

Gender in Multisectoral Nutrition Action Plans

Developing and reviewing nutrition plans through a gender lens

A core aim of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement is to “ensure equity, equality and non-discrimination for all, with women and girls at the centre of efforts”. To achieve this by 2020, as highlighted in the SUN Movement Strategy and Roadmap (2016-2020), all SUN countries are striving to (SUN Movement Secretariat, 2016):

- Have equitable improvement in the nutrition status of all people, ensuring that no one is left behind.
- Adopt policies that reduce nutritional inequities, especially among women and girls, and eliminate discriminatory laws and practices.
- Strive to involve representatives from vulnerable communities in their decision-making processes.

As highlighted, particularly in the second bullet, a key aspect of this is ensuring policies and plans consider and aim to address the unique needs of men, women, boys and girls in order to reduce nutritional inequities. Maximising the Quality of Scaling Up Nutrition (MQSUN+) recently conducted a gender assessment of SUN country multisectoral national nutrition plans (NNP). This was completed as part of a broader review of SUN country nutrition plans based on SUN’s [Checklist on the criteria and characteristics of ‘good’ national nutrition plans](#) (herein the SUN Checklist).

Why consider gender in nutrition action plans?

Socially constructed gender roles of men, women, boys and girls, in conjunction with biological differences in sex and age, influence nutritional needs and status of individuals, households, communities and societies. Inequalities in decision making and autonomy, especially for women, can lead to unequal access to and control of education, resources, information, income and political forums, amongst others, which can negatively impact a household’s ability to provide sufficient food, care and health services to all its members (Oniang’o & Mukudi, 2002). Integrating gender considerations into national-level policies and programmes can support actions that will eliminate key barriers to maximum nutrition improvement, in order to advance the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. Evidence shows that improvements in women’s societal status contribute to significant reductions in hunger (Smith, Ramakrishnan, Ndiaye, Haddad, & Martorell, 2002). By integrating gender into nutrition planning, countries can (1) contextually understand the differences that exist between men and women and boys and girls and what cultural, societal and infrastructural factors contribute to existing inequalities and (2) develop the appropriate actions to improve household food security and consumption of diverse, nutritious foods of all household members. **Box 1** defines key gender concepts related to nutrition programming.

Box 1. Key Gender Terminology

Sex is the biological characteristics that define men and women (DFID, 2008). **Gender** is the socially defined roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that differ between countries and cultures (DFID, 2008).

Gender-sensitive programming takes into consideration the differences and inequalities between women and men [and girls and boys] (DFID, 2008). It considers and raises awareness on the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that society considers appropriate for each and their related dynamics (UNICEF, 2018). **Gender-responsive programming** goes one step further and not only *considers* gender norms, roles and inequalities, but also *ensures measures are taken* to actively reduce their harmful effects (WHO, 2011). Gender-sensitive efforts need to be accompanied by gender-responsive actions in order to achieve gender equality and transform gender relationships and power structures (UNICEF, 2018). **Gender-transformative programming** is the highest level of gender-responsive programming. It considers not only gender norms, roles and inequalities for men and women, but also the specific needs of men and women [and girls and boys] and *how* all these affect access to and control over resources. It also *addresses* the causes of gender-based inequities, including ways to transform harmful gender norms, roles and relations and strategies to foster progressive changes in power relationships between men and women (WHO, 2011).

Equality refers to equal chances and opportunities for women [and men, or girls and boys] to access and control social, economic and political resources, including protection under the law. **Equity** refers to fairness and considers women’s and men’s (and boys’ and girls’) different needs to achieve gender equality (WHO, 2011).

How should gender be integrated within a nutrition plan?

The current SUN Checklist does not explicitly address the integration of gender consideration in national nutrition plans. To this end, in consultation with the SUN Movement Secretariat (SMS), MQSUN+ created a set of criteria—informed by existing resources (Mkandawire, Hendriks, & Mkandawire-Vahlmu, 2018; PEPFAR Gender and Adolescent Girls Technical Working Group, 2015)—to facilitate the development and review of countries’ NNPs with a gender lens (Table 1).

A policy or plan can be broadly considered to be *gender-responsive* if it considers and addresses gender-related roles, norms and inequities; this may be contrasted to *gender-blind* which in essence does not distinguish between men, women, boys and girls, and *gender-sensitive* which may acknowledge gender related issues and differences but does not address them (Mkandawire et al., 2018). For this review, plans were not slotted by these terms so as not to pre-emptively categorise a plan without further contextual information and supplementary documentation. However, these categories can help to frame general discussion and thinking around improving the gender-responsiveness of national nutrition plans.

Table 1. MQSUN+ national nutrition plan gender assessment tool.

Gender Criteria	Description
Situational analysis includes consideration of sex differences and gender norms	Information in the situational analysis includes sex-disaggregated data by key age groups (e.g. children under age five and adolescents) for both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive indicators, where possible. <i>Assessment question: Does the situational analysis include sex-disaggregated data for key nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive indicators?</i>
	The situational analysis includes gender-related analysis beyond data disaggregation alone, particularly discussion around gender norms, roles and relations and how this may influence nutrition (e.g. the typical role of men and women, the influence of gender roles on time burden, decision making, etc.). <i>Assessment question: Does the situational analysis includes discussion of the gender dimensions of nutrition beyond data disaggregation alone?</i>
Explicit commitment to addressing gender differences and inequity	Gender equality is a stated goal or objective of the plan. <i>Assessment question: Has the plan specifically mentioned gender as part of the strategic vision, goals or principles?</i>

Gender Criteria	Description
<p>Planned actions address gender needs or specify that gender will be addressed as a cross-cutting theme</p>	<p>The planned actions include actions that incorporate the gender dimensions of nutrition based on the needs identified in the situational analysis (e.g. actions that promote women’s decision making, girls’ education, male involvement and/or activities targeting men).</p> <p>Assessment questions: <i>Does the plan contains actions that incorporate gender dimensions of nutrition?</i></p>
	<p>The plan discusses how gender will be applied as a cross-cutting consideration across activities and who will be responsible for this (e.g. looking at gender across activities and considering the gender implications and how to address them; how equitable participation of men, women, boys and girls will be promoted/ensured; addressing harmful gender norms; how activities will be adjusted to respond to inequities).</p> <p>Assessment questions: <i>Does the plan describe <u>how</u> gender considerations will be mainstreamed/integrated across plan activities?</i></p>
<p>Gender experienced stakeholders were involved in the plan development process</p>	<p>Stakeholders and groups with gender expertise (e.g. Ministry of Women's Affairs, women's rights civil society organisations, gender divisions in the United Nations) should be consulted and included in the plan development. The plan has some mention of how stakeholders and groups with gender expertise were included and/or consulted through the planning process.</p> <p>Assessment question: <i>Does the plan reference if/how stakeholders with gender expertise were consulted and included in the plan development process?</i></p>
<p>Identified capacity-building measures, including considerations of gender differences or needs</p>	<p>The capacity assessment includes discussion of the unique needs of men and women and potential barriers to participation in capacity-building activities. The planned capacity-building actions include measures to encourage active participation of both men and women and measures to more broadly integrate gender discussions into capacity-building efforts, where relevant to address gaps in knowledge and action around gender-related needs and differences.</p> <p>Assessment question: <i>Do the capacity assessment and planned capacity-building actions consider and address the unique needs of men and women?</i></p>
<p>The monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan includes gender consideration in how progress will be measured, analysed and reported on</p>	<p>The M&E plan includes: relevant gender equality indicators based on the identified needs and actions and gender-sensitive indicators. (e.g. <u>gender equality indicators</u>: to assess power dynamics, empowerment, gender norms, resource control, gender-based violence, employment, household decision making, women’s status, etc.; <u>gender-sensitive indicators</u>: quantitative measures disaggregated by sex [and other relevant characteristics, such as age] to assess differences in outcomes).</p> <p>Assessment question: <i>Does the M&E framework include gender equality indicators and/or gender-sensitive indicators?</i></p>
	<p>The M&E framework’s data collection and analysis plan includes: disaggregation of relevant data (where available) by sex and age to evaluate equity of the plan with respect to women, men, girls and boys; discussion around addressing data gaps where sex-disaggregated data is not currently available; and an analysis plan that includes use of sex-disaggregated data to inform decision making.</p> <p>Assessment question <i>Does the M&E plan include planned collection/disaggregation of relevant data by sex and age, how data gaps will be addressed and analysis of disaggregated data to inform decision making?</i></p>

Note: These gender-related characteristics and descriptions were developed in discussion with a gender expert, conversations with SMS, and consultation of relevant resources/literature. They were not vetted or agreed on by a larger expert group (as the SUN Checklist was), and as such, broader consideration for how gender should be integrated into multisectoral nutrition plans and the SUN Checklist is recommended.

How are SUN country nutrition plans considering gender?

The review process

In 2018, MQSUN+ reviewed 15 SUN countries' national nutrition plans—either developed since the beginning of 2016 or since 2014 if the plan is still active—using the gender assessment tool outlined in [Table 1](#). Each NNP was assessed for meeting the individual criterion as 'yes', 'partially', 'no' or 'not applicable'. For the majority of NNPs, it was not possible to assess if the plan fully and effectively met many of these characteristics in the absence of country contextual information or a comprehensive country gender assessment. Given this—and the fact that this review was limited to the main planning document for each country¹—most criteria were marked as either 'partially' or 'not' meeting the defined gender inclusion characteristics for the assessed plans.

Summary findings

Overall, plans varied in how comprehensively gender was included across the defined criteria. [Table 2](#) outlines the final assessment results from this review. The summary findings include:

Situational analysis: Most of the plans included at least some gender-related discussion in the situation analysis; however, the degree to which this was done, and the focus of the discussion, was variable. Data presented in the plans' situational analysis was not comprehensively sex-disaggregated—five plans presented no sex-disaggregated data at all, and the rest only for a select few indicators. The included sex-disaggregated indicators also varied across plans (e.g. wasting and stunting were only disaggregated in two plans). Beyond disaggregation alone, most plans included some discussion around gender roles and norms, including women's empowerment, time use and education and literacy as associated with nutrition outcomes.

Vision, goals and principles: nine out of the 15 reviewed NNPs mentioned gender equality as part of the plan's vision, goals or principles. However, few describe how this will actually be done (e.g. how gender considerations will be mainstreamed/integrated in the plan activities).

Planned actions: Nearly all plans reviewed (13 out of 15) included at least some actions that incorporate gender dimensions of nutrition (e.g. actions that promote women's decision making and resource control, increasing women's access to nutrition-sensitive interventions, increasing girls' education, etc.). However, these primarily focused on women and girls. Only four plans included activities specifically targeting men's role and involvement.

Capacity building: All evaluated plans except one presented capacity building as a priority either in terms of coordination capacity within institutions or individual capacity building for nutrition-related professions. However, only one plan included specific reference to gender-related capacity considerations. It could be that this aspect would be detailed in a separate capacity-building plan.

Monitoring and evaluation: Six of the plans included at least one gender equality indicator, such as those related to early marriage, women's and girls' literacy and education, and women's groups' engagement in agriculture interventions. Only one plan discussed a gender-sensitive approach to M&E—specifically mentioning the disaggregation of relevant indicators by sex and the facilitation of gender-sensitive data collection and analysis. It is possible that this level of detail may be elaborated further in separate M&E planning documents.

¹ Reviews of documents related to the NNP—such as food security and nutrition policies, separate costing documents, annual operational plans and M&E frameworks—were not within the scope of this review.

Table 2. Results of the gender assessment for 15 SUN countries' national nutrition plans.

Assessment question	W. African country 1	W. African country 2	W. African country 3	W. African country 4	Cent. African country 1	Cent. African country 2	Cent. African country 3	E. African country 1	E. African country 2	E. African country 3	S. African country 1	Cent. Asian country 1	S.E. Asian country 1	S.E. Asian country 2	S.E. Asian country 3	% of all plans meeting at least some component of this (Y/Partially)
Does the situational analysis include sex-disaggregated data for key nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive indicators?	Y	Y	Y	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	N/A	Y	N/A	67%
Does the situational analysis includes discussion of the gender dimensions of nutrition beyond data disaggregation alone?	Y	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N/A	87%
Has the plan specifically mentioned gender as part of the strategic vision, goals or principles?	Y	N/A	Y	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	N/A	N/A	60%
Does the plan contains actions that incorporate gender dimensions of nutrition?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N/A	87%
Does the plan describe <u>how</u> gender considerations will be mainstreamed/integrated across plan activities?	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	7%
Does the plan reference if/how stakeholders with gender expertise were consulted and included in the plan development process?	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	33%
Do the capacity assessment and planned capacity-building actions consider and address the unique needs of men and women?	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	13%
Does the M&E framework include gender equality indicators and/or gender-sensitive indicators?	N/A	N/A	Y	Y	Y	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	Y	Y	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	47%
Does the M&E plan include planned collection/disaggregation of relevant data by sex and age, how data gaps will be addressed and analysis of disaggregated data to inform decision making?	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	N/A	13%

■ Yes, meets the criterion;
 ■ Partially meets the criterion;
 ■ No, does not meet the criterion;
 N/A, not applicable.

Key preliminary recommendations

To support countries in the consideration of gender during nutrition planning, specific guidance is needed on gender-responsive nutrition plans or further consideration on how and to what extent a gender consideration should be elaborated within the planning document. MQSUN+'s gender assessment tool presents a first step in the process by providing details on how gender can be considered and integrated within an NNP. Further learnings will need to be captured on what is feasible and what works as SUN countries continue in their planning cycles. Preliminary recommendations on how countries can incorporate this into the planning process and during implementation include:

- **Situational analysis:** When conducting a situational or contextual analysis, incorporate a gender analysis through sex disaggregation as well as a broader exploration of cultural and societal gender norms, roles and relations that may influence nutrition. This information can be used to inform targeted action planning as well as to support consideration of the unique needs of men, women, boys and girls and potential unintended consequences.
- **Planned actions:** Ensure the specific needs of men, women, boys and girls are reflected in planned actions based on the unique circumstances understood from the situational/gender assessment. Where possible, the plan should also include actions that address underlying inequities and broader harmful gender norms.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Consult and actively involve stakeholders, agencies and other groups during the plan development, including (1) those representing vulnerable populations to ensure their considerations are taken into account, and (2) those with gender expertise to provide technical insights into gender and nutrition. During stakeholder consultations and workshops, raise discussions around gender equality and the role that gender norms and sex differences play in nutrition-related action within a specific country context; and promote inclusion and participation of both men and women in such discussions to ensure equal representation.
- **Capacity building:** Planned capacity-building actions should include measures to encourage active participation of both men and women (and address any unique needs or potential barriers to participation). Capacity-building efforts should also broadly integrate gender discussions, where relevant, to address gaps in knowledge and action around gender-related needs and differences.
- **M&E:** Selection of appropriate gender-related indicators should be based on a country's individual situational/gender analysis. Relevant data should also be disaggregated by sex and age to evaluate equity of the plan with respect to women, men, girls and boys, and there should be a documented plan for how sex-disaggregated data will be used to inform decision making and how noted data gaps will be addressed. For nutrition-specific indicators, it is recommended that all should be sex-disaggregated, and disaggregation of nutrition-sensitive indicators should be determined based on the country context.

During common results framework, policy or plan development, consider use of MQSUN+'s gender assessment tool ([Table 1](#)) to guide discussions and ensure the integration of gender considerations. For additional information on this gender assessment or the full country plan review for the SUN Checklist, please contact SMS or MQSUN+@path.org.

Cited Resources

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About MQSUN+

MQSUN+ provides technical assistance and knowledge services to the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement Secretariat (SMS) in support of pro-poor programmes in nutrition. MQSUN+ services are resourced by a consortium of five nonstate organisations leading in the field of nutrition.

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