcity as well as outside of times of crisis. Being a member of a collective has provided women connections to social safety nets and employment opportunities they would not have otherwise known about. Examples include access to VGF, VGD⁴⁶ cards, special allowances available to elderly persons, widows, and persons with disabilities, and food ration cards. Two female members of one collective accessed an employment opportunity with the "40 Days Digging Project"⁴⁷ through their connection with the collective. They predominantly feel that as members of a collective, they are able to access governmental and NGO services easier than before. During times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, members have communicated collectively with governmental authorities to access food baskets that include rice, oil, and lentils.

Women and men in collectives have gained knowledge and awareness about GBV through training and awareness-raising activities. Accordingly, they have become active in preventing and responding to GBV, resulting in reduced incidences. Respondents reported that training and critical reflection activities related to GBV provided by local authorities and NGO partners was instrumental to changes in attitudes and behaviors that sustain GBV such as intimate partner violence (IPV), coercion for dowry, and CEFM as forms of GBV that female members of their collective face. In response, women and men in the agricultural collectives have been active in preventing and responding to these forms of GBV. Some examples include village procession protests, notifying the authorities when they hear of CEFM, prohibiting CEFM among their members, and direct intervention and mediation with couples in cases of IPV. Because of their

efforts, CEFM and forced dowry has decreased in some areas where collectives are active. Men are also less likely now to use physical violence when a fight ensues with their wives who are members of a collective.

5.1.7 Multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers

Women report becoming more active in local politics and advocacy since joining a collective, which has contributed to new social development initiatives and better governance. Interviewed participants mentioned increased involvement in local and regional political entities such as becoming members of the *Union Parishad* and school committees or participating in meetings and activities as active citizens. This participation has provided opportunities to gain knowledge about their rights and to advocate for them directly with local government authorities, including communicating collectively and individually with the Chairman and member of the *Union Parishad* to advocate for construction of roads and bridges. As members of a collective, they also helped lead social development initiatives like organizing a vaccination clinic. The latter engagement with local authorities either individually or collectively did not take place before being part of the agricultural collective. Being part of collective allows women to communicate and make requests collectively to the *Union Parishad*. According to a respondent, "[although collectives are no longer functioning], the cooperation of the group in getting various facilities is still present because it is not possible to go alone to request assistance from the *Union Parishad*." Likewise, a respondent mentioned that the Village Development Council is more effective when their collective is fully functioning, which may be because of the role the collective played in holding the Council accountable to their responsibilities. However, the ability for collectives to fully function was tied to the support received through SHOUHARDO II, which underscores the challenges of maintaining sustainability for collectives after the end of programming.

According to respondents, female members of collectives often access community clinics and union health centers for family planning, counseling, and other health care services as members of a collective versus as individuals. The members believe they receive better care when using these public health facilities collectively. Collectives have also worked towards increasing the number of community clinics.

5.2 Ethiopia

5.2.1 Background

CARE Ethiopia's recent experience with collectives, specifically VESAs and VSLAs, primarily derives from three key programs: Berchi or "Be Strong," Women's Empowerment: Improving Resilience and Food Security (WE-RISE), and Graduation with Resilience to Achieve Sustainable Development. These programs, broadly speaking, focused on the goal of achieving sustainable food and nutrition security in rural Ethiopia with a particular attention paid to empowering marginalized and chronically food insecure women. VSLA, VESA, and SAA approaches were integrated into these programs as entry points for women's financial management and business skills training, exposure to agricultural technologies and information, group saving and investment for diversified income generating opportunities, increased productivity, linkage to microfinance, improved access to input and output markets, and facilitating dialogues and trainings among men and women regarding gender equality and women's empowerment.

In addition, women's participation was institutionalized in VSLA by-laws through the proportion of women in leadership positions, and the promotion and transformation of harmful and discriminatory gender norms and perceptions about women leadership. VSLAs were composed of women while the VESAs were mixed gender, and men and women were involved in SAA discussions regarding harmful and discriminatory gender norms and socio-cultural practices. VESAs, VSLAs, and associated platforms of community engagement have been important tools for promoting women's empowerment, poverty reduction, and food and nutrition security throughout CARE Ethiopia's rural development interventions.

Emebet Nigus, 35, weeding her potato farm in West Belesa, Amhara region, Ethiopia. Emebet is member of her kebele's VSLA group, which was established by CARE in 2018 along with many other VSLA groups to encourage savings and resiliency. Emebet is able to grow her farm by taking loan from the VSLA group. ©Genaye Eshetu/CARE



5.2.2 Women's empowerment

Collectives provide women with training on their rights and leadership opportunities, which has led to increased self-confidence to ask questions, make decisions, and advocate to local authorities. Female respondents report feeling more empowered and confident thanks to trainings on business development and on gender norms and women's rights. Assuming leadership positions in collectives has also boosted their self-confidence. Collectives have supported leadership of women in a number of community-based organizations and committees. In Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) groups, women assume roles as chair persons, box keepers, money counters, and secretary positions. As a result of their membership in an agricultural collective, women have also assumed new leadership roles in local Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), Natural Resource Management (NRM), and irrigation committees at the village and woreda⁴⁸ levels. These leadership opportunities have provided women the space to engage in joint decision making with men. Women have also gained increased self-confidence to ask questions, make individual financial management decisions, and provide insight and feedback to local committees on issues like electricity, clean water, and more agricultural inputs.

Women have experienced increased incomes and roles as entrepreneurs as members of collectives. Women respondents report increased participation in economic activities as entrepreneurs because of collective-facilitated access to savings, business and empowerment training, and shifting gender norms that allow them to occupy entrepreneurial roles in society. In turn, according to findings from the USAID-funded GRAD project, agricultural collectives have helped communities to graduate from extreme poverty: beneficiary household incomes of surveyed VSLA groups (one type of studied collective) have experienced an 84 percent income increase as a result of their participation in the collective that provided better access to agricultural inputs and market information.

Men have greater knowledge and respect for equal rights of women since due to education outreach, and trainings from agricultural collectives comprised of women. Male respondents report having greater respect of the equal decision-making rights of their wives through gender norms and women's rights training facilitated through the collective. One respondent explained that,

"I [now] know my wife's rights and obligations through different training in the collective. I am now enabled to make decisions with my wife."

Respondents discuss and debate gender norms during collective meetings. Collective meetings regularly involve discussions of harmful gender norms and beliefs. Notably, collectives in Ethiopia have used the Social Analysis in Action (SAA) approach to regularly meet to debate these norms and develop action plans to address them.

Since becoming members of a mixed-gender collective, male members (boys and men) of the collectives participate in activities related to gender equality. Respondents from mixed-gender collectives report the following way that men and boys in the collectives actively participate in gender equality activities: 1) supporting the inclusion of women as members of collectives; 2) showing willingness to work with women to solve problems together; 3) involving women in advocacy processes to obtain services from the local agricultural office; 4) supporting women face GBV by collectively protesting in solidarity with women and providing direct mediation to try to solve the problem together.

Respondents report that men now assume some household responsibilities after participating in gender training and activities. Respondents report that after participating in Social Analysis and Action training and activities, men now assume some domestic and care responsibilities in the household, including helping with child care and wood and water collection.

5.2.3 Increasing women's access to and control over resources

Access to land remains a challenge to women in collectives. Respondents noted that land access was a consistent issue because men often did not divide land equally. Men also dominate larger value-generating activities which require more farmland. Men are still favored in different decision-making and agricultural activities such as marketing of cattle's oxen and land resource decisions. Men are also preferred in developing large businesses around oxen fattening, afforestation, goat and sheep fattening, while women do petty trading and other low value activities. Men are unwilling to divide resources, particularly in divorces.



Tibelet Fikadu is a member of a VSLA group. ©Terhas Berhe /CARE

Collectives help facilitate increased access to finance and credit for women. Women report improved access to credit and finance through participation in collectives. Specifically, collectives help women to save, take a loan, and have the technical skills to help succeed in their agricultural enterprise.

Through collectives, women receive important training and information about markets, improved agricultural practices, and resource sharing. Collectives play an important information and training role on a wide range of topics that help women succeed in their agricultural enterprise. Topics included finance, agriculture practices, and market negotiation.

Increased access to inputs was not widely reported, but collectives do provide some minimal access to agricultural inputs. According to one respondent, “[Collectives] provide support in the value chains as input suppliers. They provide industrial products to VESA members and provide technologies that save labor and time.”

5.2.4 Enabling women’s access to inclusive markets

Women’s limited mobility acts as the main constraint to women accessing markets. According to staff and partner respondents, men restricted women’s mobility which limited them from traveling far from home, including to markets

to sell their produce. Women often are not allowed, need permission, or need to be accompanied whenever they want to travel to distant places like larger markets. Safety concerns like being exposed to rape and other forms of sexual harassment and abuse on the way home from markets also contribute to the restrictions on women traveling to markets.

Collectives facilitate women jointly selling products. Respondents report that they have improved access to markets because the collective provides the opportunity to sell products jointly at market.

5.2.5 Improving nutrition

Collective members have more access to nutritious food than non-members. Women respondents report increased production of vegetables and livestock since becoming members of collectives. As a result, they report that they have greater access to more diverse and nutritious food such as milk, eggs, and diverse vegetables than their non-member peers. However, although they do consume some of these higher nutrient-dense foods, the bulk of it gets sold “for the use of their sons and daughters,” meaning that households often sell these foods to cover basic needs for their children including expenses related to schooling and health. **In addition,** respondents report improved nutrition outcomes through participation in trainings and related discussions on nutrition in their VSLA.

5.2.6 Promoting social protection and mitigating harmful effects

Collective members often collectively prepare for and respond to food insecurity. Respondents report experiencing improved food security because of their participation in collectives. This is due to increased food production, improved information from local climate and meteorological offices, and pooled resource savings to have stocks of food ready.

Because of training provided through collectives on GBV and human rights and obligations, women and men have gained knowledge and awareness about GBV. This has led to reduced GBV in their communities. Female respondents report that training activities related to GBV and women's equal rights facilitated by the collectives has boosted their moral and understanding about what to do in cases of GBV. There is

now more information sharing and discussion about the issue. This has led to increased solidarity among collective members to report cases of GBV to the proper authorities and ensure cases are brought to court.

5.2.7 Multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers

Collectives have forged partnerships with local governments, CSOs, and women's organizations. Collectives have actively partnered with local governments, CSOs, and women's organizations to access training for women on professional development and empowerment. Women also report participating in the League of Women Cooperatives to scale up access to training and resources for women members while increasing solidarity across cooperatives.



Aster Muchie, 45, feeds her sheep she bought by the loan she got from her kebele's VSLA group which was established by CARE to encourage savings and resiliency. Aster lives in West Belesa woreda, Amhara region, Ethiopia. Aster is one of thousands of women benefiting from the project.

©Genaye Eshetu/CARE

5.3 Georgia

5.3.1 Background

According to the Law of Georgia on Agricultural Cooperatives (first adopted in 2013), voluntary membership; democratic management; economic participation of members; and social responsibility, fairness and mutual assistance are the guiding principles of agriculture cooperatives, which encourage cooperation on one or more activities including production, processing, packing, packaging, storage, transportation, and marketing of agricultural products. Since 2013, the European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development in Georgia (ENPARD Georgia), implemented with the support of the European Union, has been one of the largest platforms for CARE Caucasus and other organizations to promote cooperatives in Georgia. To meet its goals, some of the major focuses of ENPARD Phase I (2013-2017) were the development of agricultural cooperatives, strengthening capacity for different scales of government to support cooperatives in Georgia, and increasing access to resources while promoting diversified social and economic opportunities in rural areas, particularly for women and youth. This phase was implemented by consortia led by four international NGOs/donors: CARE, Oxfam, Mercy Corps, People in Need (PIN) and the UNDP.

During the ENPARD I program, CARE Caucasus contributed to the development of mixed-gender agricultural cooperatives in 9 municipalities in the Samegrelo, Guria, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti regions. The overall objective of CARE's action was the sustained increase of food production and rural poverty reduction in Georgia, with the specific objective of promoting business-oriented smallholder farmer cooperatives that facilitated collaboration between farmers to improve market competitiveness. To meet its objectives CARE focused its work on three main directions:

- Strengthening capacity of cooperative members through different activities such as increased capacities and business skills; improved market linkages; and better access to market information, technology, and farming/processing methods
- Protecting smallholder farmers rights and interests through promoting the collaboration between cooperatives and Georgia Farmers' Association, as well as state agencies and NGOs
- Advocacy and policy level work with government in order to refine a strategy aimed at small farmers



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While gender was a cross-cutting theme in ENPARD I, women's empowerment was not a primary goal for the donor, and approaches to improve the lives and livelihoods of women were limited to data collection on gender discrimination and capacity building through trainings, workshops, conferences, and representation in various fora. After the end of ENPARD, CARE continued its support towards cooperatives through the Cooperative Fund, established in 2017. The main aim of the Cooperative Fund is to help smallholder farmers' cooperatives access financial means, reduce the cooperatives' dependence on external sources over time, and support the cooperatives to become self-reliant, and more sustainable in the long-term.

5.3.2 Women's empowerment

The existing evidence shows that while the number of women participating in cooperatives has increased and there are individual cases of gender transformation, the changes are not systemic. Many previously unemployed housewives got involved in the work, became more active, develop more social capital (contacts), and acquired new skills and knowledge as a result of engaging in cooperatives. However, this process is harder for some women than others. Some respondents consider collective as a tool to tackle gender inequality at home and work

Cooperatives provide female members professional development opportunities and contacts. Almost all male and female respondents noted that cooperatives provided women with new economic empowerment opportunities. Through cooperatives, women have participated in professional development training and activities, leading to acquisition of new skills, knowledge, professional contacts. As a result, for example, many previously unemployed housewives started working in the cooperative. Even though many cooperatives do not generate substantial profits at this stage, female respondents report that women are still able to achieve some degree of economic empowerment. Notably, they report continuing to work hard in the cooperatives because they see potential in this job. Some women respondents noted that since joining the cooperatives they have become stronger and more resilient.

"Being a member of the cooperative awakened women and gave us so much strength that I could not even imagine before." (Cooperative member)

Since joining a collective, women report having increased motivation, resilience, and decision-making autonomy. Women report feeling a renewed motivation to achieve more in life and in their business endeavors. They also report feeling stronger when faced with challenge. According to one female respondent,

"I became more motivated not only in business but in life as well. Whenever I face a challenge, I am more hopeful because I know that I will not give up, I will solve it and we will move forward."

Other respondents noted that participation in the cooperatives afforded them with new opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Likewise, many respondents report they have and become more autonomous with the ability to make decisions about their own lives without needing approval from male figures in their lives.

"I became more motivated not only in business but in life as well. Whenever I face a challenge, I am more hopeful because I know that I will not give up, I will solve it and we will move forward."

(Cooperative member)

Poverty and unequal distribution of care and domestic responsibilities is an obstacle to women's economic empowerment but is widely regarded as a problem to be addressed by each individual woman. At the same time, cooperatives are viewed as a way to help women balance time commitments at home and work. According to some respondents, in patriarchal societies like Georgia, the role of women is mostly limited to unpaid domestic labor and some women simply do not have time to participate in activities beyond their household. This created a need for specific approaches and incentives to involve women in cooperatives while also working on changing the attitudes in their families and communities. Most respondents believe that women have to put in a lot more effort into succeeding, citing, for example, their needing excellent time management skills to balance paid and unpaid work. At the same time, most respondents do not see the unequal distribution of domestic work as a major obstacle and place the responsibility to maintain balance on individual women. One respondent explains,

"If a woman wants it, she can be a good mother and a housewife and at the same time, she can do everything she sets her mind to."

On the other hand, most respondents agree that due to lack of time, women are more likely to succeed in their professional endeavors within cooperatives than individually.

The majority of cooperative members have gender-neutral attitudes, believing that concentrating specifically on women is discriminatory towards men. The majority of male and female respondents could not recount any specific measures taken with the aim of involving more women in cooperatives and believe that concentrating specifically on women is discriminatory towards men. However, there were a small number of female respondents (cooperative members) who reported unfair distribution of opportunities and resources between men and women, seeing a cooperative as a tool to tackle gender inequality at home and work. The few cooperatives that did make extra effort for female participation were led by women. According to a chairwoman of one cooperative:

"I was telling everyone that women would be a priority as long as I was a chairperson, I cannot say that we achieved our goal, but we're on our way. Talking about gender equality without economic empowerment is meaningless, therefore employment of women is necessary and I will not stop here, I plan to improve this aspect even more."

Gender stereotypes are often reproduced through cooperatives. According to respondents, women's engagement in cooperatives is mostly limited to the tasks that are traditionally considered to be "woman's job." This might be an indication that using women's workforce in this way reinforces traditional gender roles and responsibilities, instead of proactively challenging them.

Some respondents expressed that women's participation and success in agricultural collectives has provided an important example of how women can hold non-traditional roles in society. Some respondents believe that women's participation and success in cooperatives has helped reshape public opinion towards women's societal role, notably towards increased acceptance of women in roles beyond those in the private, domestic sphere. One chairwoman of a cooperative explains,

"Everyone knows me here, but they still could not believe that a single woman would be able to build the business. When I did it, it changed the expectations for women for many people. It played a big role in breaking the stereotypes. They realized that if I could do it, they could too."



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Some women who benefit the most from cooperative are those who already have economic and social means. On the one hand, according to respondents, most of the women who are considered to be role models and success stories in cooperatives come from more privileged backgrounds (e.g., those from the city, are highly educated, and/or have good connections.) These women invested their advantages into cooperatives, and it paid off for them. On the other hand, another respondent explained how the most socioeconomically disadvantaged women who receive social assistance face obstacles to joining cooperatives because if they do so, they will lose their governmental social assistance. One female respondent explains,

"There are a lot of socially vulnerable women seeing that we go to a field to pick herbs, get engaged in some activities or meetings. They want to join us as well. Nonetheless, because of their status, if they register in a cooperative, they will lose social assistance. For them that 50 GEL aid is very important. In addition, the work of the cooperative is seasonal, and we cannot offer a lot financially."

5.3.3 Increasing women's access to and control over resources

Respondents identify access to productive resources like land and agricultural technology and extension as a leading barrier to their economic empowerment.

In line with the general country level data that shows that women⁴⁹ are disadvantaged in terms of property ownership, respondents also identified this as a key obstacle. According to one female respondent,

"Getting land has remained an issue up to now. Those lands are not officially owned by the cooperative, but by the head of the cooperative. We wanted to take land on lease and grow honey-producing plants, but we have not achieved that yet. This is the problem."

Respondents also reported a lack of resources in rural areas in terms of agricultural technology, materials, and knowledge and mentioned that without these resources, it is difficult to work in the field.

Collectives facilitated limited access to finance and credit for members largely because of social and cultural norms. Several cooperatives participated in and won grant competitions or took out loans which allowed them to purchase necessary equipment. However, in line with country-level data, access to finance is lower for women than men.⁵⁰ However, according to a CARE partner/staff respondent, barriers in terms of access to resources for women do not exist at the legal levels; they are mostly because of traditions. Generally, women have less access to financial resources because they require consent from their husbands or other male family members before assuming a loan. Most women do not possess assets like a house, land, or a car, which are all potential sources of collateral for loans, and remain dependent on someone else. Therefore, they cannot apply to financial institutions.

5.3.4 Enabling women's access to inclusive markets

Cooperative members could not identify obstacles regarding access to markets specifically for women or gender-specific differences in market access but mentioned the collaborative nature of collectives as a potential benefit towards inclusive markets. For most respondents, the issue of inclusion was related to small cooperatives of women and men being excluded from major national, regional, and international markets because of insufficient certifications, financing, and government support. Male and female collective members did not provide any examples of women-specific barriers to accessing markets only noting that cooperatives could potentially promote women's access to the markets through its collaborative nature.

Instead, their concerns related to inclusive markets were related to inclusion of small cooperatives in the national, regional, and international markets. The identified obstacles for these small cooperatives include insufficient prioritization by the Government of Georgia of locally-grown products in the national markets, insufficient production capacity to meet the requirements for of some large chains; though, many respondents mentioned that their cooperatives have the potential to produce more goods but are unable to sell them, insufficient knowledge regarding European standards, transportation of goods, different payment methods, etc. Meeting these stringent requirements from large chains requires financing to pass through needed certification

processes, for example. The small cooperatives also lack the connections needed to access these regional and international markets. One male cooperative member explained:

"Everything is based on personal connections and big suppliers have the monopoly, you cannot even sell your product in a small shop if you don't know the owner personally."

However, other stakeholders identified women-specific barriers to inclusive markets and how cooperatives have addressed them. CARE partner and staff respondents identified existing barriers. For example, they noted that less access to the different resources, such as transportation and finances among women could present a gender-specific obstacle for women. During the COVID-10 lockdowns, transportation became less accessible for women.⁵¹ CARE partner/staff respondents also mentioned that women might face additional challenges in accessing markets due to the unequal access to financial resources because of negative stereotypes that exist towards female farmers, such as the harmful belief that men should control all household

and business decisions because women are perceived to be incompetent in running businesses. As mentioned by the respondents, personal connections are crucial while accessing the market. However, due to unequal distribution of domestic and care works, most women have less time and opportunities to make these connections and they are automatically put into a less advantageous position. On CARE partner/staff respondent highlighted the role of cooperative in eliminating such barriers.

"If the women produce relatively different product finds it difficult to contact the market. She has to find a mediatory chain to contact the final buyer (market, restaurant). Additional transportation costs to distribute the product to the major cities leaves the business without any benefit. So, there were two choices: produce and sell the products at the offered price (even if maybe the lower one) or not produce at all. Cooperative enabled them to increase production and quality with joint effort. Enhancing quality and increase in production made the market more easily accessible."



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5.3.5 Improving nutrition

No evidence emerged showing the cooperatives' contribution towards improved nutrition for women and girls with most respondents finding it difficult to respond to the related questions during the interviews. Most cooperative respondents did not see nutrition as a problem. They also believe that cooperatives cannot produce sufficient amount of product to contribute to large-scale food security. However, some believed at individual family levels, membership could potentially have some positive effect.

5.3.6 Promoting social protection and mitigating harmful effects

Women report feeling greater solidarity with other women as members of a collective. Women respondents feel that collectives provide a good space for women to be active and engaged collectively. They report that the solidarity these spaces created has gone beyond economic resource sharing, like cases when women were helping others that were not members of the cooperative. For example, cooperative members reported sharing experience and knowledge to neighbors in surrounding areas about new production technologies, new varieties of products, and

market information. This practice was reported to be commonplace among cooperatives. Respondents emphasized that cooperatives promote developing strong networks that potentially improves its members resilience towards difficult situations due to the collective nature of cooperatives.

Respondents typically do not consider GBV relevant to their membership in collectives, yet many mentioned their increased economic empowerment as a potential protective factor against GBV. Most respondents avoided the topic of GBV by noting they could not see direct links between being a cooperative member and incidences of GBV. At the same time, however, some respondents report that the increased empowerment and financial autonomy provided by cooperatives enables women to escape violent situations. One female cooperative respondent provided an example:

"There is one case that happened several years ago. We have a disabled girl who is 30 and lives with her parents. One time, another woman talked about how her father beat her up, having seen her with a neighboring guy. The police got involved as well, because the girl called them on her own. After that,

I got acquainted with this girl, and she joined [the cooperative] unofficially. She had not been able to work anywhere physically [before that]. Since she joined our cooperative, I notice that her family recognized her as a person and as a woman. Her earnings in the cooperative are the same as that of other members. She always comes to us, offering her help. Her mother also calls us and offers her daughter's help. Before that, they used to say that she could not work at all. I have some experience of working with persons with disabilities, and I have another viewpoint on that. The members also saw that persons with disabilities can do a lot of things. If you explain everything correctly to her, she will do everything perfectly. After she came to us, I have not heard that her parents had any issues with her anymore. Maybe, the fact that their daughter got involved in the cooperative had an impact on them. However, before that, there had been some cases that her father used to beat her up. Maybe the situation changed because of us, maybe because of the police or social workers. I am not sure about that. Perhaps, they saw that society embraced their daughter. Sometimes, this change has a positive effect on parents as well. You cannot justify her father's wrongdoing, but his attitude seems to have changed. This is a factor, and even if we do not earn a lot, this cooperative has helped that girl, so it was worth creating. This girl is an unofficial member of our cooperative, and I think she cannot be an official member because of her status. However, I do not care about formalities. The most important thing for me is that wherever we are, we have some positive results."

5.3.7 Multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers

CARE was actively involved in elaborating Law of Georgia on Agricultural Cooperatives. Furthermore, as reported in the Narrative Report project partners and beneficiaries were actively involved in a variety of local and national level discussions. Some of such events focused on women empowerment issues in agriculture.

CARE sees the importance of ongoing support of the cooperatives, while recognizing that many organizations and Government itself is dependent on the priorities of the donors. Currently, CARE provides support through Cooperative Fund, which was established under ENPARD I and encompasses CARE supported cooperatives. Cooperative Fund continues active functioning after the completion of ENPARD I and creates space for cooperatives to build and maintain connections with different agencies, as well as with each other. Through this mean CARE tries to strengthen cooperatives by giving them opportunities and widening their horizon.

Respondents identified coordinated action among actors that support cooperatives as essential for multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers. Research respondents representing different sectors (e.g., government, CSOs, private sector, INGOs) have their own vision and strategy on supporting cooperatives from their sectors' perspective. Respondents identified the government as the central stakeholder which is in the position of providing enabling legislative environment, while CSOs, international organizations, and private sector actors, together with cooperatives themselves, should be actively involved/consulted in policy and legislative level actions. Government sector representatives emphasized the need for long-term capacity building of the cooperatives and sees CSOs and public sector role as key in this process. All stakeholders unite around the idea that joint and coordinated support of cooperatives would have more successful outcomes. They view coordinated action as essential for successful popularization of the cooperatives and awareness rising among farmers regarding the benefits of the cooperatives:

"The development of the cooperative system is an issue of a national scale, which cannot be dealt with by specific international organizations. This needs the involvement of the state with its infrastructure, private sector, and educational system. This is not a separated sectorial issue. This is a multisectoral issue." - Representative of a local CSO



Nana Kofi Acquah/CARE

5.4 Ghana

5.4.1 Background

For over two decades, CARE Ghana has committed to supporting gender-transformative food systems by focusing on the economic empowerment of women through the promotion of VSLAs (via initiatives such as the Adaptation Learning Program), which scale benefits for members by working with Farmer Field Business Schools (through the PATHWAYS Program and other initiatives) and advocating for women's needs through Women in Agriculture Platforms (WAPs) under the Northern Ghana Governance Activity, and Agricultural Governance, Resilience and Economic Empowerment Activity projects. These agriculture-focused interventions have largely created opportunities for women to actively challenge harmful and discriminatory gender norms, promoted positions of social and political influence for women in communities, and addressed power inequities between persons of different genders.

In CARE Ghana's programming, VSLAs (85% of whom are women), FFBS and WAPs have over time adopted creative and participatory means to change existing power dynamics, structures, and social norms that are the root causes of gender-based inequality as a means of achieving goals including improved access to productive resources and exercising collective action for equitable shares of government-supported initiatives. For example, women, represented by their VSLA executives who are members of WAPs, engage government at the regional and district levels to improve responsive governance and facilitate women's access to land and the benefits of on-going government programs. VSLAs also engage traditional leaders to help change harmful social norms. Functionally, WAPs are largely made of VSLA and FFBS participants and they advocate to address problems facing women in agriculture including improved access to inputs and productive resources and the integration of women's concerns into development planning. In this sense, CARE Ghana has promoted a holistic approach to VSLAs by advocating for women's issues in government planning via WAPs; facilitating VSLA access to and participation in extension services, agricultural training for diversified Income Generating Activities, and marketing via FFBS; and transforming discriminatory gender norms and practices through gender dialogues.

5.4.2 Women's empowerment

Women report greater self-confidence, courage, and ability to speak in public because of their participation in VSLAs. All respondents mentioned feeling empowered with increased self-confidence and courage gained through producing their own income, learning about their rights, and gaining new agricultural knowledge and skills. They now are able to speak in public now, especially in front of men, which they were unable to do before membership in the VSLA:

"Initially women used not to come close to men especially during gatherings and they were not allowed to speak in the presence of men. Any woman who tries to speak in gatherings was tagged a disrespectful woman who does not respect her husband. But now they can speak during gatherings and persuade men to do what they need. They are now convincing the men to join the collectives, I, for instance, am a member of the collective through my wife" - Male collective member

Women report increased household decision-making power through their participation in the VSLA. Respondents report have more say in household decisions because of their increased knowledge on farming and rights provided through the VSLAs:

"There is a saying that two 'heads are better than one' based on the numerous trainings from the collectives. I now play a major role in my household decision-making process. When I got married, my husband and my mother-in-law used to take their decision on what to plant without my opinion. This is not the case now because my family now appreciate my knowledge on Good Agriculture Practices (GAPs) I got out of the trainings for the collectives." - Female collective member

The presence of collectives has contributed to nascent shifts in social norms towards gender equality; however, obstacles remain. Respondents reported improvements in perceptions of menstruations thanks to trainings and dialogues within collectives around harmful gender norms, which included conversations about menstruation:

"It has changed their perception about women, especially during their menstrual period. Initially a menstruating women cannot fetch water for the household to drink, but this has changed as a result of the collectives." - Female Collective participant

However, other harmful gender norms that limit women's equal participation in collectives have remained the same according to respondents. For example, communities continue to resist the participation of women in meetings where village elders are present because men feel that sitting with women will make them spiritually weak according to a Voodoo belief.

5.4.3 Increasing women's access to and control over resources

Female respondents mention that VSLAs have provided them with increased access to credit and capital. The collectives participants interviewed, which were all female, report that they have accessed funds through the collectives, which they have used to start some form of business. They also report an increased connection to banks to receive loans.

Women report greater access to inputs because of their participation in collectives. Respondents report that the combination of increased access to finance, which has led to women obtaining loans for agricultural inputs, along with increased self-confidence gained through the various trainings and leadership opportunities provided by the collectives has contributed to taking initiative towards accessing fairly priced agricultural inputs. They also report having more knowledge about quality and fair prices of inputs from agricultural training provided through the collectives. As a result, they are now capable of obtaining inputs from various stakeholders that include private sector inputs dealer and district assemblies:

"Yes, once they are doing their own production, they begin to look ways to get inputs. They come to my office to demand seed, chemicals and fertilizers, [the demand] has increased significantly. For example, yesterday a group of women came here with their list for me to recommend them to the bank for them to be given credit inputs for farming season, which I have their list here working on it." - Agricultural inputs dealer

Women cite collective membership as facilitating increased access to land for agriculture. According to respondents, the community at large now has greater respect towards women farmers because of their increased agricultural skills and knowledge gained through participation in VSLAs. Because of this new respect along with their increased self-confidence, they are now able to negotiate with male authorities for use of land to farm during the dry season:

"Collectives are an important tool for women, especially widows, because they have no access to land. Land is managed by men. Now that they are members of collectives they are able to negotiate with land owners and govt authorities to be able to access fertile land and water for farming." - CARE partner/staff respondent

Likewise, women report they have increased access to water for agricultural and household use because of collective membership. With their collective power gained through membership in VSLAs, women have accessed the needed

irrigation water to farm during the dry season and to use for their household needs. They have been able to make successful requests to authorities to use water sources from reservoirs:

"[Participation in collectives] has increased our access to water for dry season gardening. The community has a dam... The Collectives have formed a committee which comprised men and women to see to the opening of the dam from time to time in order for us to water our crops. There is enough good water to drink and for washing and sanitation at homes."

Since joining a collective, women apply more Water-smart Agriculture techniques, leading to reduction in water use. Women report using water more efficiently since joining the collective because of training received on Water-smart Agriculture. Newly applied techniques include using tied ridges, cover cropping, and using compost to increase water retention in their soil.



Alempes Akalifa, 56 years, Biamboog, Upper East Region, Ghana, married, 6 children brews pito, farms and raises livestock. She's learnt to make her own compost. "Women never farmed in this community but about 8 years ago, CARE and PAS GARO came and changed everything. Due to their support, my husband gave me some piece of land and I cultivated it and got 3 bags of maize and 2 basins of soya bean. Now, we don't have to depend on men to give us food. The hunger season has drastically shortened. We've been able to educate all our six children and some of them are even working in offices now. The future is bright". Nana Kofi Acquah/CARE

5.4.4 Enabling women's access to inclusive markets

Marketing training provided within the framework of collectives in conjunction with cooperative sale of produce has increased women's access to markets to some extent; however, women continue to face difficulty with jointly selling their products. Respondents shared that the trainings on market surveys provided through their collectives have improved women's capacity to access market and price information. They further explained that the new knowledge and access to information combined with collective sale of their products made possible through the collective have allowed them to negotiate better prices for their products in different markets:

"Since I joined the collectives, it has opened my eyes to do market surveys and compare prices from different markets even places like Togo and Burkina Faso. All of these give me negotiation power in order to get better outcomes." - Female collective member

Despite some success with jointly selling products together, many continue to sell individually:



Nana Kofi Acquah/CARE

"The ability of women to get into groups to collectively bargain is not working effectively and this is core of the marketing process. They are acting individually when come to selling. Because they are working individually it is a challenge." - CARE partner/staff respondent

While participation in collectives can improve equity and fairness in market negotiations, challenges still persist in mandating a standardized measurement for weighing products. Respondents noted that a weighing scale is typically used for farmers that are engaged in collective marketing of their products to identified buyers/aggregators. However, for those individual farmers selling in the open markets a bowl is used to measure the produce, which can allow the buyer to cheat farmers out of the fair value for their products.

"The market is biased in terms of measurement. This is because there is no standard measurement which is a cheat on farmers. Unless government comes out with policies to guide the open market we will face this challenge." - CARE partner



Nana Kofi Acquah/CARE

5.4.5 Improving nutrition

Membership in collectives has increased access to food and nutrition for women and their households because of training and increased income. Women in collectives have received training on the benefits of dietary diversity, preparation of nutritious meals with locally available food stuff, and importance of nutrition. According to respondents, because of this training combined with improved income and increased production of food, households now consume more nutritious food than before, thereby improving nutrition overall.

5.4.6 Promoting social protection and mitigating harmful effects

Women in collectives experience less GBV than those who are not. According to respondents, women in collectives did not suffer from GBV as much their counterparts who are not involved in collectives because they are busy making their own money and do not rely on their husbands for money.

Membership in collectives has increased solidarity among members. Respondents report that collectives have created social funds, so members can support each other in times

of need. In particular, these funds typically provide financial support for weddings, funerals, name-giving ceremonies, and when members become ill.

5.4.7 Multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers

Participation in VSLAs have led to increased political engagement among women, resulting in local authorities meeting their demands for services and changes to gender harmful policies and practices. The increased self-confidence and knowledge of rights among women gained through participation in the VSLAs has led to women in collectives running for leadership positions within the collectives and local municipalities. They also have used their collective power to demand services (e.g., agricultural extension, inputs like tractors, construction of latrines) from duty bearers such as the Ministry of Food and Agriculture and the district assemblies. Women have been able to engage the authorities. Women report also working collectively to engage authorities on changing harmful community practices and structures. For example, they were successful in getting policies changed to ensure young girls who have become pregnant can get back to school after delivering.

5.5 Guatemala

5.5.1 Background

For years, CARE Guatemala has leveraged and supported the thriving array of cooperatives within Guatemala with an emphasis on promoting women's empowerment and entrepreneurship. Two programs in particular have been cornerstones of CARE Guatemala's efforts to increase access to resources and markets for cooperatives: Nourishing the Future, funded and implemented in partnership with CARGILL in Phase I and II, and the Empowering Small Rural Women Producers project implemented with H&M Foundation funds in Phases I and II. These projects have successfully strengthened and developed both formal and non-formal collectives, including mixed as well as women-only groups. Agricultural cooperatives were primarily supported in these programs, though these cooperatives can often range from a few dozens to hundreds of members, and they are organized in regional and commodity-based confederations. These cooperatives are focused on exporting commodities or farming for local production of foodstuffs such as coffee, vegetables, beans, fish, and livestock. Collectives focused on savings and credit were also common partners in these programs and were valued for their ability to provide important financial services to members.

The Small Rural Women Producers project principally focused on the economic empowerment of entrepreneurs through training, access to capital and inspiring role models. The cooperatives and associations played a crucial role in this project by commercializing products, and increasing access to technical skills. Women also received training for improved business practices, business planning and administration to increase connections to new markets, increase savings, and increased access to loans and finance. This project was also notable for co-investing in a packaging plant for the country's first Women Agricultural Cooperative. Nourishing the Future was a regional project developed through the Cargill CARE alliance to improve food security and nutrition and strengthen productive activities by increasing the quality and quantity of agricultural production, promoting equitable access to markets and improving nutritional education to reduce the food insecurity conditions of thousands of families. The project also worked to improve effective governance of collective groups by measuring if board members were elected democratically, if women were included in board membership and leadership positions, the accountability of the collective to its members, and its ability to provide financial services to members.



VSLA farmer, Doña Juana collecting dried beans on her farm in Guatemala. Beans are grown at the base of corn stalks and serve as a trellis for the climbing bean plants. Caroline Joe/CARE

5.5.2 Women's empowerment

Because of their participation in collectives, women have experienced increased knowledge, motivation, and self-esteem, leading to the ability to handle the different situations in their live and voice their opinions. In relation to this question, 100% of the women interviewed indicated that they feel more empowered, some of them because they have already been involved in processes of personal strengthening from different spaces and others by joining the collectives. In this sense, it was the women-only collectives who emphasized or placed greater emphasis on feeling empowered in a personal and collective way, as opposed to the women in the mixed collectives.

The ways in which women feel or experience their empowerment varies from one group to another. However, what was identified as a common denominator is the capacity, they have to face different situations in life and in the group, which they attribute to greater knowledge, motivation, self-esteem, decision-making and self-confidence. Another way in which women have indicated that their empowerment is manifested is through voicing their opinions, making proposals, negotiating with family members and members of the organizations. This has allowed them to improve their communication and relationships, as well as to demand their rights and assert them. Women also link empowerment to their freedom to mobilize, to lose fear, and to believe in what they do, regardless of whether it is a personal goal or an objective of their collective:

"Now we have the opportunity to leave our homes, we are no longer the same, the training we have now, makes us more certain and capable. Before we were very attached to the house. It is easier for us to say, 'I am coming' and not to say, 'You give me permission. I feel empowered because I feel free, in the end I believe in myself, we believe in what we do and in ourselves" - Member of a women's association

Mixed-gender collectives and gender trainings and activities have led to more equitable distribution of productive and organizational tasks between women and men and more supportive attitudes about women's participation in agricultural collectives. All groups interviewed report that boys and men participate in activities related to gender equality in their collectives, or that they have at least begun



James Rodriguez/CARE

to get involved. Specifically, men and boys have attended a number of gender trainings and activities offered within the framework of collectives by CARE, the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food (MAGA), the Municipal Women's Directorates (DMM), the Integral Agricultural Cooperative Women 4 Pines and other institutions. Prior to these trainings and activities, men in mixed organizations, for example, often neither accepted the participation of women nor identified their contributions to the economy of the families and to the development of the collectives and communities. However, since their participation in trainings, the participation of women and men is now more balanced, both in the distribution of productive tasks and in the internal organization of the collective. Now women and men join the boards of directors of the mixed collectives.

However, traditional gender norms and expectations about roles and responsibilities of women and men persist. The interviews identified that men continue to reaffirm traditional gender roles of women in their families and organizations, where women and children are still seen as cheap or unpaid labor.

"Equality happens when the children are sent to work in the fields, because they have to help in agriculture, and also when the women or our wives stay at home making food and take our lunch to the fields. For me that is where I see equality and support is practiced in the family." - Male associate of a mixed collective in San Martín Jilotepeque.

Women members of collectives are talking about gender equality with their male and female children. Women respondents indicated they are telling their children about these gender issues, especially how women and men have the same rights and value. They note that this complements the approach to gender equality that is already incorporated into schools. One respondent explained that, “

“I remember that when the project came here with us they did not talk much about gender issues, in my house now I tell my daughters and sons that both should study in the same way, that they should not only privilege some and not others, because I see here in the community there are still parents who only give study to their sons, so now I am thinking, how can we ask women to participate in the Board of Directors if they did not go to school and they do not know how to read and write! Everything should start at home, we should do everything possible so that our daughters are prepared and have a better future, now all that depends on us parents.” - Member of a Board of Directors of a mixed association

Respondents perceive new members of mixed-gender collectives to be uncommitted to working towards gender equality. Respondents of mixed-gendered collectives perceive that newly elected members of the collectives Board of Directors and new farmers to join the collective lacked awareness about and commitment towards gender equality. The respondents also believe these new members require accompaniment, so advances and affirmative action achieved in recent years towards gender equality are not lost.

5.5.3 Increasing women’s access to and control over resources

Respondents associate membership in a collective with increased access to productive resources like water, agricultural and other inputs. The majority of respondents report having greater access to productive resources like agricultural inputs, seed capital, specialized technical assistance, and water as a result of their participation in a collective. Respondents highlighted examples of how being a member of a collective provides increased access to irrigation water. In the case of ASODERE association, which has existed since 2015, has been managing a mini-irrigation project in collaboration with MAGA, the Municipality of San

Martin Jilotepeque, and CARE International. Although it was approved and has a strong investment in infrastructure, it has not yet been completed due to community conflict regarding the source of water for the project. Another example comes from the Women’s Cooperative 4 Pines. The cooperative sells water in pipes (containers that are taken to the area where the plots are located). It costs between \$50.00 and \$60.00 and is a practice that has benefited the members who plant during the dry summer season.

Collectives have provided access to agricultural technology and information that members would not have accessed otherwise. All collectives interviewed they have received training and participated in field schools supported by MAGA, CARE and agro-exporting companies. As a result, they now consistently apply Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) in their production. For example, they apply crop rotation, water-saving technology like drip systems, and mulch during the winter. For livestock collectives, women have learned about GAP and Good Livestock Practices (GPP) which has improved the quality and quantity of production:

“I never used to give concentrate to the pigs, only water and tortillas. I had only one pig a year ago, but now I know how to feed them and in 4 or 5 months I have a pig worth Q. 1,500.00. They taught us how to receive a farrow (baby piglets) and how to clean the pens. Now we give them concentrate and apply medicine, iron and vitamins” - Female Masagua livestock farmer

5.5.4 Enabling women’s access to inclusive markets

Despite all interviewed collectives reporting increased capacity and confidence to negotiate in the market, some collectives report not having a secure market. Respondents mention experiencing a disconnect between their knowledge and theory and putting that knowledge and theory on marketing into practice. Despite all collectives participants, which includes mixed-gender and women-only, responding that they had more capacity and confidence to negotiate in the market, there are opposites in this regard, only some report having a secure market for their products. They report that their members have basic knowledge for the administration and management of the market (e.g., production costs, sales pricing, management of social networks, among



Rosa Marina Figueroa (left), 56, Viterba Hernandez Vicente, 59, and Marta Muñoz, 52, pose for a photo after harvesting herbs and legumes. All three are members of Madre Tierra women's group. Conrado de la Cruz Village, Santo Domingo, Suchitepequez, Guatemala. James Rodriguez/CARE

others). However, they also report that members have only somewhat lost their fear to seek out new markets, negotiate their products, and set fair prices, in order to have a fair profit margin. Furthermore, they expressed that they have weaknesses when it comes to putting their knowledge and skill into practice. Most interviewed members still do not have administrative and financial controls and records of their businesses.

"Yes, from the beginning, empowerment gives us the ability to negotiate and that gives us experience. I think we still need to expand our market, but we are a little afraid, we have high expectations, but out there are still many barriers for us. We want to sell but how to negotiate is what we still have doubts about, that is to say that we still lack that spark of how to face restaurant managers to sell our products. I think that we still need to prepare ourselves in this area."

- Member of a group of women entrepreneurs from Patzún Chimaltenango.

Access to inclusive markets is facilitated by the cooperative nature of their negotiations with buyers. The interviewed collectives have understood and are clear that they must be organized to meet the quantity and quality demands and standards of the companies with whom they have commercial contracts.

5.5.5 Improving nutrition

Most collectives report improved nutrition through increased income and training on nutrition made possible through their participation in collectives. Most collectives interviewed report that members have increased income because of their membership. This, in turn, has allowed them to buy the necessary food to ensure good nutrition for them and their families. At the same time, collective members have participated in training about good practices and nutritious eating habits, which also has contributed to improved nutrition for all members.

5.5.6 Promoting social protection and mitigating harmful effects

Conflicting data about prevalence of GBV exists in communities in which collectives operate; women-only collectives report specific actions when GBV cases emerge. Only about a third of interviewed collectives stated that they do not provide support for cases of violence. However, at the same time, all interviewed women and men of mixed organizations stated that there are no cases of violence in the communities where their members live, and accordingly they have not identified any cases among collective members.

At the same time, women-only collectives report implementing specific actions when they identify situations of violence in their organizations, for example:

- The Board of Directors is informed of cases in order to be able to request support from external organizations with experience and adequate handling of the subject.
- When it is known that women are suffering violence, the information is passed on to the social department of the cooperative and support is sought from there.
- Training and awareness-raising on GBV is provided to the members to facilitate trust among members when support is sought.

The majority of interviewed collectives believe that some social protection is provided to women through their membership in collectives. Commonly reported ways that social protection increases for women are the income from the products they produce collectively and divide the profits; the payment of wages per day of work; and social benefits that some associations provide for their members:

"The association has helped women. Recently we helped the daughters and sons of our members to enter the nutritional cookie program. We also did a sweep of children in the municipality. We tried to make sure that the neediest were on the list. At the level of the members, we have helped each other, motivated when someone is in bad shape. We try to look for solutions" - Member of the Board of Directors of a women's association in Santa Cruz Balanyá.

Solidarity among women has increased because of their membership in a collective. Respondents report improved communication and solidarity as well as increased empathy generated by the daily life that unites them. In these spaces, the women have found a way to express their emotions, problems, goals and motivations:

"The women have been helped, first there has been solidarity among us, we support them economically and we have become companions, we have helped each other. We have received mutual support." - Member of a group of women entrepreneurs from Patzún, Chimaltenango.



deBode/CARE

"We women have not only supported each other, if some are wrong, the others can support us, we have learned and overcome problems together. The cooperative has been a space of solidarity for women and for our families." - Member of the Board of Directors of a Cooperative in Patzún, Chimaltenango.

Collectives have played a role in the COVID-19 response. According to respondents, women members of collectives managed and sought alternative support for the members of their collectives, inputs for production, food, masks, psychosocial support, among others, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.5.7 Multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers

Participation in collectives has led to increased political and civic engagement among women members, resulting in direct participation in successful advocacy processes at the local and national level. All respondents reported that they have become more active in participating in political and civic public activities at both the local and national levels. The majority of the responses indicate that this is due to the fact that they have greater capacity and knowledge of the public sphere (spaces outside of their families), that they have lost their fear and that to a certain extent their self-esteem, leadership and mobility have increased. In this sense, the above aspects have boosted their participation in spaces where women never imagined they would be (local, departmental and even national organizations).

This has afforded these women opportunities to become active in advocacy processes at the local level as well as broader spaces at the national level. This has allowed them not only to position the collective they represent, but also to be the voice of thousands of women. One representative from an association of Patzún Chimaltenango describes this process:

"Some members have been incorporated in processes of promotion of economic development law initiatives such as LeyDem, where we see an opportunity for our members to benefit from their programs. Being part of the Teresa Association has allowed us to have more spaces for participation, for example there are members who are in the National Weavers' movement, others have begun to get involved in [Ministry of Economy] projects and others are in AMES [Women in Solidarity Association] for training in Integral Education in Sexuality."

Several examples that emerged are:

- Three women's collectives and one mixed, which are providers of the School Food Law, have initiated negotiations with Ministry of Education staff, in order to define better prices, based on the market and compliance with the corresponding regulations.
- At the local level, women's collectives in the department of Patzún are promoting women's economic rights processes in the local Women's Network.
- Asociación Teresa de Patzún, Chimaltenango, is promoting the Law of Women's Economic Development (decree 5452) at the local, departmental and national level.
- The San Bartolo Cooperative is participating in the Municipal Urban and Rural Development Councils (COMUDE) to demand the fulfillment of women's rights at the municipal level.
- The Women's Cooperative 4 Pines is managing agricultural development projects with the private sector to benefit members of the most vulnerable communities.
- At the community level, the Santa María Cauque agricultural committee of the Cooperativa Mujeres 4 Pinos participates in local community meetings.

6

Analysis and Discussion of Key Findings

6.1 Women's Empowerment

The social networks and collective governance created through collective membership helps mainstream gender transformative approaches to support women's empowerment, notably related to women's enhanced agency, in most contexts. In Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Guatemala, gender transformative approaches (e.g., use of SAA and other tools that involve critical reflection and dialogue on gender norms with women and men; deliberate targeting of women farmers and marginalized groups for training and support; training and capacitating female small-scale farmers through FFBS, etc.) were an integral part of the training and support provided to collectives through partners like CARE and respective government authorities. In these countries, women collective members achieved notable gains towards women's empowerment not only because of GTAs, but because the governance structures, group solidarity, and social networks created through membership in collectives provided a social infrastructure that enabled implementation of GTAs. Common advances across the countries include increased self-confidence to speak and use their voices in public, be heard, and assert their rights; increased decision-making power and autonomy both at home and in public spaces; increased motivation; and increased mobility. The case of Bangladesh provides a useful example where existing social connections provided both men and women collective members with opportunities to exercise their increased agency and improved relations for the benefit of themselves and collective members. Men and boys participated in village protests to advocate for gender equal pay and the elimination

of GBV while women gained increased confidence through interactions between the collective and government officials, seed companies, and NGOs.

Although gender transformative approaches were largely absent from Georgia's work with collectives, women still reported having increased motivation, resilience, and decision-making power. In this case, it is likely due to the economic empowerment gained through collectives in Georgia that included acquisition of new business skills, knowledge, and professional contacts. However, because many of the surveyed collectives in Georgia focused on economic empowerment, and didn't facilitate gender dialogues and critical reflection, many barriers to women's empowerment tied to underlying structural causes such as harmful gender norms remained. The unequal distribution of work between men and women, for example, remain largely unchallenged, highlighting the importance of integrating gender transformative approaches, which address not only women's economic agency, but relations between collective members and the formal and informal structures that reinforce gender inequality.

When used as platforms for integrating gender transformative approaches, collectives contribute to increased engagement of men and boys in activities related to gender equality. Similar to the above conclusion related to enhanced agency of women, men and boys become increasingly engaged in working towards gender equality when they participated in the gender training and activities in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Guatemala. With the exception of Georgia, all

countries documented increased involvement of male collective members in activities like village protests against gender-based violence (GBV), lobbying local leaders for equal pay for equal work, promoting girls' education, working collectively with women to advocate for services from local agricultural offices, etc. In Georgia, men and boys expressed gender-neutral attitudes, and thus had little engagement in activities that strengthened the agency of women. This contrast between Georgia and the other contexts suggests that gender transformative approaches that address the underlying drivers of gender inequality (e.g. critical reflection on gender norms) are necessary to engage men and boys while approaches that only address the economic agency of women are insufficient.

Collectives contribute to nascent shifts in gendered social norms towards gender equality and more equitable relationships between women and men, especially when they provide a safe space for critical dialogue on harmful gender norms. In Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Guatemala, collective meetings have become a place where women and men can now sit physically together in a safe space they use at times for critical reflection and debate about harmful gender norms between women and men. In Bangladesh and Ethiopia, for example, social norms did not allow women and men to sit together in public spaces. These safe spaces for gender dialogues in collectives has led to increased acceptance of joint decision-making between women and men both at home and within the collectives and increased sharing of household responsibilities between women and men. In Guatemala, this space has also contributed to younger generations being exposed and brought up with new or different social and cultural norms that support gender equality since women are now talking to their own children about topics like equal rights and opportunities, which is a new phenomenon in this context.

These shifts are nascent in all contexts since the evidence gathered also indicates that many harmful gender norms persist across the countries. In Guatemala, for example, despite some transformation, the persistent view of "equality" is linked to women and men maintaining traditional roles. While the precise reason for the persistence of harmful gender norms is context-specific, some similarities between different countries imply that these norms are reinforced at different levels. In Ethiopia, respondents noted that in markets, men are preferred in developing high value activities, but even in



Maria Carolina Morales benefitted from a loan and collectively owns an irrigation system that benefits a number of small plot landowners in Peru.
Peter Caton/CARE

personal decisions such as divorces, men are often unwilling to divide resources. Collectives participants in Ghana reported that taboos men held about menstruation began to change, but harmful norms held by village elders regarding women's participation remained. In these cases, gender norms needed to be understood in the context of the different powerholders and institutions which legitimize them, meaning that both the structures (gender norms in formal and non-formal spheres) and the relations (the power disparities between women and those who reinforce the norms) needed to be taken into account.

The case of Georgia provides another example where some respondents noted that long-held attitudes that limited women to the domestic sphere were changed as women achieved success as business leaders – a non-traditional role. Yet these were individual cases of economic success, and many collective members considered discussing gender norms and/or emphasizing women's empowerment as unnecessary or even potentially discriminatory towards men. Accordingly, because there were no safe spaces for critical dialogue between men and women, many interviewed collective members in Georgia still believed nonetheless women were best suited for domestic work. While the contexts are different, the similarities in these cases imply that gender norms are manifested at different levels, and only focusing on one level will inevitably create contradictions as other gender norms are left intact.

Although agricultural collectives contribute to women's empowerment largely through enhanced agency and transformed relationships between women and men, they tend to fall short of significantly contributing to part of the third domain of change necessary to achieve increased women's empowerment—transforming structures in the formal sphere. The preceding conclusions on women's empowerment illustrate how collectives have contributed significantly to increased agency among women as well as more equitable relationships between women and men. However, they also show that structural changes in the formal sphere, the enabling environment defined by policy and legislation, appear to be limited in comparison to changes in agency, relations, and structures in the non-formal sphere (i.e. household dynamics). Notably, structural barriers like discriminatory and/or gender-neutral laws, policies, and practices, particularly at the regional or national level, continue to pervade the studied contexts. This is not to say that these changes are wholly absent, as in Guatemala, for example, where one collective was involved in lobbying to pass national legislation. Efforts to change local policy were also more common, but connecting collectives to larger policy advocacy campaigns was generally a tertiary goal (if even prioritized at all) in comparison to agency, relations, and changing norms at the household or community level.



Collectives contribute to women's economic empowerment through increased income, savings and control over their earnings. In all countries, collective members report having increased income through their participation in collectives. While the income-generating mechanisms differed from country to country, often varying in which domain of gender equality was changed, the outcome of increased income for women in collectives was consistent. In Bangladesh, for example, women were able to achieve structural change in the local formal sphere by collectively negotiating their daily labor wages, leading to higher earnings for all women of the collective. As agricultural entrepreneurs, women were able to employ new knowledge to access lower cost inputs and increased productivity to achieve higher profit margins to reinvest in their microenterprises. In turn, women achieved increased autonomy on how to use their income. In Guatemala, collectives members reported that increased wages came more through changes in relations through increased solidarity amongst women, as they earned more through producing and dividing profits collectively.

However, in some contexts, challenges remain in making collectives accessible to the poorest women. Evidence from Georgia and Ghana suggest that collectives are beyond the reach of the poorest women. In Georgia, respondents noted that the most successful women in the cooperatives were from privileged backgrounds (e.g., those from the city, are highly educated, and/or have good connections), while women who receive any type of social assistance from the government are less likely to join a cooperative because their benefits will cease. In Ghana, the poorest women are often excluded from Village Savings and Loan Associations because they are unable to contribute any money as they are not involved in any economic activity. While there were evidence gaps in the Country Office KIIs on how to better make collectives accessible to the most impoverished women, CARE's LIFT II program in Malawi and the Democratic Republic of Congo provides evidence on how to improve inclusion by making "adjustments into the VSLA training manual, including sensitization/mobilization process, membership flexibility, group size, flexible savings routines for vulnerable members, increased contributions to social funds, preferential interest rates on loans for members in times of crisis, etc."⁵²

Margie Batucan, a farmer and member of a microfinance organisation named Lamac Multi-Purpose Cooperative in the Philippines. Peter Caton/CARE

6.2 Increasing women's access to and control over resources

Collectives provide increased access to technical knowledge and training to women while also offering opportunities for improved access to inputs. Regardless of the country, access to technical knowledge and training increased for women collective members. In all countries, respondents noted their increased technical knowledge and know-how because of training and professional development activities relevant to the specific type of collective (e.g., agriculture, agroindustry, animal husbandry, etc.). With the exception of Georgia, all the collectives in their other countries facilitate increased access to inputs through varying combinations of training related to selecting high quality inputs, negotiating fair prices, collectively buying inputs, and making linkages between farmers and input suppliers. In the case of Bangladesh, women also reported that their increased access in turn led to greater control over household assets like livestock, land, and other agricultural inputs in terms of making decisions about buying and selling. In Georgia's case, interview respondents noted that harmful gender norms which dictate women must acquire consent from their husbands to take out a loan often limited women from accessing resources. This suggests that addressing the structural causes (in this case, gender norms in the non-formal sphere) of unequal access to resources is necessary as women collectives members in Georgia often received technical agricultural training, but gender norms still prevented them from leveraging these trainings to acquire necessary inputs. Even in other contexts, understanding and addressing harmful gender norms and policies at all levels is critical to ensure collectives are able to contribute to gender equality. CARE Bangladesh staff noted that men are often still seen by local government officials as the primary and legitimate information holders, even despite collective-level efforts to empower women and change norms.

Collectives contribute to women's increased access to land and water for household and agricultural use, but structural barriers continue to impede greater impact. Access to land and water increased for women in all countries except for Georgia through unique mechanisms. Gender dialogues in the case of Ghana contributed to men not only allowing women to intercrop but also allocating designated productive lands and access to reservoir water for irrigation to women members of the collectives. In Bangladesh, collectives raised awareness and knowledge of the potential to use all fallow land around homes and in the



Mary Twinomujun, Kyankunyule Village Uganda, recently joined her local farmers group as part of the new She Feeds the World project. She hopes that she'll learn techniques to increase her small farms yields and find access to market where she can sale her produce at a fare price rather than the middlemen who exploit local farmers currently. Josh Estey/CARE

community as agricultural terrain, which in turn increased women's income and capacity to purchase additional land with a mortgage. The case of Guatemala provides an innovative example as women cooperatives sell water to members to ensure access to irrigation water during the dry season.

Despite the contributions that collectives make towards land and water access, there are many formal and non-formal structural barriers like cultural and social norms and customs that favor men in cases of land inheritance, decision-making, and use (e.g., case of Ethiopia) and insufficient legal and policy frameworks to ensure equal access to land (e.g., case of Guatemala). In these cases, even if collectives increase access to land for members they can still reinforce gender inequality as men accrue more land than women.

In most cases, collectives provide an important pathway to increased access to credit and financial services. Across Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Guatemala, collectives provided women with access to credit in a variety of forms. For example, in Bangladesh, women became connected to microfinance institutions through the collectives. In the case of Ethiopia and Ghana, savings and loans mechanisms established through VSLAs and VESAs were the primary way that collectives increased savings for or needed credit to women. In the case of Georgia, collectives faced unique difficulties to increase access to credit for members because, in many cases, banks preferred to give loans to individuals rather than collectives due to the perception that individuals have a greater chance of repayment.

6.3 Enabling women's access to inclusive markets

Collectives facilitate improved access to markets for women farmers but have made little gain towards making those markets inclusive. Across all countries, women producers have experienced improved access to markets by selling their products collectively. However, despite increased access to markets and improved bargaining power from selling collectively, structural barriers persist in many contexts, limiting how inclusive markets can be for women. For example, in Bangladesh, market information is predominantly available through a male-dominated communication network among farmers, extension agents, and input dealers. Men also continue to have greater access to mobile phones. Barriers to women visiting markets, such as harmful gender norms limiting women's mobility, unequal access to financial resources, and threats of GBV were other structural inequalities identified by collectives members across Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Georgia. In Guatemala, women collective members expressed that despite training and increased confidence to seek out markets and negotiate fair prices, they faced difficulties breaking into new markets and securing stable markets due to doubts regarding their ability to put their skills into practice.

This distinction between improved access to markets and inclusive markets was also apparent in Ghana, where Market Research Committees (MRCs) were established during the Pathways program to identify market outlets for VSLAs, negotiate with buyers for fair prices, and support bulk sales of produce from VSLAs to established buyers. While MRCs were successful in providing women farmers with important market information, participants reported that in many instances markets sourced by MRCs came up with offers that were less competitive relative to those obtained in local markets. Similarly, other participants and staff noted that MRCs were ineffective in reducing transaction costs throughout the value chain, including transport systems and storage facilities. Because interventions like MRCs only addressed structural barriers for women small-scale farmers in certain linkages in the market, instead of strengthening every preceding market linkage, the inclusivity of these markets was questioned.

Agricultural collectives may ignore inequalities beyond gender when addressing inclusive markets. In the case of Georgia, for example, exclusion of small cooperatives from the

major national, regional, and international markets was the most cited issue when discussing inclusive markets. For male and female respondents, ensuring women's inclusion was not the most important issue but rather how small cooperatives were able to gain the needed resources and market power to access larger markets. In Ghana, collective participants lamented that farmers still faced challenges in securing fair prices because there wasn't a standardized measurement for measuring produce between buyers and farmers. Instead, a bowl is commonly used to measure produce in the open market, providing buyers the opportunity to cheat farmers from receiving the fair value of their products.

6.4 Improving nutrition

Collective membership and linkages with partner organizations facilitates improved nutrition for women and their families. Across countries, improved nutrition among women members of collectives is primarily the result of nutrition training provided by support organizations (e.g., NGOs and governmental authorities) to members of collectives in addition to increased financial capacity to buy nutritious food gained through collective-supported income increases. In Bangladesh, men have also become more aware about the importance of nutrition for women and men, leading to their increased participation in nutrition practices. The case of Georgia was an outlier as most respondents did not believe that malnutrition was a problem in the country. That said, the respondents did recognize the possibility that members may have an increased capacity to purchase more nutritious food—which is often comparatively more expensive than less nutritious food—because of their increased financial well-being resulting from their participation in a cooperative.

However, these findings suggest that collectives by themselves may not address the structural barriers women face in accessing nutritious food. In Ghana, women collective members reported an increase in the production of more diverse and nutritious foods such as milk, eggs, and vegetables. But while they consume some of these more nutrient-dense foods, they noted that the majority of it is sold to cover basic needs for their children such as schooling expenses. While this increase in nutritious food largely came from women's increased agency in obtaining greater financial resources and skills in improved agricultural practices, complementary CARE and partner programs facilitated dialogue sessions on gender and nutrition, which contributed to positive changes in relationships at the household level.

In addition, these programs worked with the Department of Agriculture to conduct nutrition sensitization in VSLAs. Thus, the economic benefits provided by collectives are insufficient to ensure positive nutrition outcomes in all three domains of gender equality, and linkages with government agencies and other organizations are critical to ensure that barriers to nutrition related to structures and relations are also addressed.

6.5 Promoting social protection and mitigating harmful effects

Collectives act as a protective institution in the prevention of and response to GBV for female members of the collectives, though the mechanisms for GBV prevention are diverse and need to be better understood. In Ethiopia and Bangladesh, women and men in collectives have gained knowledge and awareness about GBV. Accordingly, they have become active in preventing and responding to GBV, resulting in reduced incidences of child and forced marriage, dowry, and intimate partner violence. In the case of Ghana, women in collectives reportedly experienced less GBV than those who are not because of increased incomes and economic opportunities that reduced reliance on male figures. In Guatemala, however,

only women-specific collectives had specific mechanisms (such as training and awareness-raising on GBV) in place to respond to GBV while interviewed members of mixed-gender collectives believed there were no cases of GBV in their respective communities.

This suggests that the particular mechanisms that ensure collective membership is a protective factor in reducing GBV need to be better understood and mainstreamed in both women-only and mixed-gender collectives. In the case of Georgia, respondents by and large did not perceive a direct relationship between collective membership and GBV response and prevention. However, the fact that some respondents believe that economic empowerment provided by cooperatives contributes to preventing and responding to GBV points to collectives' potential as a protective factor against GBV in the Georgian context. Overall, in some contexts, the economic independence for women afforded by participation in collectives was the primary pathway for reduced GBV, while in others specific mechanisms for trainings and accountability on GBV was the determining factor. More research is needed to fully understand the efficacy of each pathway for GBV reduction in collectives, and how to best adapt these protective factors to meet the needs of women collective members in their specific context.



These women are part of Forage seed producers cooperative. There are eight women along with their husbands and they are growing improved forage on a quarter of a hectare of land. They have already sold two carts of elephant grass for 7,865 Bir, which the government bought. With that money they bought an ox to fatten and plan to get another one. Some members are involved with bee keeping and goat fattening. Josh Estey/CARE

Collectives help build social cohesion in communities where they are present, which in turns builds community and household resilience in the face of crisis. Across all countries, collectives build solidarity among its members, which has impacts beyond the collective. Common themes expressed among members were increased empathy and compassion for others outside their family, willingness to support others financially when they needed it, openness to giving and receiving advice and support from other members related to their agricultural and household activities, and, in turn, increased resilience in face of crisis and disaster. For example, in Guatemala, members now more readily support each other and their respective families in times of need. In Georgia, women collective members not only better supported each other, but noted cases where they helped women who were not cooperative members by sharing their knowledge of market information and new varieties of products. This also extended to the larger community beyond collective members by playing a role in the COVID-19 response, such as in Guatemala where women collective members sought and managed helpful inputs such as masks, food, and psychosocial support for the entire collective during the pandemic.

Collectives provide increased access to social safety nets either by making critical linkages to external assistance or creating internal and/or informal social assistance programs. With the exception of Georgia, collectives facilitated increased access to social safety nets. The way this happens, however, depends on context. For example, in Bangladesh, collective membership facilitated access to several governmental assistance programs that include food ration cards and other benefits targeted to elderly persons, widows, and persons with disabilities. The collectives also facilitated knowledge of work projects that led to employment of some of their members. In Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Ghana, and Guatemala, the collectives themselves created internal safety nets through groups savings schemes and/or social funds and benefits specifically designated to supporting members during times of crisis and disaster both at household (e.g., family member death) and community levels (e.g., natural disasters).

In Bangladesh, these increased linkages to government services were also useful during the COVID-19 pandemic as collective members communicated with government authorities to access needed food supplies for the entire collective. This suggests that collectives can help to address barriers across all three domains of gender equality during

times of crises as increased social solidarity helps improve the agency and relations of collectives members as they organize to address the needs of women and girls, while improved access to government programs helps to overcome structural barriers.

6.6 Multiplying the impact of agriculture through women small-scale producers

Collectives facilitate increased female participation in local, regional, and to a lesser extent national politics and advocacy, contributing to social and economic development initiatives, better governance and public services, and passage of laws and policies that support gender equality. With the exception of Georgia, evidence gathered from the studied countries illustrate that collective membership has facilitated a marked increase in women's participation in politics and advocacy at all levels, leading to improved and more gender-equitable socioeconomic development, governance and public services, and legal frameworks. The fact that women collective members in Georgia didn't report increased levels of participation outside of economic activities suggests that gender transformative approaches which specifically train women on their rights, facilitate dialogue sessions to address harmful gender norms, and increase their collaboration with government and partner agencies enable increased political participation for women. Thus, collectives must go beyond increasing women's economic independence and create opportunities for participation by addressing barriers across all three domains of gender inequality. For example, women in Bangladesh who had previously worked with local government councils through their collective continued to leverage this connection by advocating to these councils for improved transportation infrastructure, leading to construction of new roads and bridges. In addition, collectives in Bangladesh also participated in social development initiatives like vaccine clinics and COVID-19 response efforts in Guatemala. In Ghana, women members have been elected to local leadership positions and use their collective power to demand services from national Ministries and district assemblies.

In regards to better governance and public services, the case of Bangladesh illustrates how collective membership led to women collectively accessing health care in their communities. This, in turn, gave them collective power

to demand and receive better care than they would have received by accessing the facilities as individuals. Likewise, collectives in Bangladesh played an important role in holding local governmental authorities accountable to performing their roles, noting that their local government council operates more efficiently when the collectives are fully functioning. In Guatemala, one association is playing a role in governance by promoting the Economic Development Law 5452, which focuses on women's economic empowerment at the local, departmental, and national levels.

Collectives have also played a key role in advocating at all levels to achieve more gender equitable policies and laws. In Ghana, for example, female members of collectives were successful in changing a harmful school policy that blocked young mothers from returning to school after having their babies. In Guatemala, one collective was active in lobbying efforts to pass the LeyDem initiative that promotes equitable economic development in the country.

6.7 Sustainability in Collectives

Agricultural collectives are often unsustainable when funded entirely or in part by external means (e.g., international project funding), thereby increasing the chance of losing gains made towards the six SFtW domains. More research is needed to understand what types of collectives ensure sustainability and replicability of gender transformative outcomes. Across countries, collectives have depended to some extent on external funding and resources for training, financial support, and/or other technical assistance, especially related to gender transformative training and activities. Undoubtedly, this support has been essential to their development and continuity. However, little evidence emerged of specific mechanisms put in place to ensure replication of gender transformative ideas and practices and to guarantee collectives' permanency once external support ends. This potential lack of sustainability, in turn, jeopardizes the gains made towards gender equality and women's empowerment. In the case of Bangladesh, for example, when the SHOUHARDO II project ended in Bangladesh, many agricultural collectives stopped functioning. Although it appears that some of the gender transformative work achieved has remained (e.g., nascent shifts in gender norms, enhanced agency of women), other gains that support women's empowerment (e.g., collective sale of products that was in many ways an essential way that women could access markets because of mobility limitations) have stopped.

In the case of Guatemala, for example, new members to collectives and the board of directors are often not committed to gender equality because they have not participated in gender transformative trainings and activities typically provided by external organizations. Without establishment of specific mechanisms that ensure sustainability of gender transformative work within the framework of collective operations, collectives risk falling back onto previous patterns of gender unequal relations and structures as seen in Guatemala, or they simply cease to exist as in Bangladesh.

More research is needed to understand what these specific mechanisms are, not only to ensure that collectives are sustained and replicated, but to maintain any gender transformative beliefs, practices, and mechanisms. VSLAs, for example, have evidence showing their viral replication as a group or trainer supported by CARE independently forms other groups. It's vital to research these drivers of replicability (e.g. women's empowerment and leadership or the inclusion of VSLAs across corporate value chains), how these drivers work better in certain contexts, which indicators of gender equality across the SFtW framework are maintained as replication occurs, and how they can be integrated into existing collectives.



Glenn Shaw/CARE

7

Opportunities & recommendations

Building on the current strengths and addressing the shortcomings of collectives provides a number of opportunities to entities that support collectives and to the collectives themselves. Seizing these opportunities will contribute to not only achieving outcomes of the SFtW framework but also gender equality more widely in communities where collectives are active. The following are some recommendations on how to pursue these opportunities in different stages of programming:

7.1 Engage collectives and their social networks to better mainstream and scale gender transformative approaches

Collectives, to varying degrees depending on the context and function of the collective, operate based on core principles of solidarity, collaboration, and the strengthening of social ties. As a result, they are ideal platforms for integrating gender transformative approaches because they allow members to conceive of agency through participation in a group rather than as individuals. This further reinforces the goals of GTAs by helping members harness increased self-confidence through collective action, understand the ways in which gender inequality is manifested and reinforced through group relationships, and put skills and knowledge into practice through interactions between the collective and partner organizations across sectors (e.g. extension agents, seed companies). Here are some brief steps for how to integrate GTAs in collectives throughout the project cycle:

- **Conduct staff reflections to interrogate beliefs, assumptions, and biases** in the way women's empowerment is conceptualized, how preconceived notions of success (especially in regards to Western

belief systems) influence M&E, and how development practitioners can center the voices and local knowledge of collectives in co-creating activities and outcomes.

- **Use gender and power analysis to understand the local context**, specifically any barriers to participation, policies and legislation such as land tenure that reinforce gender inequality, and negative outcomes that may arise from the implementation of GTAs, such as physical violence from males as women transcend discriminatory taboos and norms. In addition, these forms of analysis should seek to understand the function of the specific collective (e.g. savings group, producer group) and its relationship to the local socioeconomic, political, and environmental context.
- **Hold critical reflection processes with collective members** to give them the space to define their priorities and conceptualization of empowerment, address harmful gender norms, engage men and boys, and co-create activities to meet the needs of women and girls in collectives. Creating these spaces for gender dialogues allows collectives to go beyond gender-unaware activities and/or a narrow



Tapash Paul/CARE

focus on economic empowerment and address multi-dimensional drivers of gender inequality to the benefit of the collective as a whole.

- **Prioritize collective benefit and group solidarity in participatory M&E.** Frameworks such as She Feeds the World often focus on easily quantifiable indicators of individual empowerment (e.g. increased income, skills, resources) at the expense of women's empowerment manifested through collective action. However, empowerment is a subjective concept that is mediated through cultural and social norms, and it's important to recognize that the individual "as the basic social unit which other social organizations and social relations form" is a frame grounded in Western and neoliberal conceptions of social development.⁵³ To decolonize M&E from Western conceptions of empowerment, participatory and mixed methods and the collection of sex and age disaggregated data should be used to better understand how collectives help women support each other in times of crisis such as GBV or bereavement, help women contribute to enhanced management of community natural resources, negotiate collectively for rights and fairer economic outcomes, and any forms of community support prioritized by collective members. Participatory forms of M&E should work with collective members to define indicators, methods of data collection, and community-based forms of monitoring – ensuring that members are fairly compensated for their participation.

- **Create and leverage connections between collectives and partner organizations for:**

- **Increased access to social protection services:**

The social networks maintained in collectives allow for more efficient delivery of government services and an increase in scale and impact for the objectives of social programs administered by CSOs, INGOs, and government partners. Development practitioners should leverage their own multi-sectoral relationships to connect collectives with critical social services such as nutrition programs, healthcare clinics, and job training.

- **Increased political participation in local and national policy and governance:**

Necessary training to build confidence, education on local and national policies, gender norms change, and linkages with government agencies and partner organizations need to be prioritized so that collective members have the resources and knowledge needed to meaningfully participate in political processes. Political participation should also be encouraged even outside the agricultural sector into water and natural resources management, healthcare, education, climate adaptation, and human rights. Increasing political engagement among female members especially can act as a sustainability strategy because members are able to leverage newfound social capital and networks to advocate directly for the resources they need to thrive.

In addition, political participation should not only be measured in terms of leadership positions attained by women, but by women's own experiences in being able to voice their opinions publicly

- **Use participatory value chain mapping and market systems analysis to ensure markets are inclusive throughout food systems.** Just as harmful gender norms exist at multiple levels (household, groups, policies), they are also manifested in multiple linkages throughout the food value chain. These market linkages are especially critical for small collectives that have difficulty competing with larger agribusinesses. While this includes strengthening women's capacity for negotiation and maintaining relationships with input dealers and wholesalers, it also includes making local markets safer and more physically accessible to women. Participatory value chain mapping and market systems analysis should be used to identify all the actors within food systems and an understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and any barriers they may present for collectives. As opposed to top-down, 'expert'-driven forms of value chain analysis, a participatory process

capacitates and compensates community members as researchers, and uses tools such as focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and participant observation to drive analysis.⁵⁴ In addition, this analysis should also identify intervention points where collectives can better leverage the value of their group membership (demanding or expressing preference for nutrition-sensitive and sustainable inputs, negotiating fair prices, selling goods collectively, advocating for gender equality in economic policies).

- **Establish accountability mechanisms between collectives and partners.** Tools for social accountability such as the Community Score Card should be used for collectives to provide feedback, improve service delivery, and provide opportunities for collective members, particularly women, to gain confidence in advocating for their needs. Such accountability mechanisms should be adapted to work not only between collectives and government agencies, but between collectives and development agencies to ensure any support is serving the priorities of collectives, allowing the project to be improved iteratively.



Community farms led by women as part of the Tres Paso program. Tres Pasos is helping families learn how to farm, diversifying crops and protein sources, while also reintroducing native species. The women's groups also work together to create small plots of seedlings of varied crops that they share. This process happens across all of the towns in the Chirijcalbal area, Guatemala. Valenda Cambell/CARE

7.2 Ensure the sustainability of collectives to eliminate dependence on development organizations

Collective members across contexts reported that they had difficulty or simply ceased operating after the initial programmatic support was no longer available. Financial sustainability is an ever-present and urgent challenge for collectives, and there must be a strategy in place to ensure that the existence of collectives is not tied to the existence of any one program. There are different approaches to financial sustainability that could be used depending on the context.

- **Establish grants facilities, revolving funds, or savings mechanisms for collectives.** Revolving funds could be set up within collectives based on member contributions that are either uniform or in proportion to their patronage to the collective. Members could also be connected with formal financial services, such as grants, offered by governments or cooperative networks to provide necessary funding. If GTAs are integrated with cooperatives, then any funds needed to sustain these approaches should be taken into account when devising a financial sustainability strategy. The success of VSLAs in maintaining autonomy and replicating without donor support also suggests that savings groups provide important mechanisms for financial sustainability that could be incorporated into other types of collectives.
- **Compare sustainability outcomes between different types of collectives and GTAs.** While this research provides useful information on the sustainability of collectives in different geographic and programmatic contexts, more rigorous and precise analysis needs to be done to better understand the relationship between sustainability and replicability, and type of collective, GTAs, and any other relevant variables. Better isolating the pathways by which gender transformative collectives maintain sustainability and/or replicate is critical for determining how to best support collectives to eliminate dependence on donors.

7.3 Work with collectives to increase impact of multi-sector interventions

While this research focused on the measurement of gender equality as defined in the context of food systems, collectives can be adapted to serve as platforms and trusted institutions to promote gender equality in other sectors.

- **Support and sustain collectives to increase food, water and nutrition security during humanitarian crises and promote women's collective leadership in disaster preparedness and responses.** This research has highlighted a great deal of potential for how collectives can provide urgent support services in times of humanitarian crisis. Numerous members highlighted how participation in collectives increased their food and nutrition security throughout the complications created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Collectives should thus be considered important partners and platforms in humanitarian action for disseminating information and disaster risk management strategies, employing financial resources, and leveraging the leadership of collective members, particularly women, to define their needs and priorities in times of crisis, not only within collectives but in local and national policy advocacy
- **Prioritize collectives in climate change adaptation and integrated natural resources management.** Community-based approaches to adaptation and integrated natural resource management (INRM) prioritize discussions with communities and facilitate a co-creation process to define the activities that help frontline communities deal with the effects of climate change, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss and environmental degradation. Because collectives, especially those which have integrated GTAs, are trusted platforms for collective action, they should be prioritized in community-based adaptation and INRM programs to reduce the costs of setting up parallel institutions, ensure localization of interventions, and increase impact through the social capital collective members have developed amongst themselves and partner organizations.

Appendix A

KII Methodology

#	KII Interviewee	Roles	Key Interview Goals
1	CARE CO Staff	Key CO Staff with programming experience related to agricultural cooperatives/collectives and women's economic empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Any evidence and existing work related to agricultural collectives/cooperatives and She Feeds the World change areas• Barriers to making agricultural collectives/cooperatives gender-transformative• Improvements that need to be made to make agricultural collectives/cooperative gender-transformative
2	Government	Public sector stakeholders (ministries, municipalities, local elected leaders, etc.) who have partnered with CARE in work related to agricultural collectives and cooperatives, or have general experience related to agricultural cooperatives/collectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experience with agricultural collectives/cooperatives• Evidence of any agricultural collectives/cooperatives contributing to the She Feeds the World change areas• What role does government play in shaping women's access to resources through agricultural collectives• What can government do better to make agricultural collectives more gender transformative

#	KII Interviewee	Roles	Key Interview Goals
3	Private Sector	Private sector stakeholders who have general experience related to agricultural collectives/cooperatives, or who have previously partnered with CARE on this work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience with agricultural collectives/cooperatives • Evidence of the strengths and gaps of agricultural collectives/cooperatives in contributing to the She Feeds the World change areas • How can both input and output supply chains be improved to support agricultural collectives/cooperatives for promoting gender-transformative initiatives • What role does the private sector (which sectors?) play in supporting and/or hindering gender-transformative agricultural collectives/cooperatives • What can the private sector do better to support gender-transformative agricultural collectives
4	Non-Governmental	Stakeholders in civil-society organizations, community groups, and local leaders who have general experience related to agricultural collectives/cooperatives, or who have previously partnered with CARE on this work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience with agricultural collectives/cooperatives • Evidence of any agricultural collectives/cooperatives contributing to the She Feeds the World change areas • What role do CSOs and informal institutions play in supporting and/or hindering gender-transformative agricultural collectives/cooperatives • What can CSOs and informal institutions do better
5	Collective/Cooperative Participants	Participants and leaders in local agricultural collectives and cooperatives (e.g. VSLAs, VESAs, Water User Committees, Producer Groups, Farmer Field and Business Schools, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How their agricultural collective/cooperative has or hasn't contributed to the She Feeds the World change areas • Which forms of agricultural collectives/cooperatives are most common in their area • What are the greatest barriers to making their agricultural collective/cooperative gender-transformative • How can institutions (including CARE) better support their agricultural collective/cooperative so that it can function better and be more fully gender-transformative

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