

ETHIOPIA PROMISING PRACTICES FOR TRANSFORMING WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' NUTRITION

Introduction

Ethiopia is making significant strides in addressing malnutrition through health systems strengthening. However, in regions affected by conflict and insecurity, acute malnutrition remains life-threatening and disproportionately affects women. The [Strengthen Productive Safety Net Program Institutions and Resilience](#) (SPIR) project – SPIR I (2016–2021) and SPIR II (2021–2026) – is an exemplary model for integrating equality for women and girls into large-scale social protection and resilience-building programmes. This project aims to enhance livelihoods, build resilience to shocks, and improve food security and nutrition among poor rural households in Ethiopia's Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray regions. It focuses on improving dietary diversity, complementary feeding, health extension services, and women's health-seeking behaviours.

The [Gender Transformative Framework for Nutrition](#) (GTFN) highlights the critical relationship between equality for women and girls and nutrition outcomes. To identify promising practices, World Vision projects were evaluated using the GTFN matrix, focusing on the [seven key domains](#) of gender-nutrition transformation: equitable food systems, gender- and adolescent-responsive health systems, equitable education, economic inclusion, safe and equitable water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), social protection, and resilience to environmental and political crises.



This good practice document captures key interventions, lessons learned, and recommendations from the SPIR projects in Ethiopia. It provides practical, actionable insights for designing future projects aiming to enhance gender equality and nutrition outcomes for women and girls.



Promising Practice 1: Economic empowerment and gender-sensitive agriculture for resilience

The SPIR project strengthens the resilience of vulnerable households by diversifying livelihoods and improving income generation, with a specific focus on empowering women. The project supports female producers in growing and selling nutrient-rich cereal-legume and oilseed mixed flour, enhancing both the availability and accessibility of nutritious foods for young children. This initiative facilitates the timely introduction of complementary feeding at six months. SPIR also integrates gender-sensitive approaches into agricultural training, ensuring women have equal access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities. These practices align with the GTFN domains of equitable food systems, economic inclusion, and women's resilience to environmental and political crises.

Promising practices

- **Women's savings and loan groups and income generation:** SPIR I established 1,856 savings and loan groups for women, enabling them to start and expand small businesses in petty trade, poultry, and vegetable production. This increased their financial independence and improved household dietary diversity. The project also supported women's entry into production and value chains for poultry and honey while training 20,628 female Village Economic and Social Associations (VESA) members. Women participating in these micro-financing and business skills programmes collectively generated US\$10,998 in income.

- **Gender-sensitive agricultural training:** SPIR I and II trained women on climate-resilient agricultural practices, including water management and drought-resistant crops. In SPIR I, 14,306 women participated in nutrition-sensitive farm activities. SPIR II has expanded this training to an additional 51,833 women.
- **Supporting complementary feeding:** By increasing the availability and accessibility of nutritious mixed flour, SPIR II is improving the timely introduction of complementary feeding for young children. This easy-to-cook flour also enables caregivers to sustain their child's weight gain at home after the child is discharged from a two-week feeding demonstration session designed to rehabilitate undernourished children. Working with 263 saleswomen, the project introduced door-to-door sales of cereal-legume and oilseed mixed flour, enhancing women's income diversification, small business management skills, and child nutrition, while reducing the time required for child meal preparation by caregivers.
- **Access to resources:** The project facilitates access to agricultural inputs, such as seeds and tools, for women engaged in the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) through a dedicated 3% nutrition-sensitive capital budget and linkages to agro-dealers and social services. This enables women to apply their training to diversified food production and improve their livelihoods. SPIR II also facilitated links to financial service providers, with 33,475 women participating in group-based savings, microfinance, or lending programmes. Additionally, SPIR II connected women to agro-dealers and other social services, increasing household dietary diversity and women's access to agricultural and economic resources.

Lesson learned: Women's economic empowerment can directly contribute to better nutrition outcomes – not just for women themselves but for their entire households. However, sustaining these improvements requires parallel and ongoing support at both the systems and household levels. Ensuring that women have equal access to agricultural and financial resources is crucial for improving nutrition and resilience to environmental and economic shocks.



Promising Practice 2: Achieving equality for women and girls through male and community engagement

The SPIR project worked to shift harmful barriers preventing women and girls from reaching their full potential by engaging both women and men in community discussions and decision-making processes related to nutrition and health. This approach aligns with the GTFN domains of social protection and gender-responsive health and nutrition systems.

Promising practices

- **Advocating for equity in health systems:** SPIR II trained 574 safety net frontline workers on gender protection and empowered 734 women as leaders in transforming social role expectations for women and girls.
- **Women's empowerment:** SPIR I worked through VESAs and women's solidarity groups to increase leadership opportunities and expand female representation. The project established seven women leader's solidarity groups, each with 115 members, and provided training in leadership and public speaking.
- **Male engagement:** SPIR II engaged men and religious leaders in discussions about equality for women and girls and their role in supporting women's health and nutrition. This led to increased male involvement in household chores and maternal and child health care. Last year, the Men's Engagement Model trained 1,370 male advocates, who facilitated the formation of 705 male engagement groups with 12,565 members. [Read about a father's personal transformation as a result of this programme.](#)

Lesson learned: Engaging men as allies in gender equality efforts can significantly increase their participation in household and caregiving labour and can create male advocates to sustain these efforts at the community level and within health and social protection systems.



Promising Practice 3: Creating equitable water and social protection systems and building environmental resilience

The SPIR projects aim to strengthen Ethiopia's PSNP, a cornerstone of the country's social protection system. SPIR supports government provision of services for the PSNP in key areas such as women's access to government and health services, livelihoods, food security, mental health and psychosocial support, and addressing barriers and social expectations that limit girls' education. Ethiopia is vulnerable to climate change and has faced severe droughts in recent years. SPIR responded by supporting PNSP systems-strengthening for shock-responsive water management. SPIR's support for these various systems addresses the GTFN domains of social protection, equitable education, food, health, and water systems, and environmental resilience.

Promising practices

- **Strengthen social protection systems through mental health provision:** SPIR II integrated Group Problem Management Plus (gPM+) and Interpersonal Therapy in Groups (IPT-G) into ongoing VESA work to tackle common mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and stress, in a group setting.
- **Improving water resource management with female leaders:** Fetching water is traditionally a woman's job in many communities, yet women rarely hold leadership roles in water management systems. SPIR II has trained over 2,000 female and male watershed committee members, forewomen, and experts. These trained leaders helped 77,646 people to improve water resource management, strengthening resilience to drought.
- **Improved water infrastructure for women:** To date, SPIR II has constructed 12 water supply infrastructures and 10 small-scale irrigation systems that have benefited thousands of people. These improvements have reduced water collection time and enhanced access to markets and transportation services. Improved access to water is particularly significant for women, who frequently walk long distances to fetch water, increasing their vulnerability.

Lesson learned: Women's leadership in WASH systems is essential to support and protect women as the primary users of these systems, and to sustainably build infrastructure for resilience to drought.



Conclusion and recommendations

The SPIR project in Ethiopia demonstrates that integrating gender-transformative approaches into social safety net and nutrition programmes can lead to significant improvements in both gender equality and nutrition outcomes for women and girls. The following recommendations based on the promising practices from the SPIR project can be scaled up to further transformation of gender and nutrition.

Key recommendations

1. **Increase the use of mixed cereal and seed flours for complementary feeding** and rehabilitation of undernourished children, ensuring adoption and sustainability by linking it to livelihoods and empowerment for female producers. This approach is promising and may be applicable across broader contexts.
2. **Expand economic empowerment programmes:** Expand the scope of savings and loan groups to include more women and introduce digital financial literacy training to enhance financial management skills and resilience to crises.
3. **Enhance women's access to agricultural resources:** Ensure that women have equal access to agricultural training and resources and address barriers to market access to improve household dietary diversity. Scale up gender-sensitive agricultural programmes with components that address the unique challenges women face in accessing financial and agricultural resources.
4. **Promote women's agency through male engagement:** Develop targeted male engagement programmes that are integrated into national and community systems to encourage men's support for women's health, nutrition, empowerment, and participation in community and household decision-making. Working with men to shift attitudes while also promoting women's decision-making and leadership has the potential to increase gender equality, empowerment, and overall well-being for women and girls.
5. **Strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability through improved water access:** Increase women's leadership in water management infrastructure and training to increase safe water access and resource management in climate-vulnerable contexts.
6. **Promote gender equality within national systems:** Provide technical assistance to strengthen gender integration and service delivery for social protection and intersecting systems, including mental health and psychosocial support, health, nutrition, livelihoods, and WASH.

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