

# Women's empowerment and nutrition



Mara van den Bold and Stuart Gillespie (IFPRI)  
Bonn, 24 September 2013

**transform nutrition**

# Introduction

- Increasing research on links between women's empowerment and nutrition
- “Women's empowerment” increasingly a focus of development programs:
  - i) as a goal in and of itself
  - ii) as a pathway to other important development outcomes
- Intra-household dynamics determine allocation of resources within a household
  - Women often primary caretakers → empowerment can impact health/nutrition of others, especially children
- Human capital outcomes often rigorously evaluated; impact on empowerment not always, at times assumed.
- Review examines:
  - i) evidence of links between women's empowerment and nutrition outcomes
  - ii) evidence of impact of different programs on women's empowerment, nutrition, or both (cash transfers, agriculture, microfinance)

# Methodology

- Electronic data bases & websites screened, using key search terms



- Further literature searches through experts on agriculture, gender, nutrition, social protection



- Snow balling process – additional literature added



- 4,000+ references screened; approximately 180 included
- Published and grey literature included
- Studies/reviews on 3 programs included if they measured i) women's empowerment, ii) nutrition outcomes, iii) both

# Defining women's empowerment

- Defining women's empowerment – frequently used terms: choice, power, options, control, agency.
- *The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them (Kabeer 1999)*
- Emphasizes **agency** and empowerment as a **process**
- Critiques on current interpretations:
  - Sidesteps agenda of social justice and equality as a valuable goal in itself
  - Re-traditionalizes gender roles
  - Ahistorical, apolitical, de-contextualized

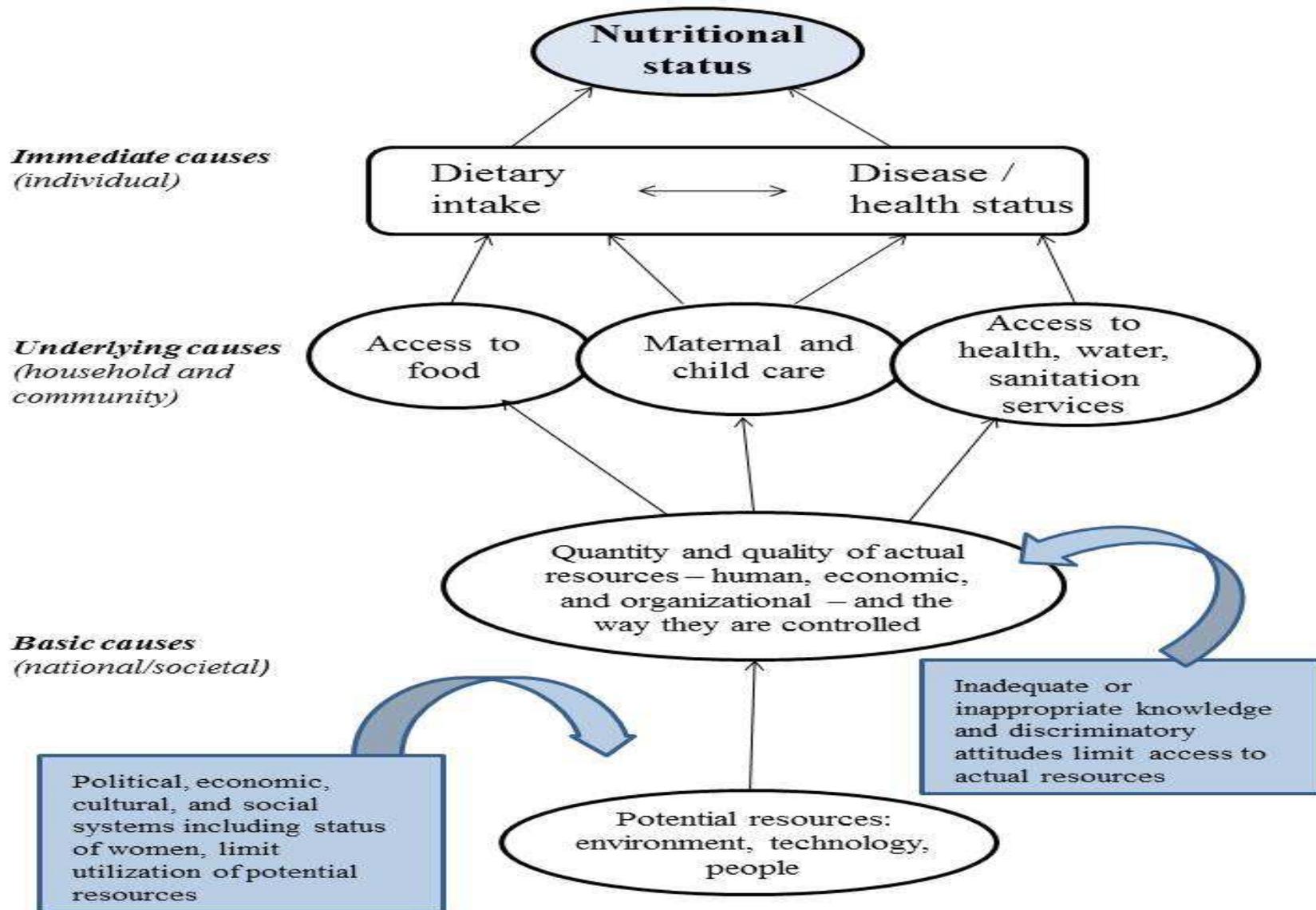
# Measuring women's empowerment

- **Indirect** measures include: education, labor market status, legal frameworks, marriage/kinship, land ownership, social norms, political representation
- **Direct** measures include:
  - Women's involvement in household decision-making
  - Women's access to or control over resources
  - Women's freedom of movement / mobility
  - Power relations between husband and wife
  - Women's/men's attitudes towards abuse / IPV / gender roles
  - Sources of power e.g. media exposure, education, paid employment
- Others: management/knowledge, marriage/kin/social support, settings of power such as social hierarchies, appreciation in household, sense of self-worth

# Women's empowerment and nutrition

- Studies (using indirect and direct measures) demonstrate relationship between women's empowerment dimensions and nutrition
- Similarly, studies also demonstrate relationship between women's *disempowerment* and adverse nutritional impacts (e.g. domestic violence)
- Further supported by evidence that men and women have different preferences for allocation resources within a household (rejection of unitary model)

# Conceptual framework: women's empowerment and nutrition



## A. Structural interventions: “leveling the playing field”

- Renouncing gender discrimination in constitutions and legislation
- Voting rights, rights to basic citizenship documents
- Representation/participation in politics (e.g. through quotas)
- Equal access to public services (education, health care, agricultural information/extension)
- Equal access to financial (e.g. credit) and physical assets (e.g. land)
- Legal reforms: marriage/family law, inheritance law, property rights law, labor laws; social protection programs

## B. Interventions that aim to directly empower women

Programs that either target women as primary beneficiaries, or have “women’s empowerment” as a key objective:

- Cash Transfer programs (conditional and unconditional)
- Agricultural interventions (animal production/dairy; home gardening)
- Microfinance programs (mostly microcredit)

What is the evidence on impact of these programs on:

- i) women’s empowerment?
- ii) nutrition?
- iii) both?

# Cash Transfer programs



**transform nutrition**

LED BY IFPRI 

# Cash Transfer programs

## Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs):

- Implemented in many countries; rigorous evaluations mostly in LA
- Transfers cash to poor households provided they adhere to conditions – mainly related to health, nutrition, education --- often targeted to women
- **CCTs → women's empowerment:**
  - Qualitative evidence mostly positive
  - Quantitative evidence more heterogeneous
- **CCTs → nutrition:**
  - Mixed evidence; little evidence on pathways
  - Non-health related conditions appear to have *negative* impacts on nutritional status

# Cash Transfer programs, cont'd.

## Unconditional Cash Transfers (UCTs):

- Transfers without program conditions, women often targeted
- **UCTs → women's empowerment:**
  - Limited evidence
  - Quantitative research points to mixed results
- **UCTs → nutrition:**
  - Positive but very limited (quantitative) evidence
  - Little known about impact pathways
- In cases where nutrition impact was positive: little known about pathways, e.g. whether impact due to beneficiary's gender, or due to conditionality or not (other factors may be more important)

A woman is shown from a side profile, bent over as she works in a field. She is carrying a young child on her back, secured with a green and white patterned cloth. She wears a white headwrap with blue and yellow patterns and a blue and yellow patterned dress. In her right hand, she holds a white bucket with a red stripe, containing a reddish-brown substance, likely fertilizer or soil. Her left hand is on the ground, which is dark brown soil with some dry plant matter. The background shows a lush green landscape with hills, trees, and a clear sky. The word "Agriculture" is written in white text on the right side of the image.

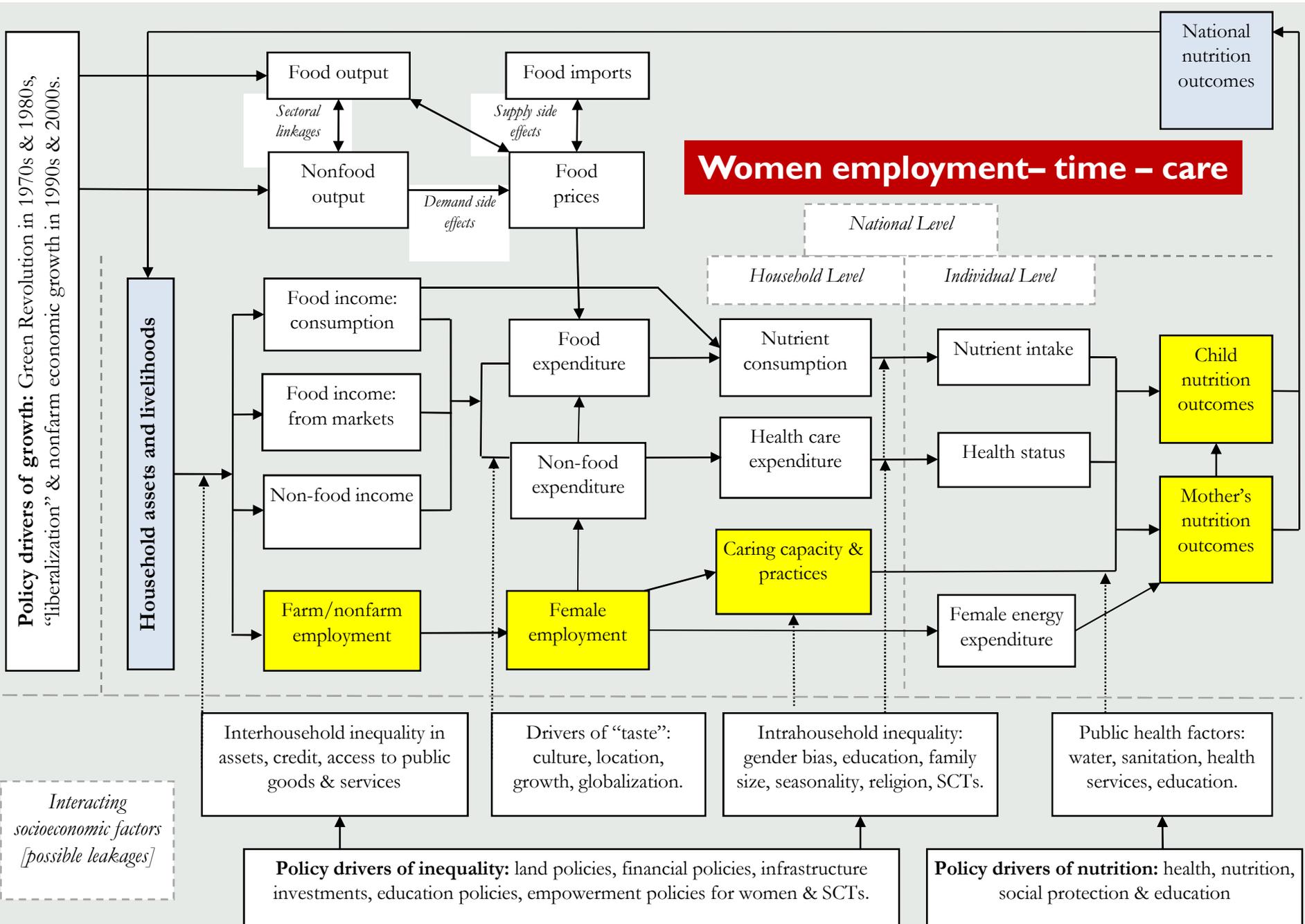
# Agriculture

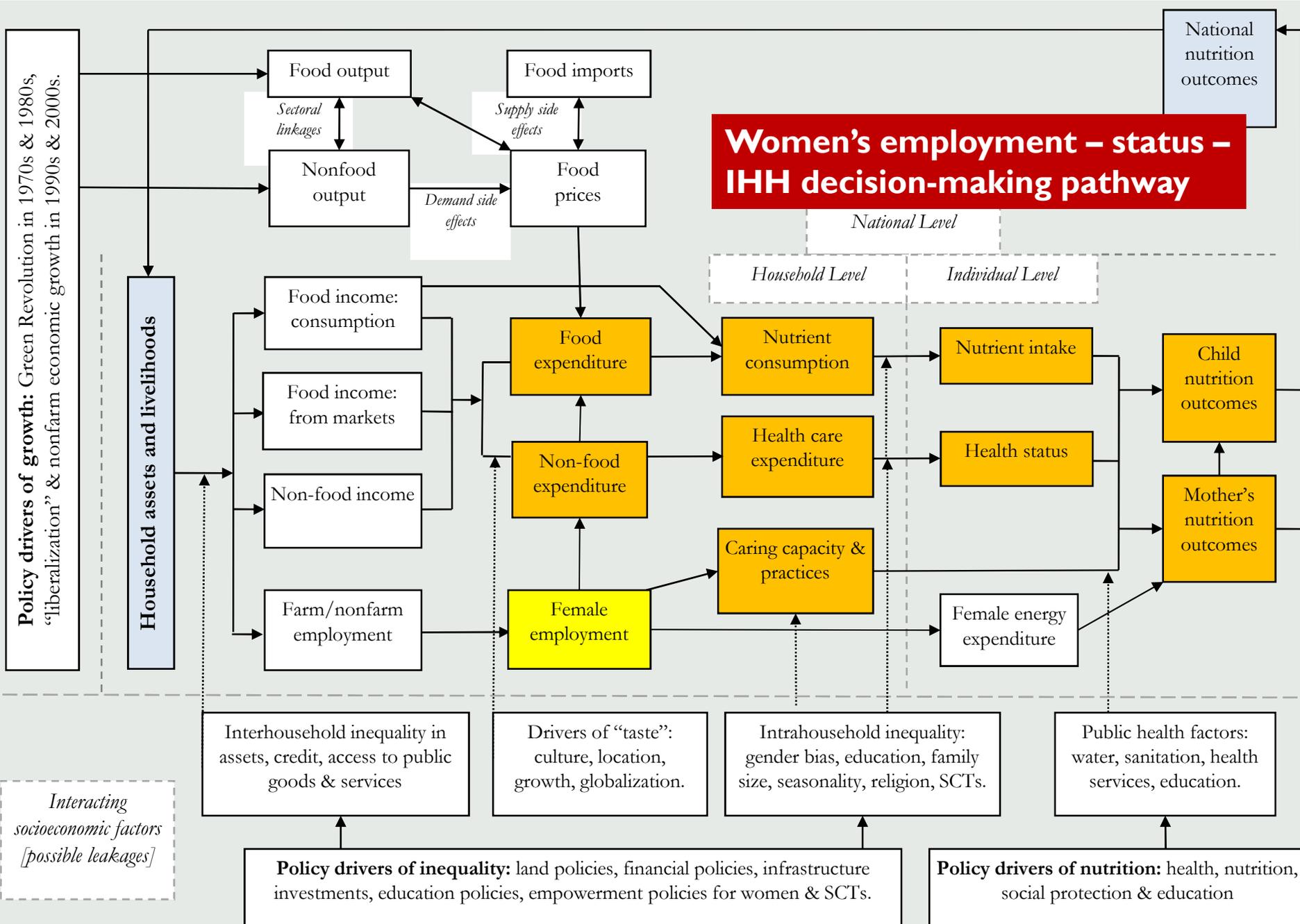
Photo: One Acre Fund

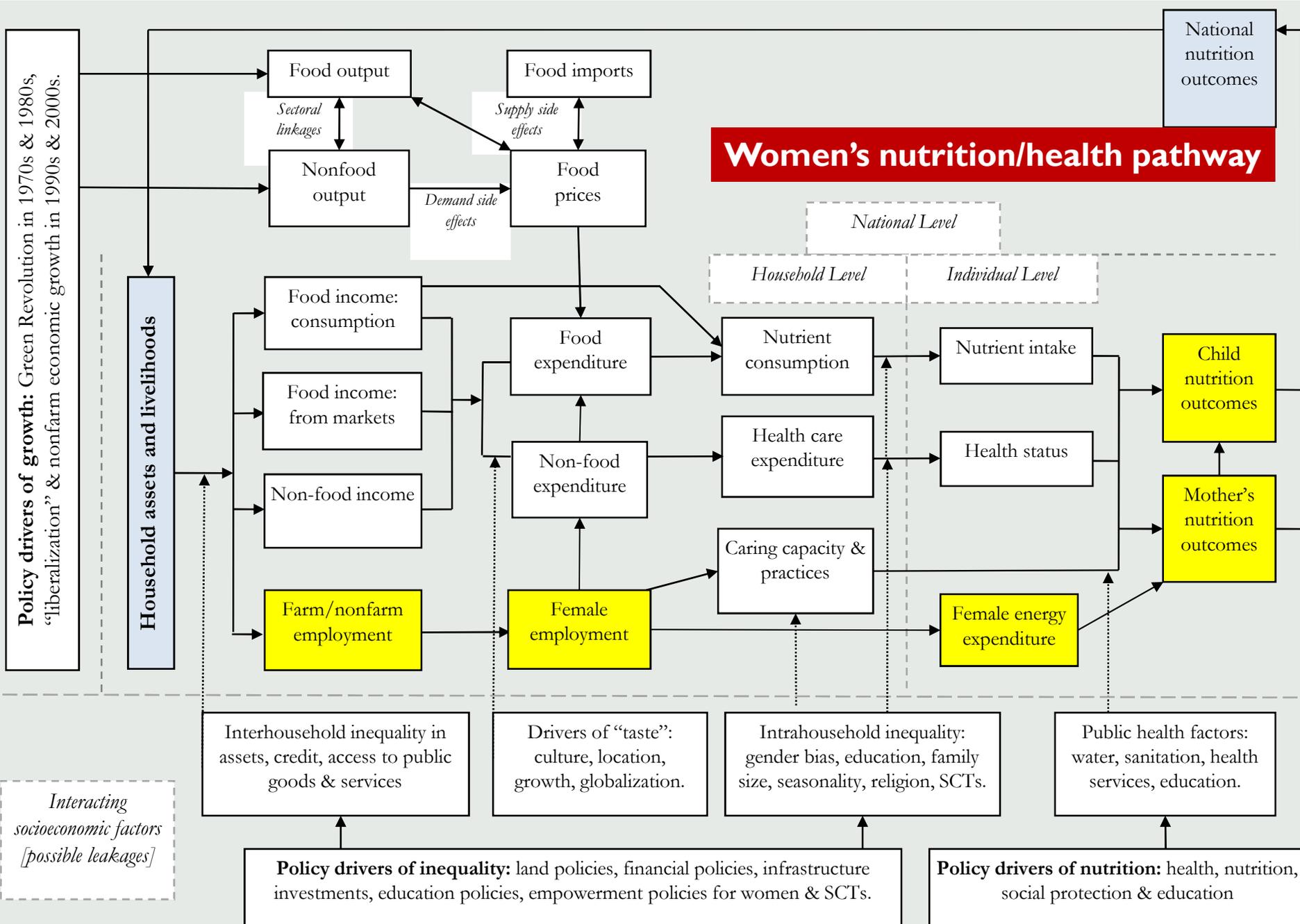
# Agricultural interventions

Pathways between agriculture and nutrition outcomes:

1. Agriculture as a source of food
2. Agriculture as a source of income:  
how income from agriculture/non agriculture is spent on food and non food (other basic needs)
3. Agricultural policy and food prices
4. Women's employment, time and ability to manage young child care
5. Women's status, decision making power and control over resource allocation
6. Women's own health and nutritional status







# Agricultural interventions, cont'd.

- **Agricultural interventions → women's empowerment:**
  - Limited evidence; mixed results
- **Agricultural interventions → nutrition:**
  - Limited evidence of impact on maternal/child nutrition, with exception of vitamin A intake/status
  - Programs with behavioral change components more promising
  - Few good evaluations
  - Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index potential future tool



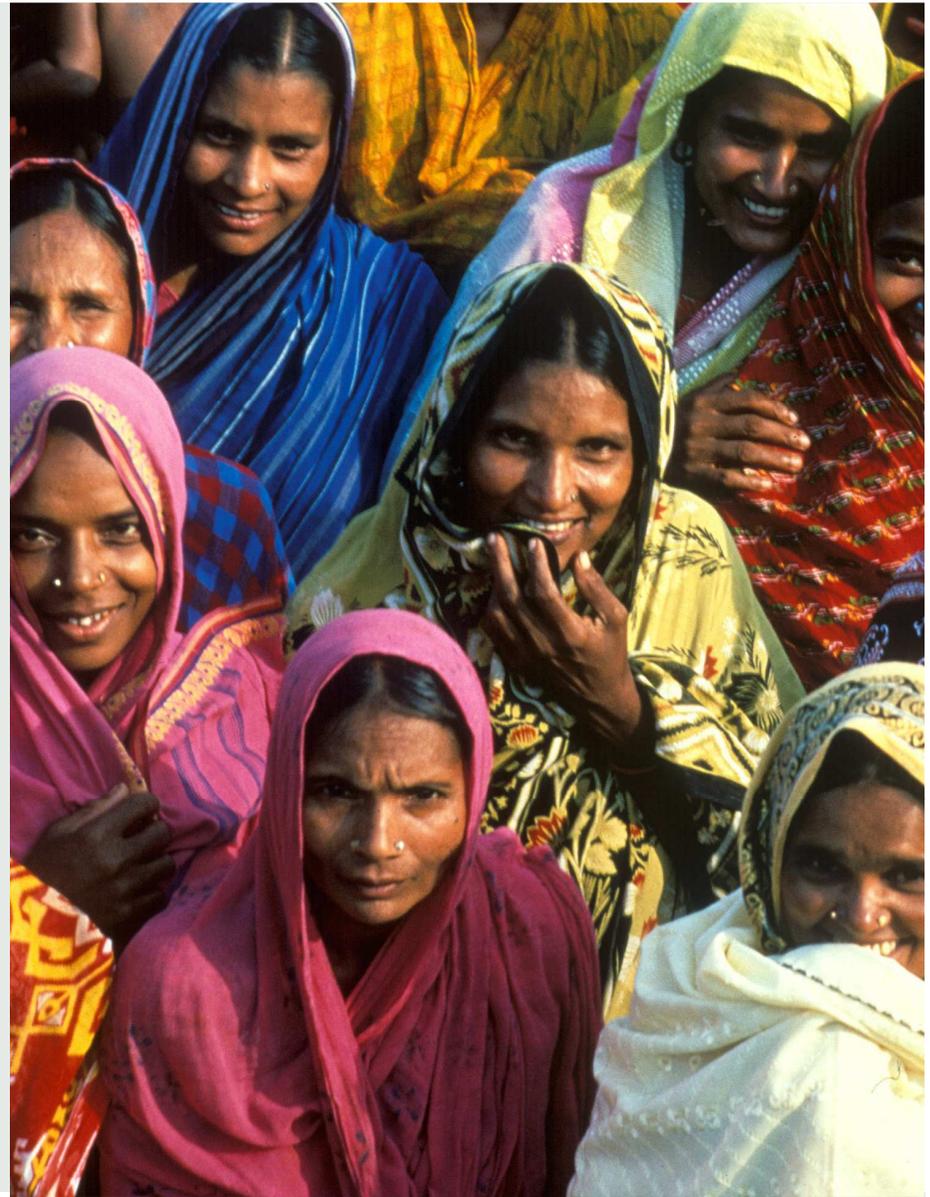
**Microfinance  
programs**

**transform nutrition**

# Microfinance programs

- Facilitating access to financial services otherwise unavailable to poor (credit, savings, insurance); women often primary beneficiaries
- **Microfinance → women's empowerment:**
  - Mixed and controversial results from non/quasi-experimental studies
  - Recent RCTs find **no** impact on women's empowerment
  - Recent systematic reviews find **no** impact on women's empowerment
- Recent reviews question studies that found positive impacts (suggesting weak research designs/analyses)
  - Also: differences in definitions/dimensions of empowerment, differing study methodologies and interpretation of results (Kabeer 2001)
- **Microfinance → nutrition:**
  - Limited and mixed evidence on nutritional status
  - No impact on micronutrient status

# Conclusions and recommendations



**transform nutrition**

# Conclusions

- Women's empowerment: **process** involving **expansion of agency**
  - Context-specific, political, historical; different meanings to different women
  - Direct and indirect measures
- Positive associations between women's empowerment and nutrition outcomes; more research needed on models to measure this
- Evidence for three types of programs:
  - Women's empowerment impacts: mostly mixed evidence
  - Nutrition impacts: limited, mixed evidence on impact on nutritional status; almost no evidence on impacts on micronutrient status
  - Very little known about pathways of impact, impact of gender of beneficiary, and of conditionality

# Recommendations

1. Rigorous mixed-methods evaluations capable of measuring impacts on women's empowerment dimensions – particularly related to nutrition
2. Data:
  - disaggregated data on sex and other social variables
  - life cycle and gender differences in nutrition and health burdens
3. Indicators:
  - Use gender-disaggregated impact indicators
  - Ensure indicators are rooted in political/historical/cultural context
  - Develop indicators at outcome and impact level

# Recommendations, cont'd.

4. Carry out thorough gender analyses
5. Broaden evidence base:
  - Impact of CTs on women's empowerment and nutrition in SSA and Asia
  - Expand research on microfinance beyond Bangladesh to other Asian contexts as well as other non-Asian developing countries
  - Further research on conditionality and gender impacts of programs
  - Further research on impact of agricultural programs on nutrition, examining impact pathways
6. Strengthen capacity among researchers to conduct gender analyses, collect / analyze gender-disaggregated data

# transform nutrition

Thank you

LED BY IFPRI 