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Transforming gender norms through the gender model family approach: Evidence from Sierra Leone

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Abstract

The Gender Model Family (GMF) approach, developed by the NGO SEND Ghana and implemented in Sierra Leone through Welthungerhilfe's LANN+ project, seeks to transform gender and social norms to enhance women's access, participation, and resilience in agri-food systems. By targeting families as the fundamental unit of social change, the approach aims to reduce gender inequalities and stimulate long-term societal transformations. The GMF approach involves recruiting volunteer couples to participate in a series of trainings that promote critical reflection on household roles, workloads, and decision-making.

Integrated into the LANN+ project (Linking Agriculture, Natural Resource Management and WASH towards Nutrition Security), implemented by Welthungerhilfe in collaboration with the NGO SEND Sierra Leone from 2018 to 2020, the GMF approach was used to mobilise communities and promote nutrition education and improved agricultural practices. The project linked these efforts with activities on natural resource management, alternative income generation, and improved access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

This study assesses the sustainability of the LANN+ project measures, particularly the gender-transformative effects achieved, and their impact on the nutrition situation and agricultural productivity. Qualitative field research, conducted in January 2025, included focus group discussions with 40 smallholder farmers (20 women, 20 men) as well as local dignitaries and community leaders of four villages in Kenema District, along with interviews with project staff and government representatives.

Findings indicate sustained positive impacts, including more equitable workload distribution, enhanced decision-making power for women, improved joined financial management, and greater family cohesion, although traditional gender roles still posed challenges. GMF participants continue to practice food diversification and hygiene behaviours introduced through LANN+ and act as role models in their communities.

The study highlights the importance of integrating gender-transformative measures with more tangible project components to increase participation and acceptance. It also underscores the need for context-specific adaptations, continuous support, and multi-stakeholder engagement to sustain gender-transformative change.

Apart from presenting the study's findings, the contribution formulates lessons learned for development cooperation and explores pathways to transfer this good practice of community-driven gender norm change to other contexts.

Keywords: Agri-food systems, gender Model Family, gender norms, gender-transformative approach, LANN+ project, Sierra Leone, social change

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