

SIERRA LEONE 2024

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND NUTRITION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



FOREWORD

It gives me great pleasure to present the 2024 Women's Empowerment and Nutrition (WEN) Survey Report, a groundbreaking study that provides critical insights into the intersection of gender, agriculture, and nutrition in Sierra Leone. As our nation strives to achieve the ambitious goals outlined in the Medium-Term National Development Plan (MTNDP 2024-2030), this report serves as an indispensable tool for evidence-based policymaking and program development.

Agriculture remains the backbone of our economy and the cornerstone of our Feed Salone¹ initiative. However, as this report clearly demonstrates, we cannot achieve true agricultural transformation without addressing the systemic barriers that limit women's full participation and empowerment in the sector.

The findings presented in this report reveal both progress and persistent gaps. While we see encouraging signs of women's participation in agricultural organizations and increasing awareness of women's rights, the data also shows disparities in decision-making power, access to resources, and nutritional outcomes. What makes this survey particularly valuable is its integrated approach, examining not just agricultural production but also the critical linkages between women's empowerment and household nutrition.

I wish to acknowledge the collaborative effort that made this report possible. The partnership between Statistics Sierra Leone, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been instrumental in producing these high-quality statistics.

As Statistician General, I reaffirm our commitment at Stats SL to continue producing timely, reliable, and disaggregated data that illuminates the path toward inclusive development.

Andrew Bob Johnny
Statistician General
Statistics Sierra Leone

¹ The **Feed Salone Initiative**, launched in October 2023, is Sierra Leone's flagship agri-food transformation strategy. It is built around six strategic pillars—spanning mechanization, access to finance, AgTech, and value-chain development—with the core aim of reducing food imports, expanding exports, fostering climate resilience, promoting inclusive job creation, and achieving food security. Supported by partners such as FAO, the EU, Africa Phytosanitary Programme, and through investments of over US \$100 million, Feed Salone has already reached tens of thousands of farmers and is operationalizing regional ecological planning and market integration. More info [here](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT







The successful completion of the 2024 Women's Empowerment and Nutrition (WEN) Survey Report represents a significant collaborative achievement for Sierra Leone's statistical system. Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL) and Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS) extends its deepest appreciation to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for their unwavering technical and financial support throughout this initiative.

The 50x2030 Initiative, a transformative partnership between the World Bank, FAO, and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), has been instrumental in strengthening Sierra Leone's capacity to produce high-quality agricultural and gender statistics.

We are particularly grateful to the dedicated coordination team that made this report possible: **Momodu M. Kamara**, Principal Statistician and Head of Agriculture Division at Stats SL, and **Edward Kargbo**, Assistant Director at MAFS, who both served as Coordinators for the WEN Survey and as lead editors of this report. Special recognition goes to the core team of analysts and writers who contributed their expertise: **Christopher H. Kalokoh** and **Aruna M. Kanu** (Statistics Sierra Leone), **Andrew Samura** and **Margaret Bangura** (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security).

Our sincere appreciation extends to the various government agencies, development partners, and local authorities who facilitated the survey implementation. This collaborative effort demonstrates Sierra Leone's growing capacity to produce gender-sensitive agricultural statistics that will inform policies to empower women, improve nutrition, and transform our agricultural sector.

KEY INSIGHTS

| Women's empowerment in agricultural communities/households | Claiming Rights |
|--|---|
|  <p>Women in Sierra Leone score lower on empowerment (0.46) than men (0.56), with 93% of women classified as disempowered compared to 78% of men. Women face more widespread constraints—especially in spending decisions, digital and financial access, and social norms—while men's limitations are more concentrated. No region met the 80% empowerment threshold; the lowest scores were in the North (37.8%)</p> |  <p>Endorsement of women's freedoms is highest in the Southern region, and more common among younger and literate women. In contrast, the North region and older or illiterate women show lower levels of awareness and endorsement. While rejection of sexual harassment remains high across all groups, broader understanding and support for women's rights are still uneven across demographics</p> |
| Decision Making Power | Leadership roles in organizations |
|  <p>Men consistently report greater control over key decisions, especially in spending (42% of young men vs. 18% of young women) and health (51% vs. 39%). While female-headed households show slightly higher influence over time use, women overall have less say, particularly in commercial agriculture. The gender gap is widest among youth and the less educated, pointing to a need for targeted support.</p> |  <p>Men are more likely than women to participate in community groups, especially those tied to livelihoods and services. This higher engagement also translates into leadership—46% of men hold leadership roles compared to 38% of women. Men consistently report feeling more informed, involved, and heard in community decision-making.</p> |
| Property Ownership | ICT Usage and Financial Services |
|  <p>Land and property rights are widespread but rarely documented. Most women and men say they have rights to land or housing, mostly through joint or customary arrangements. But very few women have their names on formal documents, and even fewer hold sole rights to sell or inherit property.</p> |  <p>Digital and financial access remains unequal: only 38% of women use mobile money or bank accounts, compared to 55% of men. Young women (18–29) are more connected, but usage drops with age and is lowest in the North (30%). While 67% of women report access to credit, they rely more on informal sources, unlike men who use more formal channels. Formal financial inclusion, especially bank use, remains low—particularly in the Southern and North-Western regions</p> |
| Dietary Diversity | Empowerment and Dietary diversity |
|  <p>Women of childbearing age (18–49) had more diverse diets (75.1% consumed ≥5 food groups) compared to older women (71.9% for ages 50–64). Literate women consumed more diverse foods (80.6%) than illiterate women (72.1%). e Southern region showed the highest dietary diversity (78.5%), while the Eastern had the lowest (64.1%).</p> |  <p>Empowered women are more likely to meet minimum dietary diversity (MDD-W). Those consuming ≥5 food groups had a higher average empowerment score (0.48) than those who did not (0.42). Food group consumption increases with empowerment. Intake of sugary drinks also rises, while traditional protein sources decline. This suggests empowerment expands dietary choices, both healthy and less healthy.</p> |

1. Introduction and Objectives

The 2024 Women’s Empowerment and Nutrition (WEN) Survey marks a milestone in Sierra Leone’s efforts to integrate gender and nutrition data into national agricultural statistics. Implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS) and Statistics Sierra Leone (Stats SL), with technical and financial support from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) under the 50x2030 Initiative to Close the Agricultural Data Gap, this is the first time Sierra Leone has produced nationally representative data on women’s empowerment alongside dietary diversity and nutrition indicators in agricultural households.

The WEN survey provides a comprehensive, evidence-based view of gender inequality in Sierra Leone’s agricultural sector and its strong connection to nutrition outcomes. Empowerment is both a rights-based priority and a catalyst for development.

Addressing the gaps identified in decision-making, leadership, resource access, and nutrition will be essential for achieving the Medium-Term National Development Plan (2024–2030) and building a more inclusive, food-secure future

Why this survey matters

Agriculture is the backbone of Sierra Leone’s economy, employing most of the rural population and playing a central role in national food security strategies, including the **Feed Salone initiative**. Yet, persistent gender inequalities limit women’s ability to contribute fully to agricultural production, decision-making, and community leadership. These inequalities also intersect with nutrition outcomes, as women often bear primary responsibility for household food preparation and childcare but have less control over resources.

Without systematic, disaggregated data, these gender gaps remain invisible in policy design. The WEN survey addresses this evidence gap by providing:

- Robust, nationally representative indicators on women’s empowerment and dietary diversity.
- Comparative data for men and women on empowerment domains, allowing for analysis of gender gaps.
- Actionable insights to inform agricultural, nutrition, and gender equality policies.

Measurement tools

Two global measurement frameworks underpin the WEN survey:

- Women’s Empowerment Metric for National Statistical Systems (WEMNS): a multidimensional indicator adapted from the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). WEMNS measures four domains:
 1. *Intrinsic agency* – awareness and claiming of rights.
 2. *Instrumental agency* – decision-making in time use, household spending, and health.
 3. *Collective agency* – participation and leadership in organizations.
 4. *Enabling resources* – access to information, financial services, and property rights.
- Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women (MDD-W): a global nutrition indicator capturing whether a woman consumed at least 5 of 10 food groups in the last 24 hours. This reflects micronutrient adequacy and is strongly linked to health outcomes for women and children.

By combining empowerment and nutrition data, the WEN survey provides an integrated view of the structural and behavioral factors influencing women’s wellbeing in agricultural households.

2. Methodology and Sample Design

2. Integration into the Agricultural Survey

The WEN module was embedded in the Sierra Leone Annual Agricultural Survey (SLAAS), which is part of the country's strategy to generate high-quality agricultural statistics for evidence-based policymaking.

This modular approach allowed the collection of empowerment and nutrition data without the cost of running a standalone survey.

Sampling

- Enumeration Areas (EAs): 520 EAs were selected for the agricultural survey.
- WEN sub-sample drawn from 2,525 households across 452 EAs (5 questionnaires per EA) and 68 EAs (4 questionnaires per EA).
- Respondents:
 - Women aged 18–64 (empowerment module + nutrition module).
 - Men aged 18–64 (empowerment module only).
- Total interviews: ~2,200 women and ~1,700 men.

This design ensured robust national-level estimates and the ability to disaggregate by province, rural/urban, education level, age group, and household headship—though some subgroups have higher sampling variability.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

- Fieldwork period: July–August 2024, during the rainy season.
- Teams: 26 supervisors, each with 1–2 enumerators.
- Interview process:
 - Household selection followed the SLAAS protocol.

- Interviews conducted privately where possible to ensure confidentiality.
- Questionnaire administration time: ~30 minutes for women, ~20 minutes for men.

The concurrent timing with the agricultural survey minimized costs and logistical challenges but also meant that fieldwork occurred during a period of high agricultural activity, potentially affecting respondent availability.

3. Overall Empowerment Status

The WEN survey reveals a clear and persistent gender gap in empowerment across agricultural households in Sierra Leone.

National headcount

- Women, on average, score 0.46 on the empowerment index, while men reach 0.56.
- This difference is mainly due to the higher share of women classified as disempowered—93% compared to 78%.
- Although both women and men who are disempowered face a similar number of overlapping constraints, women experience limitations across a broader range of domains.
- Women are particularly constrained in areas such as spending decisions, confidence in community participation, digital and financial access, and social norms related to autonomy and rights.
- In contrast, men's disempowerment is more concentrated in specific areas like leadership and decision-making, with fewer barriers related to access or social acceptance.

Subgroup differences

By age:

- Empowerment increases with age for both sexes but remains lower for women at every stage.
- Young women (18–29) are the least empowered group, often constrained by social norms and limited access to resources.

By education:

- Literate women consistently have higher empowerment scores than illiterate women, especially in intrinsic agency (rights awareness)

and enabling resources (digital access, financial services).

- Education not only increases knowledge of rights but also expands opportunities to participate in economic and community activities.

By household headship:

- Women in female-headed households report slightly higher empowerment levels than those in male-headed households.
- However, female heads still face structural barriers to land ownership and financial access, particularly in formal institutions.

By region:

- Women in the Southern report the highest empowerment rates nationally, partly due to stronger participation in community groups.
- Women in the North and Western Rural are most disempowered, reflecting lower access to land, credit, and leadership opportunities.

3. Empowerment by Domain

Intrinsic Agency – Claiming Rights

This domain measures awareness of personal freedoms, the right to make life choices, and the rejection of harassment and coercion.

- Endorsement of women's rights and freedoms varies considerably across country regions. Women in the Southern region are more likely to endorse women's freedom in family formation and livelihoods and more likely to reject sexual harassment.
- Women who are younger and those who are literate exhibit a higher endorsement of women's freedoms related to livelihoods and family formation.
- While rejection of sexual harassment is consistently high across almost all groups, broader awareness of

personal freedoms remains uneven, particularly in the Northern region and among older or illiterate women.

Key challenges

- In some areas, women accept restrictive gender norms even while rejecting harassment.
- Older women are less likely to assert rights over family formation and livelihoods.

Instrumental Agency – Making Choices

Covers influence over time use, household spending, and health decisions.

- Women remain heavily engaged in unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks, while men dominate in decision-making power across most productive activities.
- Despite similar involvement in agricultural work (compared to men), women report less control over time allocation and financial decisions, particularly in commercial agriculture and spending.
- Influence tends to increase with age for both genders, but men consistently report higher levels of control.
- The gender gap is especially wide on spending and health-related decisions, particularly among younger adults and those with limited education.

Regional insights:

- North-Western: Largest gender gaps health decision-making.
- Southern: Smallest gaps, with women's health decision influence approaching parity with men.

Collective Agency – Engaging in Communities

- While both women and men engage in community organizations, a higher proportion of men participate in groups, especially in livelihood, service-related, and local government groups.

- Higher engagement in groups translates into higher leadership: 45.9% of men hold leadership roles compared to 37.9% of women.
- Men also report more confidence in community engagement. Across all regions, age groups, and education levels, men are more likely to feel informed, involved in decision-making, and listened to by community leaders.

Enabling Resources – Mobilizing Resources

Covers access to ICT, financial services, credit, and land/property rights.

- Digital financial access is still unequal. Only 38% of women use mobile money or bank accounts, compared to 55% of men.
 - Young women (18–29) are more connected, but access drops sharply with age, falling to only 24% among women aged 55–64.
 - Access varies across regions: women in Western Rural are the most connected (57%), while women in the North lag (30%).
- Formal financial access is limited. Only 40% of women use mobile money, even fewer use bank accounts, especially in Southern and North-Western regions.
- Credit access looks equal but isn't. Around 67% of both women and men say they can get a loan. But women depend more on informal sources like savings groups, while men access a wider range of formal lenders.
- Land and property rights are widespread but rarely documented. Most women and men say they have rights to land or housing, mostly through joint or customary arrangements. But very few women have their names on formal documents, and even fewer hold sole rights to sell or inherit property.

Implications: Without secure, documented rights and equal digital access, women face structural barriers to expanding their economic agency.

4. Women's Nutrition – MDD-W Findings

This section analyses the diversity of diets consumed by women aged 18-64 years living in agricultural households in Sierra Leone. The analysis used the Food Group Diversity Score (FGDS) and the Minimum Dietary Diversity (MDD-W) methodology developed by FAO to assess diet diversity among women of reproductive age

Prevalence

- 75% of women in agricultural households consume at least five groups out of ten, but over 420,000 women nationally still consume too few food groups for adequate nutrition.
- Younger women (18–49) have slightly better dietary diversity than older women (50–64), though both show similar patterns overall.
- Regional and urban–rural disparities exist: Eastern region has the lowest MDD-W rate.
- Literate women are more likely to achieve dietary diversity (81%) than illiterate women (72%).
- Cereals and tubers, meat/fish, and leafy greens are widely consumed; milk, eggs, and fruits remain under consumed.
- Nearly 1 in 3 women reported consuming savoury snacks or sugar-sweetened beverages, reflecting a shift toward processed food across all age groups.
- Rising intake of snacks and sugary drinks signals a nutrition transition, calling for targeted dietary interventions and awareness-raising programmes in rural areas.

Regional, residence, and education differences

- Highest prevalence: Western Area (90.7%), Southern (78.5%), Northern (77.4%), and North-Western Regions (77.1%).
- Lowest prevalence: Eastern (64.1%).
- URBAN Vs Rural: Urban women scored higher (79.3%) than rural women (73.5%).

- Literacy/Educational Level: Literacy and higher education correlated with higher MDD-W achievement.

Food group consumption patterns

- Almost all women consumed staples (grains, roots, tubers, plantains).
- High consumption: meat/fish (92.6%), dark green leafy vegetables (87.7%), nuts/seeds (79.5%).
- Low consumption: milk (13.8%), eggs (9.7%), and fruits (31.9%).
- Younger women reported slightly higher intake of nuts/seeds and pulses; older women consumed more vitamin A-rich fruits/vegetables and other vegetables.

Urban vs rural

- Rural women consumed more pulses, nuts/seeds, and other vegetables.
- Urban women consumed far more vitamin A-rich fruits/vegetables (70.1% vs 47.8%).

Processed and “other” foods

- 30.3% consumed savory snacks; 29.8% sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs); 15.2% sweet foods.
- Older women had higher snack and sweet food intake; younger women had slightly higher SSB intake.
- 77.2% consumed red palm oil; insects/other small proteins were rarely eaten (6.1%).

Regional variation:

- North-Western had the highest savory snack (48.4%) and palm oil (91.5%);
- North had the highest sweet food (23.1%) and insect consumption (17.8%).

Trends over time

- MDD-W prevalence improved steadily: 68.4% (2017) → 74.2% (2021) → 75.3% (2024).
- FGDS rose from 5.4 (2017) to 6.3 (2024).
- Processed food consumption has increased sharply:
- Savory snacks: 14.9% (2019) → 23.8% (2021) → 29.8% (2024).
- Sweet foods fell slightly from 23.5% (2021) to 14.8% (2024).

Key implications

- While dietary diversity is relatively high and improving, a quarter of women still fail to meet minimum diversity, and intake of nutrient-poor processed foods is rising. Nutrition programs should focus on:
 - Increasing consumption of dairy, eggs, and fruits.
 - Reducing high-fat, high-sugar processed foods.
 - Leveraging regional differences for targeted interventions.
 - Addressing gaps in the Eastern region and among older, less-educated women.

5. Relationship Between Empowerment and Nutrition

The analysis examines how women's empowerment, as measured by the WEMNS score, relates to their dietary diversity (MDD-W).

- Empowerment and MDD-W link:
 - Women who achieved the MDD-W threshold (≥ 5 food groups) had significantly higher average empowerment scores (0.48) than those who did not (0.42), with the difference being statistically significant.

- This suggests that higher empowerment is positively associated with better dietary quality.

Empowerment tertiles and dietary patterns:

When women are divided into low, medium, and high empowerment groups:

- Nutrient-rich foods (pulses, meat/fish, eggs, dairy) are consumed more frequently by highly empowered women.
- Nuts/seeds and other vegetables also increase with empowerment.
- Conversely, vitamin A-rich fruits/vegetables slightly decline with empowerment, and cereals/tubers remain stable and universally high.

Other food categories:

Processed foods show mixed patterns:

- Savory snacks: highest among low empowerment (34.4%), drop in medium (27.1%), slight rebound in high (28.7%).
- Sugar-sweetened beverages: steadily increase from 24.7% (low) to 36.6% (high).
- Traditional foods:
 - Red palm oil consumption is consistently high (76–78%) across all groups.
 - Insects/other small protein foods decline sharply from 8.6% (low) to 3.8% (high).

Interpretation: Higher empowerment appears to increase women's food choices, improving access to diverse and nutrient-rich foods. However, it also correlates with greater intake of processed and sugary products, possibly due to increased income, autonomy, and exposure to urbanized markets and media.

6. Key Barriers to Equality

1. Decision-making inequality – Men dominate in spending, agricultural production, and health decisions.
2. Underrepresentation in leadership – Women are excluded from many formal governance and economic groups.
3. Digital and financial exclusion – Rural women, especially in Northern and Eastern provinces, are the least connected and financially included.
4. Land tenure insecurity – Lack of documentation undermines women's economic leverage.
5. Social norms – Gender roles limit women's mobility, public participation, and economic opportunities.

7. Policy Recommendations

Priority 1 – Strengthen Women's Land Rights

- Reform tenure laws to support co-ownership and inheritance rights.
- Work with traditional authorities to promote gender-equitable practices.

Priority 2 – Bridge the Digital Divide

- Expand rural mobile infrastructure and subsidize access for women.
- Integrate digital literacy into agricultural extension services.

Priority 3 – Increase Financial Inclusion

- Support women's transition from informal savings groups to formal banking.
- Develop women-targeted credit schemes for agriculture and small businesses.

Priority 4 – Foster Collective Agency

- Provide leadership training for women in rural communities.
- Support childcare and safe transport to enable participation.

Priority 5 – Mainstream Gender in Agriculture Policy

- Require WEMNS-based gender-disaggregated monitoring.
- Integrate empowerment targets into the Feed Salone initiative.