Gender and Commodity Management:

A Field Guide

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Recommended citation:
TOPS Program. 2017. *Gender and Commodity Management – A Field Guide*, Washington, DC: TOPS Program.

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Acknowledgements

1. What is the Purpose of this Guide?

This brief guide confirms that gender (defined below) affects the management and distribution of food commodity, both within the managing organization, and between the organization and commodity recipients. It outlines **good practice** that Commodity Managers and their staff can follow to ensure that all parties enjoy equal and safe access and opportunity. It offers a set of **assessment questions** that Commodity Managers can ask, of themselves and others, to verify that people's rights to food commodity are not hindered by gender norms that marginalize or exclude any group.

2. Who Should Use This Guide?

This guide is written for staff of NGOs that design and implement projects that supply food commodity to beneficiaries in the context of food security programming (including but not limited

to emergency food aid and food-for-work projects). Specifically, the guide is for:

- Those who design and manage such projects
- Commodity Managers
- Warehouse Managers
- Those who manage food distribution teams

Typically, commodity management is only one element of a larger project, designed and managed by an NGO (or similar organization) and funded by a donor (such as USAID). Almost all NGOs have policies on gender, and they design projects with at least some consideration of gender. Donors likewise have gender policies that NGOs must follow. Therefore, commodity management occurs in a context where many actors have already considered and are acting on gender matters. This does not mean that Commodity Managers can assume that gender is not relevant to their work.

3. What is Gender?

Gender refers to the attributes, aspirations, roles, responsibilities, and privileges that a society assigns to its members based on their sex. Gender is socially constructed and maintained, in contrast to **sex**, which is (in almost all cases) a matter of biology: a human being with two X chromosomes is female, and one with an X and a Y chromosome is male.[1] All human societies have gender norms. Norms vary from one society to another, and they change over time. Biological differences, in contrast, are constant over time and place.

Because societies construct gender differences on a foundation of sex differences, gender and sex become so tightly linked that it is difficult to disassociate them. In other words, gender

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[1] More recently, the word **gender** is also used to describe a person's experience of being male or female, which may or may not correspond with their chromosomal makeup. This guide focuses only on gender as social construct, and not gender as a matter of individual identity.

differences can seem as much the natural order as sex differences, and go unseen and unquestioned. More deeply and persistently than class, race, or other social constructs, gender norms affect the lives of both men and women.

Some gender differences have a clear link to sex differences (for example, women's role in caring for infants is larger than men's, because women breastfeed and men cannot). In most cases, however, the link is less clear (women continue to perform all or almost all childcare well after an infant is weaned) or, upon examination, not clear at all (the labor that women devote to childcare, food preparation, and housekeeping is not paid, and is assigned little or no social value). Wherever we encounter differences between men's and women's roles, rewards, and degrees of power, we should ask ourselves some basic questions:

- Is this difference a matter of sex or of gender?
- Who benefits from this difference, and who does not?

- Should this difference, regardless of its source, affect individuals' abilities to fulfill their basic human rights and meet their basic human needs?

4. Why Does Gender Matter for Commodity Management (CM)?

In this light, gender and gendered social norms are highly relevant to people's **participation** in projects, their **access** to project assets (including food rations), and to their **experience** of project impacts both positive and negative. Bear in mind that food commodity is an asset, jobs are assets, and voice and participation in decision-making are assets. Human societies tend to allocate assets unevenly among members, based on status and power. Status and power, in their turn, are universally tied to gender.

Here are several, real-life ways in which gender can affect the quality and fairness of food assistance programming:

- In the past, it was common for NGOs and donors to assume that distributing food rations to male heads of household automatically led to all family members' equal access to food. It is now more common that beneficiary selection takes account of actual household composition, and that food rations are distributed to women.

- Cases have been documented of male project staff and volunteers using their positions of relative power to sexually exploit women and children in exchange for food rations or vouchers.

- Poor distribution site selection and timing may give predators (thieves, rapists) easy access to recipients, especially women and children, as they carry rations home along remote roads or in the dark.

- NGOs staff may automatically assume that commodity management jobs are for men only, because only men have held such jobs in the past.

- Gendered harassment in the workplace can cause disruptions to program operations and create tension on the job and in the community.

Ignoring gender issues in the workplace and in a project not only can lead to harm, but it can also mean staff may overlook opportunities for greater impact.

5. Good Practices

This section provides suggestions that Commodity Managers and other project staff should consider as they proceed through the project cycle, from planning through post-distribution monitoring and reporting. The suggestions are derived from actual good practice in the field, and show how specific actions can minimize the negative impact of the gender differences that are already at play in the communities being served—and in the organization managing the project.

Project Design

Consult with women and men separately to discuss their perceptions of the impact (positive and negative) that food aid interventions may have on women, girls, boys, and men.

When planning a food-for-work project, ask men and women separately about what roles and tasks they feel would be best suited to men and women, based on **their analysis** of physical differences (sex) and local norms (gender). While the food-for-work interventions may be largely predetermined, asking men and women to analyze and identify who they think should do what work could lead to a more gender-informed project design. Alternately, unreflective responses may mean that your project is cementing gendered norms that already privilege some people and disadvantage others.

Consider each food-for-work activity in light of existing gender norms. For example, if the work requires large amounts of water (such as for

mixing cement) and women are typically responsible for traveling to distant sources to haul water, will your project pay women for their labor?

Discussion and action on gender are not once-off phenomena at the beginning of a project. Plan for continuous engagement and dialogue with communities on gender. Ensure that messages on gender are consistent across all sectors and projects.

Hiring Commodity Management Staff

Advertise

Advertise staff positions in a way that elicits applications from both men and women:

- Post announcements in locations and/or via media channels that both women and men are likely to access.

- Use gender-neutral language in the advertisements. For example, state that "the

Commodity Manager will…" instead of "He will…"

- Consider adding a statement such as "Women and men of all ages and abilities are encouraged to apply."

- Advertise within your organization. Female staff in other sectors may want to join the commodity management team.

Recruit

Include female staff members on all staff recruitment and selection committees.

Ask community leaders (tribal, religious, and government) to recommend ways that you can increase the number of women on staff. In preparation, determine:

- Who you will speak with

- What type of information you will seek from these leaders

- How you will explain what you are trying to accomplish

- How you will deal with negative responses to your request

Reach younger women, perhaps those who have just completed secondary school, via headmasters or other school staff.

Consider part-time or temporary / seasonal positions to accommodate to women's schedules.

Consider short-term deployments so that interested female staff can experience field conditions and determine if they wish apply for a field position.

Values

Incorporate value statements in all job descriptions and performance reviews. For example, "All staff are required to demonstrate respect and inclusion within the workplace regardless of a person's sex, religion, ethnicity, religion, class, etc."

If your organization does not already have a workplace code of conduct, develop one—in a participatory manner with your staff—that describes the standards to be applied when determining if a staff member is demonstrating these values.

If the project has gender equality objectives, provide all staff with training and technical support to implement them.

Organize female mentors (on the job, not in the head office) for newly hired female staff.

Community Food Committees

Explain to communities that your organization is committed to gender equality, and describe what this means in practice (committee member selection, recipient targeting, distribution).

Strive for equitable representation of both men and women on food committees to ensure that their different experiences and perspectives are represented.

Learn of the factors that might hinder women's or men's regular participation in committee activities (including distance, schedule, training needs). Take measures to counter these factors. For example, provide child care, and schedule meetings so that they do not coincide with market, meal, or prayer times.

Make sure that informational materials are designed to meet the varying knowledge and literacy levels of committee members.

Include basic concepts of gender in community committee training.

Establish protocols to rotate roles and tasks among members. This will help ensure equitable distribution of duties, and equal opportunities for all committee members to take leadership and other roles.

Recipient Targeting and Registration

Clearly communicate your project's targeting approaches and criteria to the community

(recipients, non-recipients, and beneficiaries) to avoid creating tension.

To ensure that targeting follows the criteria established by your project, involve women and men (of all ages, classes, wealth, and position in the community) in identification of recipients. For example, you might assign responsibilities for targeting and selection to 'referral committees' that you create using existing structures such as youth clubs, women's clubs, HIV support groups, resident's associations.

Collect sex-disaggregated data during registration.

If polygyny is widely practiced, determine how women will be targeted. For example, if each woman (and her children) is considered an individual household, ensure that women (and not their spouses) are recipients of food aid for themselves and their children. Always make the process transparent so that communities understand why each woman is being targeted in polygynous households.

Warehouse Operations

Provide adequate safety training for all staff.

Provide separate latrines or toilets and clothes-changing areas for women and men.

Ensure adequate lighting inside the warehouse, and at the entrance/exit of all facilities.

If the warehouse is located in an area where it is unsafe to travel alone, or if staff are required to travel in the dark, provide transportation or escort service for all staff to the nearest safe location.

Distribution

Select Final Distribution Points (FDP)

Involve both women and men in the selection of FDP.

To ensure that FDP are accessible and safe for all recipients, consider the following before finalizing selection:

- Examine the routes that people will travel to reach the FDP. Are they walking or taking public transportation? Are men and women taking different routes? Is there risk of violence or harassment along any route? Who poses that risk, and to whom?

- Avoid areas where recipients have to cross military or armed check points or negotiate safe passage.

- Prioritize FDP that minimize travel distances for all recipients (preferably less than 10 kilometers), and especially for recipients who are elderly, pregnant, or whose mobility is compromised.

- Ensure that water, toilets, and shade or shelter are available at or near the FDP.

Determine Scheduling

When determining the frequency of distributions, consider the total weight of the food ration, and how recipients will carry it home. Less frequent distribution means a larger ration per person / household, and a heavier volume of commodity that each recipient must carry. Consider the following:

- Can rations be packaged to facilitate easy carrying, for example, 25 kilo bags rather than 50 kilo bags?
- Can assistance be organized (by community or project) for carrying rations home?

Schedule distributions during a time of day that allows recipients to travel to and from the FDP in daylight.

Identify and avoid overlaps with other project activities (group meetings, trainings, vaccinations at health clinics, for example) so that recipients are not forced to choose one or the other.

Design distributions to reduce long waiting times. For example, organize distributions at different time intervals to avoid crowds.

Ensure that all interested parties are equally and fully informed in advance about:

- Recipient selection criteria
- Place and time of distribution
- Quantity and type of commodities that will be distributed
- The complaint / response mechanisms in place at the final distribution point

Make sure that all parties—staff, recipients and others—know that that **it is never acceptable** for staff or volunteers to demand money, goods, or services in exchange for commodity.

Distribute Commodities

At the final distribution point, ensure that the following information is prominently displayed, in

formats that are understandable by people who cannot read:

- Ration entitlements
- Process for seeking help, asking questions, and raising complaints

If possible, employ an equal number of male and female staff. Because of the different social roles they play and the experiences they have had, men and women may 'read' situations differently; together they can provide a more detailed picture of the distribution site, process, recipients, and more. Female recipients can approach female staff to discuss problems or seek help; male can approach male.

Give priority to certain groups of people (for example, unaccompanied children, sick or malnourished children, pregnant or lactating woman) and make sure this priority, and the reasons for it, are clearly explained to all.

Ensure that your organization has a zero-tolerance policy on gender-based violence and

sexual exploitation, and review USAID's policy on these matters. Require every staff member associated with food distribution to sign the policy, and regularly monitor to ensure that the policy is being implemented.

Educate staff to understand which behaviors / actions constitute sexual exploitation, violence, and gender-based discrimination (for example, withholding a distribution from an entitled recipient because s/he is a known sex worker), and about the consequences of such actions.

Develop, in a participatory manner with community members, a reliable system for the use of delegates (someone elected to work on behalf of another, or collect entitlements on behalf of a registered recipient). Include a means to verify (and triangulate) that the entitlements reached the intended recipients, and recipients were not required to make monetary or sexual payment to the delegate.

Monitoring

Monitor security during distributions. Take timely and appropriate action on instances of abuse.

Ensure that complaints are treated confidentially, and that there is no retaliation against the complainer.

Routinely monitor women's, girls', boys' and men's access to services through spot checks and discussions with community members.

Provide opportunities, other than communicating directly with a staff member, for communities to give positive and negative feedback on the distribution process. Mechanisms may include a phone line, a texting option, dropping in on mothers' groups to quickly survey for complaints, written complaint forms offered at distribution site. Staff should pay attention to rumors of violence related to the commodity.

Develop post-distribution monitoring tools in consultation with women and men in the target

population to specifically review the impact of food distribution on women, girls, boys and men.

Commodity Reporting

Disaggregate data by sex and age.

Use sex- and age-specific language (boys, girls, men, women) to capture differences in outcomes by population group.

Describe how women, men, boys, and girls have actively participated in the food program.

6. Gender and CM Assessment Questions

This section consists of sets of questions that Commodity Managers and other project staff can ask of colleagues, of themselves, and of commodity recipients.

- The first set of questions should be incorporated into the *Project Level Gender Assessment*, usually conducted the first year of the project.

- The *CM Self-Assessment* questions can be asked by commodity staff before, during, or at the end of a food assistance project.

- Project monitoring staff may integrate the *Questions for Community Members* into monitoring or evaluation tools.

The overall aim of these questions is to determine if all aspects of the project are gender-blind; in other words, to make sure that opportunities, experiences, and access to assets (commodity, participation, jobs) are not restricted or

compromised by social norms surrounding gender.

If the response to any question is "No", actions should be developed and implemented to ensure a positive response in the future. Where prompted to explain a positive answer (for example. "If yes, how?", share the answer with others in the CM community.

Project-Level Gender Assessment

Project Design

Did the project's needs assessment and/or baseline survey document:

- Gendered divisions of labor and remuneration within and outside the household, and the approximate time that individuals must devote to various tasks

- The roles assigned to or assumed by women, girls, boys, and men in food procurement

- Culturally and religiously imposed food restrictions and preferences for men, women (including during pregnancy and lactation), and children under five years of age

Human Resources

Did the implementing organization **recruit** both men and women for positions (including senior positions) in commodity management? If yes, how?

Did your organization/project **hire** both women and men into positions (including senior positions) in commodity management? If no, why not?

Was a commodity management staff member identified to serve as a gender advocate, or to represent the commodity management function in a larger gender advisory group within the project/organization?

CM Self-Assessment

Human Resources

Do female commodity management staff have opportunities for promotion within your organization? If yes, how are female staff made aware of these opportunities?

Was gender awareness included in your job description?

Is gender awareness or gender integration part of your performance evaluation?

Does your organization have policies on gender? If yes, how did you learn about those policies?

Does your organization provide training on gender in commodity management? If yes, did you receive the training?

Do you feel you have the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to carry out your work with

gender awareness? If not, what knowledge or skills are you lacking?

Community Food Committees

Do both women and men serve on the community food committees that target recipients, distribute commodities, and monitor food assistance?

Did your organization (or some other project actor) provide training or information to committee members? If yes, did the training or information take into account the various education and knowledge levels of all committee members?

Did women and men committee members participate equally in the design of the registration process (to ensure the process itself is accessible to all potential recipients)?

Registration

Is registration done by a sex-balanced team, allowing for same-sex interviewers?

Is a mechanism in place at registration sites for community members to monitor and report on security and instances of abuse? Do both women and men participate in this monitoring?

Are female and adolescent-headed households (if applicable) allowed to register?

If polygyny is widely practiced, has it been ensured that women will receive commodity rations for themselves and their children?

Warehousing

Do men and women have equal opportunities to work in warehouses?

Is the working environment in the warehouse friendly to both men and women?

Do Commodity Managers demonstrate a willingness to discuss issues and concerns related

to warehouse operations that are raised by female staff?

Do Commodity Managers take gender seriously and discuss it openly during team meetings?

Distribution

Did both women and men participate in the process of selecting safe distribution **points**?

Did staff consider safety and security when identifying distribution **times**?

Did project staff hold discussions with men and women about dangers posed to recipients as they travel to and from the distribution points? Who poses danger, and to whom? Are these dangers acceptable to the community, or are they willing to act to prevent or confront and hold accountable those who pose danger?

Can all recipients (men, women, and children) easily transport the average ration?

Are female commodity distribution staff always on site to monitor security and instances of abuse?

Post-Distribution Monitoring

Is a clear mechanism in place for female monitors to express security concerns? If yes, who addresses these concerns and how?

Were monitoring questionnaires developed in consultation with women and men in the target population?

Are spot checks (discussion groups) conducted to assess women's, girls', boys' and men's access to commodity distribution?

Are recipients routinely asked about their knowledge of selection criteria, distribution place and time, size and composition of the ration, and proper channels for reporting abuse?

Are sex- and age-disaggregated data on food distribution coverage collected, analyzed, and routinely reported on?

Is a complaints mechanism in place? If yes, who receives and responds to complaints?

Questions for Community Members

Project Start-up

Did project staff consult women and men separately about any negative impact that food assistance interventions may have on women, girls, boys, or men?

Were you consulted separately from your spouse or partner and asked if you had any concerns about participating in the project?

Community Food Committees

Are the community committees that target recipients, distribute commodities, and monitor

food assistance composed of equal numbers of women and men? If no, why not?

Was any training provided to committee members? If yes, was it organized at a convenient time and place? Were information materials provided? If yes, did you easily understand the materials?

Are ongoing meetings held at a place and time that allow women and men to attend?

Registration

Did both women and men participate equally in the design of the registration process and in the information-sharing meetings about the process?

Did both female and male staff members conduct the registration?

Did both male and female committee members participate in monitoring the registration sites?

Did men have any problems registering as recipients? Did women have any problems registering as recipients? If yes, please describe the problem(s).

Did each registration site have a place to report security problems or instances of abuse?

Distribution

Were both women and men included in the process of selecting the distribution point(s)?

How do project staff provide information about the distribution date and time to male and female recipients?

Is the current information dissemination system the best way to communicate such information? If not, please suggest improvements.

Were you asked about the timing of distribution? If so, did you inform project staff about any concerns you had with the timing? If no, why not?

If yes, do you feel your concerns were addressed? How?

Is information about the types and quantities of food in the ration posted at the site? Is it easy to understand?

Are staff at the site friendly to both men and women?

Is there an area at the site where parents can feed or tend to children privately?

Is there a toilet at the site for women? For men?

Are female commodity distribution staff always on site to monitor security and instances of abuse?

Can the 'registered recipient' easily transport the average ration? If no, why not?

What security threats do women, girls, boys and men face as they collect commodity rations? Who poses those security threats? Does the

community in general find the threats acceptable? What are communities able and willing to do to remove, minimize or counter these threats?

Is there a place at the site to ask questions or discuss concerns about the distribution? If yes, is there any mechanism to help illiterate adults or children submit a complaint?

If you made a complaint, did someone from the project respond to you? If yes, what was their response?

Post-Distribution Monitoring

Did men and women in the community participate in creating the monitoring questionnaires?

Are both men and women asked to review the reports from monitoring visits?

How often are you asked to provide information? What type of information are you asked to provide?

7. Resources: Learn More, Do Better

General

The ***Global Gender and Integration*** video features Mercy Corps' Gender Advisor, Sahar Alnouri, giving a TEDx talk about gender: a general overview, examples, and arguments about why we must pay attention in development and emergency response programming. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HCP1wAJyN4

Integrating Gender throughout a Project's Life Cycle 2.0 provides more information about how gender fits into programming. Available at: https://www.landolakes.org/getattachment/Resources/Tools/Integrating-Gender-into-Land-O-Lakes-Technical-App/Integrating-Gender-throughout-a-Project-s-Life-Cycle_FINAL_compressed.pdf.aspx

The *Minimum Standards for Mainstreaming Gender Equality* have been developed through a multi-year process by the Gender Practitioner Collaborative—a consortium of gender experts representing development and aid organizations. Available at: https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/minimum-standards-mainstreaming-gender-equality.pdf

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA)

The InterAction online course *SEA "101"* provides a basic, entry-level introduction to sexual exploitation and abuse of beneficiaries. Available at: https://www.interaction.org/courses/sea101/index.html

For more information, the *InterAction Step by Step Guide to Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* helps NGOs and similar organizations to develop and implement policies to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse of beneficiaries and vulnerable members of the

community. The intention is to make the process easily understandable so that any staff person can pick up the guide and use it to get started—or to enhance and expand on the policies they already have in place. Available at: http://www.fsnnetwork.org/interaction-step-step-guide-addressing-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse

Gender Audit / Analysis

InterAction also provides *The Gender Audit Handbook* for those interested in learning about the process of gender audit. Available at: https://www.interaction.org/sites/default/files/Gender%20Audit%20Handbook%202010%20Copy.pdf

A Sample Gender Analysis is a case study by Catholic Relief Services that summarizes a gender analysis conducted from June to October 2012 in Ethiopia. The purpose was to inform the development of a cross-cutting gender strategy to ensure women, men, girls and boys equally participate in and benefit from a CRS food security program in Ethiopia. Available at: http://www.fsnnetwork.org/sample-gender-analysis