

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Achieving Sustainable and Equitable Consumption of Wild Meat

Gender dynamics of tropical wildmeat systems: A systematic map of women's roles and influence

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Abstract

1. Wildmeat is a vital natural resource globally, which must be managed sustainably to avoid livelihood insecurity, species decline and biodiversity loss. Women have a pivotal role in harvesting, processing and distributing wildmeat, yet their contributions are often overlooked. Engaging women is essential for sustainable wildmeat management and equitable conservation, which requires an understanding of their roles and influence—an area that remains under-researched.
2. To address this gap, we conducted a systematic map exploring gender dynamics in wildmeat systems. We searched six academic and grey literature directories using key terms in five languages and extracted data on women's presence and absence in wildmeat systems from relevant publications.
3. Our analysis of 334 publications across 54 countries identified 935 records of women's presence and absence in 36 roles within tropical wildmeat systems. Women were most commonly consumers, traders and harvesters. Their presence and absence were strongly linked to their gender, such as domestic responsibilities assigned to women, or taboos against hunting and consuming wildmeat linked often with pregnancy and fertility.
4. Women occupy vital roles in tropical wildmeat systems, from household consumption to commercial trade, influencing food security, community cohesion and market demand. Their contributions could support sustainable management, balancing conservation with livelihoods, but their participation in governance is poorly documented, risking their exclusion from decision-making. More research is also needed on gendered power dynamics and intersecting factors like age and ethnicity. We provide robust evidence linking gender and wildmeat and call

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for more gender-sensitive interventions that recognise women's contributions, address their challenges and ensure their meaningful role in wildmeat governance. Women's active participation in decision-making is essential for inclusive, equitable policies and interventions that promote both conservation outcomes and sustainable resource use.

KEYWORDS

bushmeat, equity, gender, tropics, wildmeat, women

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gender is increasingly being considered in conservation, with growing attention in both research and practice (Alexander et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2018). Gender perspectives mean gender-based differences, such as in opportunities, power and status, and social roles and interactions, can be considered in research, policy or practice (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016; UN Women, 2021). Many NGOs are developing gender strategies to enhance women's participation and leadership in conservation activities (e.g. CITES, 2023; FAO, 2021; UN Women, 2020). Such strategies can promote gender equity, account for differences in the experiences and needs of certain genders, and distribute conservation benefits more equitably (UN Women, 2020). They help ensure women contribute actively to managing essential natural resources (FAO, 2020). This active participation can help address inequalities and avoid perpetuating power imbalances (Arnstein, 1969; White, 1996).

Sustainable and equitable natural resource management is necessary to help avoid environmental issues and livelihood insecurity, and to ensure all stakeholders have fair access and control over critical resources (Rocheleau, 1995). Despite women's reliance on natural resources, they are frequently excluded from decision-making (Agarwal, 2009). Including women helps account for their contributions and knowledge and ensures conservation efforts address their specific needs (Alexander et al., 2023; James et al., 2021).

Wildmeat is one such resource. It has significant socio-economic value (De Merode et al., 2004; Nunes et al., 2019), yet unsustainable harvesting, trade and consumption likely occur (Ingram et al., 2021; Maxwell, 2016). Overexploitation risks biodiversity loss, species decline and livelihood insecurity (Booth et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2018). Gender plays a critical role in wildmeat systems, as many activities are highly gendered. For instance, in West and Central Africa, men are typically hunters, while women dominate wildmeat trade (Mendelson et al., 2003). These gendered activities should be reflected in the literature.

While gender has been studied in fields like forestry and water management (e.g. Agarwal, 2009; Murali et al., 2021), its role in wildmeat systems remains unclear, including how gender shapes individuals' participation, decision-making and the impacts of wildmeat conservation. Interest in gender dynamics is growing in wildlife trade, where recent studies (e.g. Agu & Gore, 2020, 2022; Kahler & Rinkus, 2021; Nana, 2022) have highlighted women's contributions

to illegal trade, providing deeper insight into trade dynamics. Regarding wildmeat, Ingram et al. (2021) linked it with gender equity, urging interventions to improve women's inclusion and consider impacts that might disproportionately affect women. Understanding women's roles in wildmeat systems, their motivations for participation and barriers to decision-making is essential for more equitable wildmeat management. However, no dedicated review has assessed the extent to which gender perspectives have been considered in wildmeat research.

To assess our current knowledge, we conducted a systematic map of literature on women and tropical wildmeat systems to explore their presence, absence and the factors driving these dynamics. We also identified knowledge gaps in the literature. This information helps to understand where women face exclusion from resources or decision-making and create solutions to address barriers and improve inclusion. Given the time-intensive nature of such reviews, we focused on tropical regions, which share common patterns of wildmeat use and similar ecologies (Ceballos, 2014; Nasi et al., 2011; Reyes-García et al., 2020). This focused approach enables detailed insights into tropical systems while offering reflections from a global perspective. Our study highlights current knowledge and identifies gaps that hinder progress towards equitable and sustainable wildmeat management. By better understanding women's contributions to wildmeat systems, we aim to inform future research and interventions and ensure women's inclusion, advancing gender equity and strengthening conservation outcomes.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Gender statement

We define gender as the socially constructed norms, behaviours, and roles that societies assign to individuals based on their perceived or assigned sex (World Health Organization, 2023; see [Supporting Information](#) for additional definitions). This includes women, men, and people who are non-binary, genderfluid, agender or have other gender-diverse identities. Gender shapes how individuals are perceived by others, how they understand themselves and how their personal experiences are understood.

Gender varies across and within cultures and over time, and is better described as a spectrum rather than a binary (man/male,

woman/female) (Stonewall, 2023; Trevor Project, 2021). Non-binary and gender diverse identities are not new and have existed historically across cultures. This study focuses on women, without distinguishing between cisgender and transgender women, and discusses only women and men. We acknowledge that the experiences of cis- and transgender women may differ, and that feminine-presenting individuals, regardless of gender identity, may face similar inequalities and experiences. However, these intricacies could not be explored due to data limitations. The reviewed publications adhered only to the traditional gender binary, likely reflecting the dominant social constructs of the studied communities or researchers and potentially due to safety concerns when identifying individuals as transgender or non-binary.

2.2 | Search and screening strategy

We searched six academic and grey literature directories (SCOPUS, Web of Science, African Journals Online, Overton Policy Database and Google Web Search Engine) to identify literature that discussed wildmeat and gender in the tropics. We developed search strings in English in consultation with wildmeat researchers that were translated into Bahasa Indonesia, French, Portuguese and Spanish by native or fluent wildmeat researchers (Table S2). These languages helped identify publications from across our geographic range. Please refer to the Supporting Information for more detail regarding our methodology.

2.3 | Article screening and study inclusion criteria

We screened the publications in Excel against eligibility criteria to identify publications that collected primary data about wildmeat in the tropics. Inter-reviewer reliability was checked using Cohen's Kappa (IBM SPSS 29.0.1.0) for a subsample of results. Our score of 0.645 suggested sufficient agreement between reviewers.

2.4 | Data extraction and coding strategy

We extracted and coded data from relevant publications using a Microsoft Excel form Figure 1, for which reviewers received detailed guidelines to ensure data extraction and coding was consistent. The form was piloted with a subsample of articles, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved before final data extraction.

The form captured the following data:

- Bibliographic information.
- Study location.
- Roles where women were present or absent, according to the publication.

We targeted the method and results sections to identify and code or extract data on roles that women were present or absent in. A role was the name of a particular function performed within a wildmeat system (e.g. trader, hunter, consumer). Roles could be part of the supply chain (e.g. trader), wider system (e.g. policymaker) or study itself (e.g. interviewee). Publications could contain more than one role.

Women's presence or absence in these roles was determined through:

1. Gender-disaggregated data (e.g. '50% of market traders were women', 'all hunters were men'), or
2. Descriptions in the publication (e.g. 'most traders were women', 'women do not hunt here' or 'hunting is a men's activity').

We recorded each time a publication indicated women's presence or absence in a role using quantitative or qualitative data. These records formed the unit of analysis. Due to inconsistent availability of finer resolution data (e.g. ethnic group or region), we did not analyse variation within countries. Reviewers met regularly during data extraction and coding to address any queries. We coded information on the roles (see Table S5), including role name (e.g. hunter, trader), type

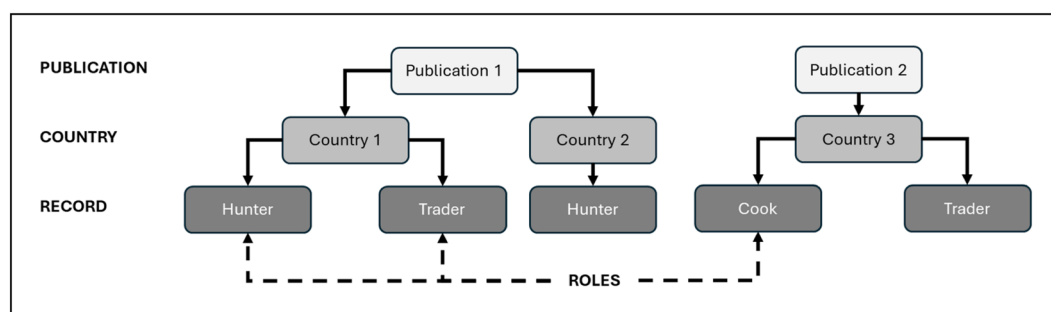


FIGURE 1 Structure of the data extraction and coding form for the systematic map. Records of women's presence and absence in different wildmeat-related roles within tropical wildmeat systems were created at the country level from publications identified by the literature searches. Often multiple records of women's presence and absence were obtained from one publication. A publication could discuss women's presence and absence in more than one role, which were separated by country. Country was the highest resolution unit that was consistently available in the literature.

(e.g. subsistence, employment), connection to wildmeat (direct or indirect), and women's representation (minority, majority or all) and extracted descriptions (e.g. of responsibilities, interactions) for context.

2.5 | Data synthesis and presentation

We used descriptive statistics to identify trends in publications (e.g. year, type, geographical distribution) and roles (e.g. role frequency, regional distributions) using R (R version 4.4.0) (ggplot2 package used for figures) and Microsoft Access, using coded and extracted data. We visually represented trends in the geographical distribution of publications using ArcGIS Pro (Version 3.2.2.). Other graphics showing example publications and interactions between roles were created using Microsoft PowerPoint (Version 2412). We then conducted a thematic analysis using qualitative data extracted from the publications. We coded this data in NVivo 14 to identify decision-making, role interactions and common challenges. Women's presence was biased towards research-related roles as these were determined from the literature; we therefore excluded these roles from analyses, unless stated otherwise.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Literature overview

We compiled data on women in tropical wildmeat systems from 334 publications (1975–2023) (Figure 2), and mapped their presence and absence based on 935 records in 35 roles across 52 countries

(Figure 3). Most publications were peer-reviewed journal articles (70.1%) published by academic institutions (70.7%). Publication rates have steadily increased since 1998, peaking in 2022 ($n=36$), though there were no identified publications in 14 non-consecutive years (Figure S1).

Numbers of relevant publications differed notably between regions (Figure 4). There was a bias towards South America ($n=114$ publications), and Central ($n=92$) and West ($n=79$) Africa. Fewer publications focused on Asia ($n=36$), with 33 publications on Southeast Asia, and only two publications on East Asia and one on South Asia. Brazil had the highest number of publications ($n=55$), followed by Nigeria ($n=41$) and Cameroon ($n=32$).

3.2 | Women's presence in tropical wildmeat systems

We compiled 818 records of women's presence in 34 roles across 50 countries (Figure 5 and Table S6). Most records were of subsistence ($n=306$ of 818) or informal employment ($n=136$) roles, with women most frequently described as wildmeat consumers ($n=143$ records), traders ($n=108$) or hunters ($n=69$). Records were mostly in rural contexts ($n=422$), but also in urban ones ($n=207$). Women participated in research primarily as interviewees ($n=196$ records), but were also focus group ($n=19$) or study participants ($n=16$), researchers ($n=9$) and research assistants ($n=3$).

Role distribution varied regionally (Figure 6). Records of retail roles were most common in West (39%) and Central (43%) Africa, whereas processing and consumption roles were more prevalent in Central (10%) and South America (12%). Central America (47%), East

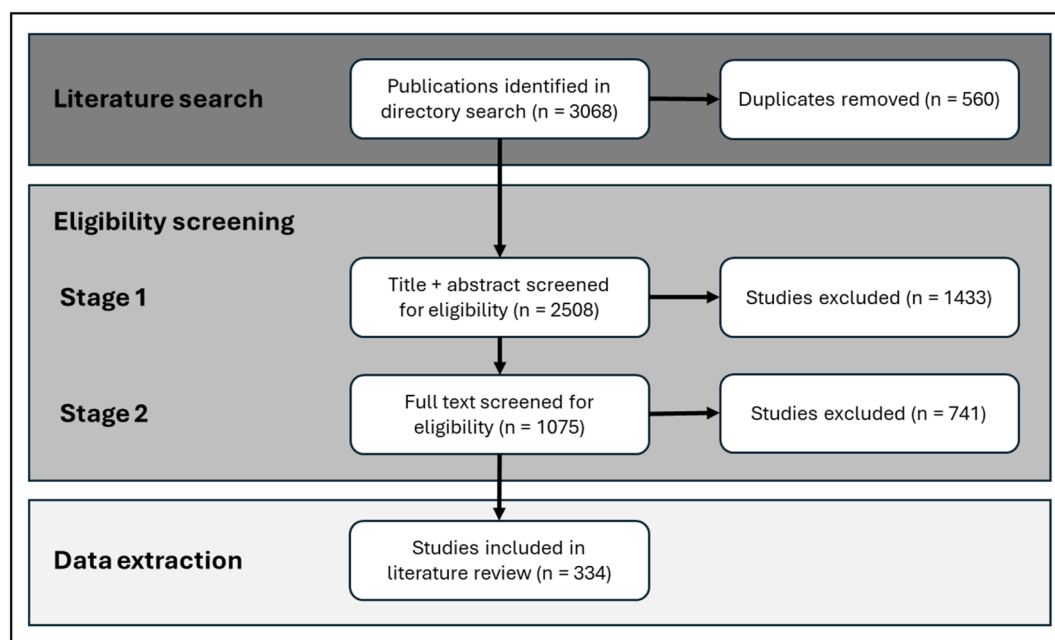


FIGURE 2 Number of publications resulting from the directories (Google Scholar, SCOPUS, Web of Science, African Journals Online and Overton Policy Database) searched using keywords related to gender and wildmeat for the systematic map, included and excluded at each stage of the screening process, and from which data were extracted and coded.

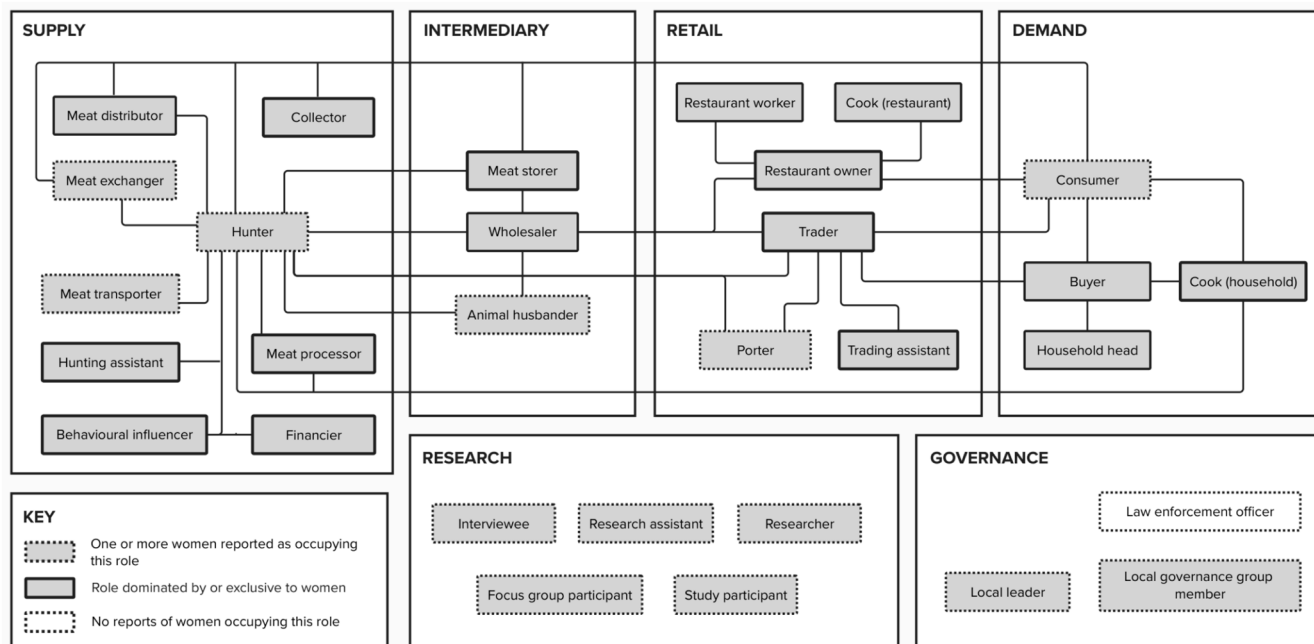


FIGURE 3 Map of women's roles in tropical wildmeat systems and how each role interacts with other supply chain roles, as described in the literature. Interactions were usually a supply chain transaction (i.e. an exchange of money or goods), but could be social (e.g. providing food or assistance). Roles where one or more women were reported as present are represented once by a box with a solid border; the same box with a dashed border indicates roles that were dominated by (i.e. over 60% of individuals in the role were women on average), or exclusive to women (i.e. only women were reported to occupy the role, where the information was available). The singular role (law enforcement officer) where women were reported as absent and where there were no instances reporting their presence is indicated in dark grey. For clarity, some roles have been grouped, including hunter, trader and consumer.

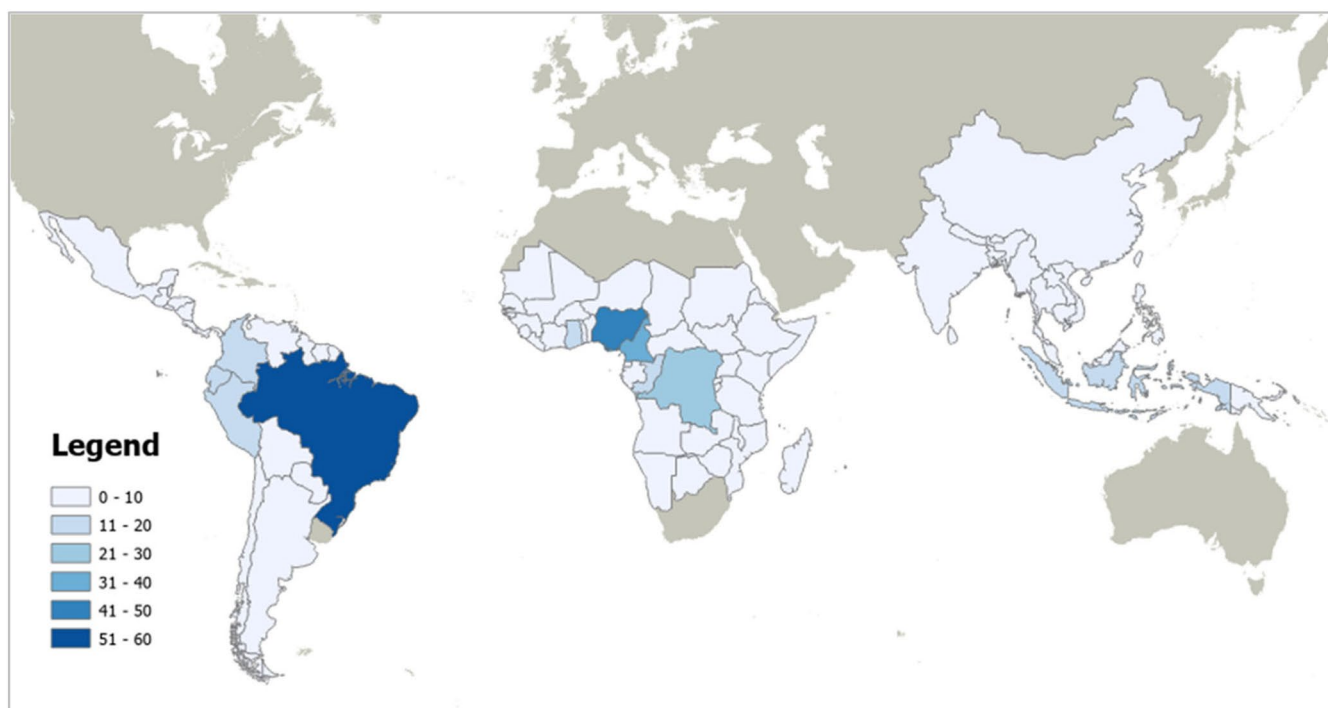


FIGURE 4 Geographical distribution of publications that discuss women's roles in tropical wildmeat systems that were identified by the systematic map. Values are the number of publications that contained data on women's presence or absence in each country included in the study; a publication could mention more than one country.

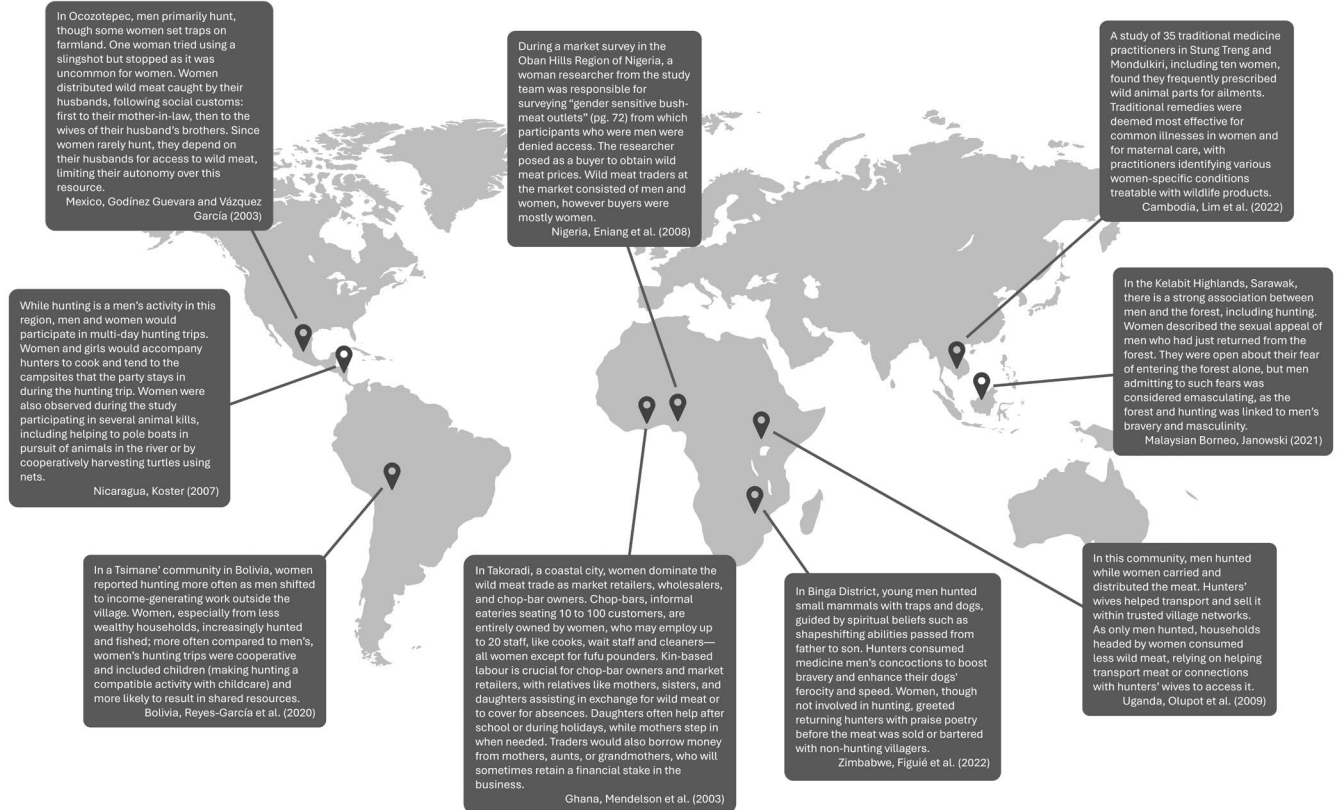


FIGURE 5 World map with examples of women's presence in tropical wildmeat systems annotated from countries in Central and South America, West and Central Africa, and Southeast Asia. Text summarises information on women's roles included in the publications, and the country name and citation are also given. A full list of publications identified by the systematic map can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

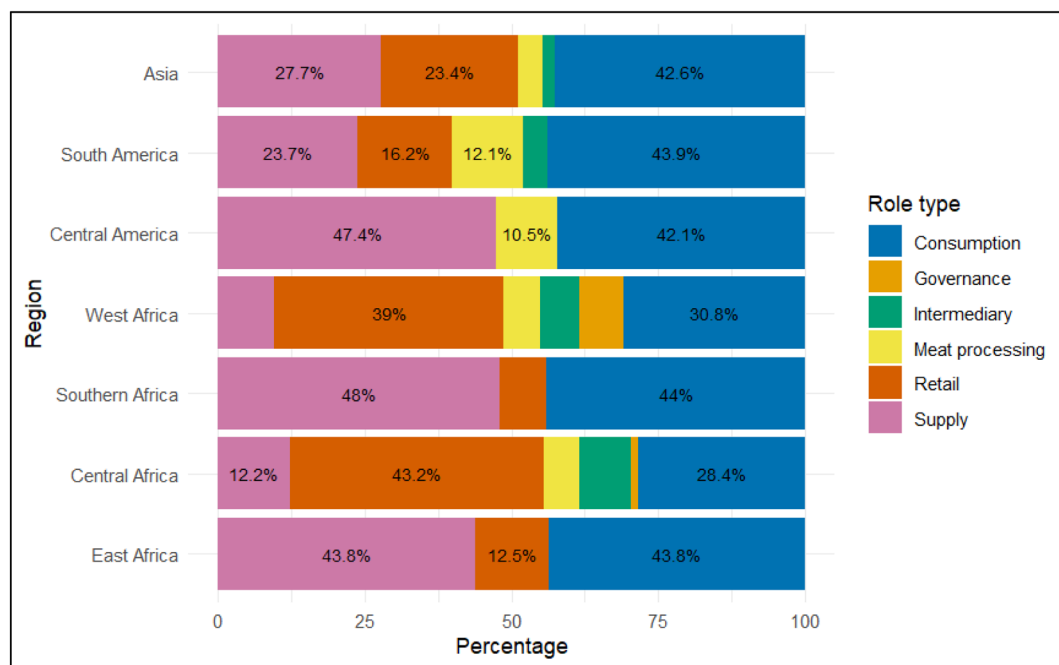


FIGURE 6 Regional distribution of roles commonly occupied by women. Values are the percentage of records of roles that women were present in within tropical wildmeat systems from each region. Governance includes community leadership roles, formal authority positions (e.g. government agency workers), NGO employees and members of governance groups (e.g. traders' associations).

Africa (43%) and Southern Africa (48%) had more records of supply-related roles proportionately.

Data on the proportion of women present was available for 391 of the 818 records (Table S8). These records consisted of 30 roles, of which 21 were either exclusive to or dominated by women ($\geq 60\%$ women on average). Over 80% of traders (e.g. market, roadside) in Central, East and West Africa were women, and over 90% of bar/restaurant owners in Central and West Africa were women. Roles such as behavioural influencer, collector, financier and trading assistant were exclusive to women.

3.2.1 | Women and wildmeat harvesting

We recorded women in 11 supply-related roles within tropical wildmeat systems. This included: women as harvesters, such as hunters ($n=69$ records) and collectors ($n=6$); wildmeat suppliers, such as meat exchangers ($n=7$), transporters ($n=5$) and distributors ($n=4$); and hunting facilitators, such as hunting assistants ($n=21$) and financiers ($n=4$). Women most often harvested wildlife for subsistence (personal or household consumption) over income generation. Women typically harvested small- or medium-sized mammals, insects and herpetofauna, often alongside other non-timber forest products (Dindé et al., 2017; Van Vliet et al., 2017). Common harvesting methods included hand collection, nets, dogs, machetes or traps/snares (Brittain, 2019; Ceppi & Nielsen, 2014; Reyes-García et al., 2020). There was limited evidence of women hunting with guns (e.g. Kümpel et al., 2010), against which some taboos exist (e.g. Babalola, 2023). Cooperative group hunting was common among women, often including children (Bonwitt et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2023).

If not direct hunters, women frequently assisted hunters by checking traps (Schulte-Herbrüggen et al., 2013), carrying catches (Olupot et al., 2009), chasing animals into nets (Hart, 1978), killing captured animals (Kamins et al., 2015) or providing hunters with food (Koster, 2007). Women also influenced hunting behaviour through social and cultural practices, including reciting praise poetry when hunters returned, singing to encourage men to hunt, verbally berating non-hunters, withholding sex until a man hunted, or showing preference to hunters when selecting sexual partners (Figuíé & Lepiller, 2020; Janowski, 2021; Lowassa et al., 2012). Women would also distribute wildmeat within their communities, either by choosing preferred recipients (de Figueiredol & Barros, 2016) or adhering to strict social customs dictating who received what and in what order (Minzenberg & Wallace, 2011).

3.2.2 | Women and wildmeat trade

Women were recorded in 12 retail-related roles, including traders ($n=108$ records, e.g. market, roadside), wholesalers ($n=27$), trading

assistants ($n=4$), restaurant owners ($n=28$), workers ($n=11$) or cooks ($n=7$). They typically obtained wildmeat from hunters (often their husbands) and wholesalers and sold it within their communities or at local markets (Akbari, 2016; Bayol et al., 2012; Ngolela et al., 2023). Their customers included restaurants, bars and consumers (Ahmadi et al., 2018; Che et al., 2017; Ruitan et al., 2024).

Women generally owned informal restaurants, which included chop-bars, mobile food stalls, roadside restaurants, and street cafeterias and bars (Sandrin et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2022). Market traders and restaurant owners employed transporters, such as commercial car operators (Jones et al., 2019), and assistants, often their daughters (Ayegbusi et al., 2016; Soaga et al., 2014). Restaurant owners might also hire cooks, waitresses, cleaners and general assistants (Mendelson et al., 2003).

3.2.3 | Women and wildmeat consumption

Women were recorded in six consumption-related roles, either as direct consumers ($n=143$ records), household cooks ($n=38$), buyers ($n=13$) and household heads ($n=12$). Buyers purchased wildmeat locally for their family as part of their domestic responsibilities (Bakutu, 2010; Van Vliet, Quiceno, et al., 2015). Consumers typically obtained wildmeat from traders, purchasing it fresh, boiled or smoked (Mwakatobe et al., 2012), or consumed meat caught by themselves or family members (Moraes, 2022; Schulte-Herbrüggen et al., 2013). Consumption frequency varied from daily to special occasions (Reuter et al., 2016; Ruitan et al., 2024). Women often processed wildmeat (meat processors, $n=20$) before consumption or sale, which involved removing hair or fur, skinning carcasses, butchering and smoking meat (Akem & Pemunta, 2020; González, 2021).

3.2.4 | Interactions between women and other actors

We identified interactions between women's roles and other actors in tropical wildmeat systems (Figure 3). While most interactions involved supply chain transactions, our thematic analysis (Table S7) also highlighted trust-based, mutually beneficial relationships within and between families. Familial relationships included cooperative labour within households ($n=11$ mentions, e.g. daughters assisting at market stalls, women selling wildmeat caught by their spouses), imparting knowledge ($n=6$, e.g. mothers teaching daughters to cook or sell wildmeat) and gifting wildmeat within families ($n=1$). Non-familial interactions included commercial agreements ($n=8$, e.g. traders partnering with preferred hunters or women storing hunters' meat in freezers), gifting wildmeat to community members ($n=3$) and inter-family cooperative labour ($n=1$, e.g. community groups harvesting wildlife together).

3.2.5 | Women's power and influence

We collected data on women's power and influence in tropical wildmeat systems by recording women in formal authority positions and highlighting decision-making in the thematic analysis. We identified only two formal authority positions: one local leader and one senior government agency worker. Other governance-related roles included governance group member ($n=11$) (e.g. trader union/associations, village committee), market manager ($n=1$) and administrator ($n=1$).

Beyond formal positions, we identified decision-making in role descriptions (Table S7). Women influenced consumption decisions ($n=26$), like determining which foods to purchase or harvest for household consumption. Women also influenced hunting behaviours ($n=16$) by encouraging others to hunt or loaning money to hunters for equipment to support their businesses. We did not identify women's decision-making beyond the supply chain (e.g. policymaking).

3.2.6 | Motivations for women's participation

The primary reason for women's presence was reported in 564 of the 818 presence records (Table S9). Obtaining food/income was the most common driver (60.6% of 564), but other drivers included gender norms or gender-related reasons (15.1%, e.g. food provision was a women's responsibility) and social norms (8.9%; e.g. part of traditional diet). Of the 818 presence records, there were 286 records of income-generating roles (e.g. hunter, market trader, restaurant owner). Where the information was available ($n=126$ of 286

records), it was the individuals' primary income source in 67.4% of records. Women were described as business owners 21 times in the thematic analysis, owning market stalls and restaurants.

3.2.7 | Women's challenges and changes

Information on the challenges women experience was only available for 78 of the 818 records (Figure 7). Through the thematic analysis, we found that the most common challenge was legality (laws prohibiting or regulating wildmeat use) ($n=19$ of 78), followed by zoonotic disease risk, particularly Ebola ($n=18$). Both major challenges related to retail roles.

Limited information was available on temporal changes in women's roles (Table S7). However, we highlighted changes in hunting ($n=12$ references) and trading ($n=11$) patterns in the thematic analysis, including changes in gender roles and species availability, and changes in legality/law enforcement and profitability, respectively. We also identified changes in consumption ($n=10$), such as shifts in cultural values and alternative protein availability.

3.3 | Women's absence from wildmeat systems

We identified 117 records of women's absence from tropical wildmeat systems in 12 roles across 31 countries. Reasons for their absence were available for 78 records; the most common was gender norms or gender-related reasons (68%, $n=53$; Table S9). Women were most commonly absent from hunting ($n=87$ records) and wildmeat consumption ($n=11$), both often highly gendered activities. In

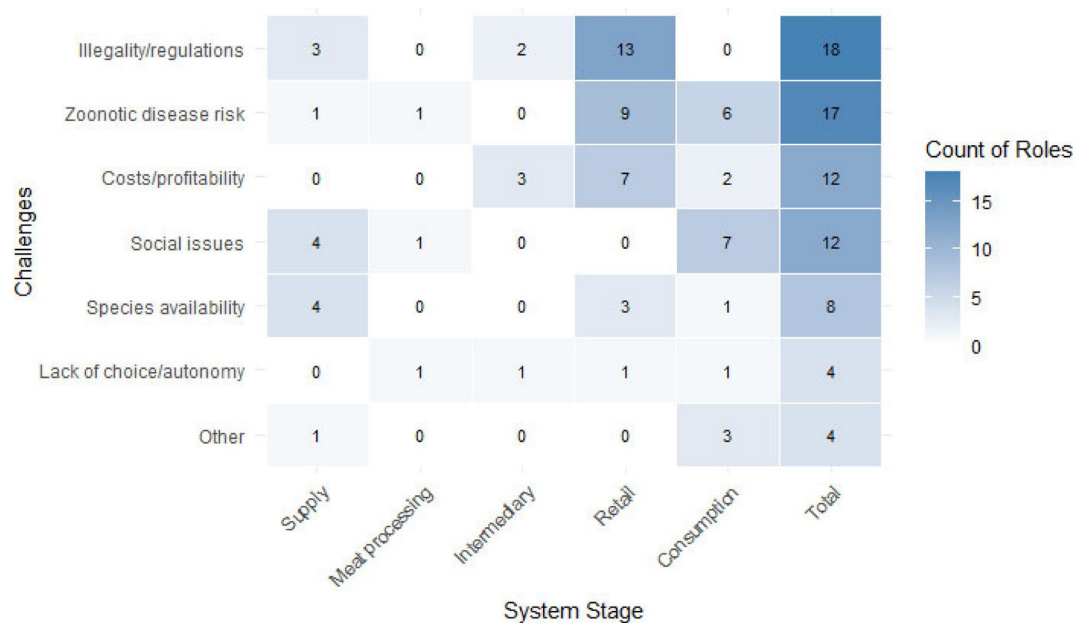


FIGURE 7 Heatmap showing challenges women encounter within tropical wildmeat systems when occupying certain roles, grouped by system stage. Values indicate the number of records that reported experiencing a challenge; each instance of a role mentioned by a publication could experience more than one challenge.

some communities, social rules and prohibitions restricted women from hunting and consuming wildmeat. Hunting was linked with masculinity, demonstrating strength and bravery (Igene et al., 2013; Janowski, 2021), and considered a men's activity (Koster, 2011; SWM Programme, 2021a). Women's domestic and childcare responsibilities also limited their ability to travel away from the home to hunt for long time periods (Seager, 2021). Cultural taboos meant women often abstained from wildmeat or avoided certain species, often linked to pregnancy, fertility or sexual activity (Ingram et al., 2014; Puit et al., 2004).

Finally, women were occasionally absent as meat processors ($n=4$ records) or excluded from research as interviewees ($n=4$). We recorded one instance of women being absent as law enforcement officers and there were no records of them being present in this role.

4 | DISCUSSION

We present the first comprehensive review of women's roles in tropical wildmeat systems, highlighting their motivations, challenges and influence. Women occupy significant roles as harvesters, processors, traders and consumers within supply chains, while also indirectly influencing wildmeat use through household food management and by encouraging hunting. A few records identify them outside supply chains, such as in research and governance roles. Women's roles may grant considerable influence over food provision, resource sharing and consumer demand. We emphasise the need to reflect women's contributions in interventions, highlight knowledge gaps and provide recommendations for improving their inclusion in conservation.

4.1 | Women and subsistence wildmeat use

Wildmeat is integral to many cultural identities and traditional diets (Obioha et al., 2012; Reuter et al., 2016; Ruitan et al., 2024). Women are commonly responsible for household food provision, purchasing, preparing and cooking wildmeat (Bakutu, 2010; van Vliet, Nebesse, & Nasi, 2015). They also pass on knowledge of wildmeat dishes and preparation methods to younger generations (Barros & Azevedo, 2014; Oliveira, 2019). These activities underscore women's significant contributions to household nutrition, food security and traditional diets.

Women also drive demand for wildmeat through food provisioning responsibilities. By purchasing it, they reinforce wildmeat as a highly demanded, profitable food, potentially encouraging traders to maintain or increase their stock. Their crucial role in driving demand makes women key targets for demand reduction campaigns—as seen in Wright et al. (in press)—an increasingly used intervention method (Willis et al., 2022). Effective wildmeat management must target key influencers, including women, should reflect women's influence on household consumption and consumer demand, and be informed by robust evidence (Burgess et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2023).

Wildmeat is vitally important to rural subsistence communities as both a source of food and social cohesion (Bennett, 2002). We highlight women's pivotal role in resource sharing through co-operative hunting (Babalola & Oladipupo, 2018), assisting hunters (Valencia, 2010) and distributing wildmeat within the community (Attiwilli et al., 2023; Lupo & Schmitt, 2017). They often partner with family members (especially their spouse) to share domestic or commercial responsibilities. These activities foster social bonds and mutual dependence, helping to strengthen community relationships and support overall health and well-being (Minzenberg & Wallace, 2011). They showcase women's considerable contribution to household and community resilience, mutual dependence and food security. Consequently, women have significant potential to promote community-based management interventions that rely on social cohesion to adopt behaviour changes (SWM Programme, 2021b).

Women's involvement in harvesting wildlife reflects growing evidence for women's role in hunting (Anderson et al., 2023; Noss & Hewlett, 2001), direct or facilitatory (Koster, 2007; Olupot et al., 2009). Even when not directly harvesting, women may rely on others to provide wildmeat to consume or sell, sometimes encouraging or pressuring their husbands to hunt (Lowassa et al., 2012). This behaviour reinforces traditional gender roles (e.g. men hunting, women preparing/cooking wildmeat) and hunting practices while impacting household food security. Such behaviour may grant women influence over wildmeat hunting and consumption—though their control over wildmeat or resulting income varies (Lowassa et al., 2012). Excluding women from hunting studies based on assumptions and stereotypes of femininity and women's roles risks overlooking their contributions. Interventions must be guided by specific gender dynamics to avoid excluding key stakeholders that could be key tools in behaviour change projects.

4.2 | Women and commercial wildmeat trade

Women contribute significantly to the commercial wildmeat trade, particularly in West and Central Africa (Edderaï & Dame, 2006; Gaubert et al., 2022). For many, especially in rural areas with limited financial opportunities, selling wildmeat provides a vital income source (Mendelson et al., 2003; Nana et al., in press), enabling economic empowerment, control over household resources and investment in family health and education (Babatunde et al., 2020; Coad et al., 2010; Randolph et al., 2022). Consequently, changes in wildmeat use—driven by species loss, legal restrictions or interventions—can profoundly affect women's livelihoods, autonomy and social identity. Interventions must mitigate any negative impacts on women, who face disproportionate challenges related to food security and access to education and formal employment (UN Women, 2022, 2024).

Trade roles often exist within informal economies, which constitute up to 75% of women's employment in developing countries (UN Women, 2015), and sometimes, illegal markets. Informal markets can offer flexibility, allowing women to balance employment with

domestic and childcare responsibilities (Schwarz, 2023), but risk job insecurity and safety concerns from lack of regulation (Blades et al., 2011; OECD/ILO, 2019). Informal and illegal markets also risk unsustainable trade, species decline, livelihood insecurity and zoonotic disease transmission (Booth et al., 2021). Additionally, profitability varies regionally, with some women earning little and having few alternatives (Jacob et al., 2018; Nana et al., *in press*).

These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by crises like the West African Ebola outbreak and the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly reduced women's economic power (Falola et al., 2015; Funk et al., 2021). We identified illegality as the most common challenge for women in wildmeat systems, and it can increase risks of income loss, arrest and physical and/or sexual violence (Agu et al., 2024; Badiora & Oresanwo, 2024; Green, 2024). Legalising trade could mitigate these issues, provided measures consider their impact on women and improving access to formal employment and education could strengthen women's resilience by offering alternative livelihoods where appropriate (Nana et al., *in press*).

4.3 | Women's power and influence in wildmeat systems

Women influence wildmeat systems through both social and commercial power. They shape food security and behavioural norms by managing household food decisions (Almeida Vélez, 2017; Donn et al., 2016; Morsello et al., 2015) teaching others to cook or sell wildmeat (Barros & Azevedo, 2014) and encouraging hunting (Cáceres Córdova, 2017; Sylvester et al., 2016). However, this influence stems from unpaid domestic labour, which can burden women and limit their autonomy (Seedat & Rondon, 2021). Recognising and valuing women's work is crucial to ensuring interventions do not exacerbate these burdens (Agarwal, 2009). Women also hold substantial commercial influence as traders, earning high profits as skilled business owners who hire employees and finance hunting trips (Akumsi, 2003; LaCerva, 2016). These roles can provide financial autonomy and economic influence (Nana et al., *in press*). Women's combined social and commercial influence should be reflected in interventions to avoid reducing their autonomy through restrictive measures without offering alternatives.

Traditional gender roles heavily shape women's involvement in wildmeat systems. Their domestic responsibilities often grant them household decision-making power, but exclusion from hunting can create dependency (Lowassa et al., 2012), potentially creating power imbalances affecting food security and household well-being. Gendered taboos can further restrict women from consuming wildmeat or certain species, handling meat or participating in hunting (Adefalu et al., 2012; Anderson, 2019; Méndez Sánchez, 2020).

More information is needed to determine how gender norms impact women's formal decision-making power. However, gendered norms can exclude women from wildlife trade policy, conservation, and climate governance (James et al., 2023; Seager, 2021). Broader natural resource research shows domestic and childcare

responsibilities can hinder their involvement in focus groups and committees (Agarwal, 2001). While norms can provide household influence and allow women to avoid risky activities like hunting (González, 2021), they also may restrict access to natural resources and decision-making within formal institutions, perpetuating power imbalances (Agarwal, 2001; Godínez Guevara & Vázquez García, 2003). Interventions should consider these complexities and avoid reinforcing inequities.

4.4 | Knowledge gaps and recommendations

Despite increasing focus on gender and wildmeat, research remains biased towards South America and West and Central Africa; likely due to high biodiversity in the Amazon and Congo basins and high wildmeat use (De Merode et al., 2004; van Vliet et al., 2014). East and Southern Africa and Asia remain underrepresented, despite high wildlife consumption, particularly in Southeast Asia (Krishnasamy & Zavagli, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Additional languages may have improved representation, but gender is likely under-researched in Southeast Asia (Davis, 2022). Despite these biases, our results highlight regional differences in women's roles, underscoring the importance of considering gender in wildmeat research to understand varying dynamics between systems.

Data on women's decision-making is scarce, potentially overlooking their influence and presenting a substantial knowledge gap. Women are likely underrepresented in formal wildmeat governance as their exclusion from natural resource management is well documented (Leisher et al., 2016; Razafindratsima & Dunham, 2015). Men dominate major organisations shaping illegal wildlife trade policy and gendered barriers such as harassment and violence discourage or actively exclude women's participation (Seager, 2021). Despite this, women's participation in conservation can enhance outcomes (Agarwal, 2001, 2009; Leisher et al., 2016). Identifying and addressing barriers to participation is therefore both a moral and practical imperative to enhance equity and effectiveness in natural resource management (James et al., 2023; UN Women, 2015), but further research is needed to examine gendered power dynamics, including women's roles in governance and obstacles to participating.

Women are not a homogenous group. Intersectionality ensures that diverse experiences are considered by examining how different characteristics intersect to shape individual autonomy (World Health Organization, 2023). However, this data was inconsistent or missing from the literature. Conservation research is beginning to adopt an intersectional approach, creating a more nuanced gender exploration (e.g. Gay-Antaki & Liverman, 2018; Lau & Scales, 2016). We encourage wildmeat researchers to continue this trend, collecting gender-disaggregated demographic data to allow for an intersectional lens.

Women contribute their extensive knowledge on wildmeat to research as interviewees and focus group participants. Methods like women-only focus groups and holding home-based interviews that accommodate responsibilities like childcare can help facilitate their

participation (Eniang et al., 2008; Parathian & Maldonado, 2010; Singh, 2012). However, tokenistic participation, where women are only consulted or are present during decision-making, is insufficient. Active and empowered participation, where women influence decision-making outcomes, is required to ensure that interventions adequately address their needs (Agarwal, 2001; Lawless et al., 2022). Interventions should aim to address systemic gender inequalities, rather than simply giving women representation in traditionally men-dominated environments (Lawless et al., 2022; Sodhi et al., 2010). Agency requires not only having a voice, but also the ability to use this voice to influence decision-making (Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2022).

4.5 | Global perspectives

Wildmeat is not only used in the tropics but also worldwide. While we focused on tropical systems, similar gender dynamics are evident elsewhere. Globally, traditional gender roles shape participation in wildmeat systems. Wildmeat hunting and consumption are often associated with masculinity. In temperate regions, women face challenges in male-dominated spaces, such as hunting, where their participation has historically been discouraged or denied (Smalley, 2005; Tickle et al., 2024). Despite growing evidence for women's historical and current involvement (Anderson et al., 2023) and increasing numbers of women hunters (Lizana et al., 2022), societal norms in post-industrial contexts linking women to domesticity and feminine stereotypes can limit their participation in hunting, paralleling patterns in tropical settings. Gender also influences wildmeat consumption. Like tropical contexts, Western societies associate wildmeat consumption with masculinity (Corradini et al., 2022; Tomasevic et al., 2018) and fewer women may consume wildmeat due to health, safety and other concerns (e.g. Corradini et al., 2022; Niewiadomska et al., 2021).

Social patterns in tropical subsistence communities are mirrored elsewhere. Women hunt, prepare and cook wildmeat for food provision and community resource sharing in other subsistence communities; for example, in Australia (Bird & Bird, 2008) and Siberia (Ziker, 2014). Here, men hunt while women prepare wildmeat, sharing household responsibilities (e.g. Quintal-Marineau & Wenzel, 2019)—a pattern that we identified in tropical subsistence contexts. Despite significant variation, parallels in gender dynamics across regions underscore gender's global influence in wildmeat systems and may offer opportunities to learn from interventions from other regions.

5 | CONCLUSION

We underscore women's significant roles in tropical wildmeat systems. Women are integral to supply chains, occupying multiple roles and holding considerable influence. Though their influence varies regionally, it extends from household consumption to

commercial trade and demonstrates their contribution to household resilience and food security, community social cohesion, and demand and access to wildmeat. Women can be important assets in wildmeat management and their considerable influence, such as on household food security and community social cohesion, may be leveraged to balance conservation outcomes with livelihood and food security. However, information on their participation in governance is limited, potentially meaning their contributions are overlooked or underrepresented. Further research on gendered power dynamics and factors intersecting gender to influence women's autonomy, such as age or ethnicity, is needed, as is transformational change in women's participation in wildmeat governance. We emphasise the need for gender-sensitive interventions that recognise women's contributions and challenges in wildmeat systems, ensure their meaningful involvement in decision-making and promote equitable, sustainable wildmeat management.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jasmin Willis was responsible for conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, visualisation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, and project administration. Wahyu Nurbandi, Brenda González-Nava, Juanita Gomez, Ferdinand Castera, Guilherme Costa Alvarenga, Auriane Flottes De Pouzols, Maya Lemaire, Jennifer F. Linden and Emily K. Madsen contributed to data curation. Lauren Coad, Amy Hinsley and E.J. Milner-Gulland were involved in conceptualisation, methodology, writing—review and editing and supervision.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this systematic map were extracted from previously published sources. Due to the large number of included studies, individual sources are not cited in the main text, unless referenced directly in the results or discussion, but a full list of the publications can be found in Table S10 of the Supporting Information. The data has also been archived and is available through Dryad here: <https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.7m0cfxq7t>.

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literature directories (Table 1) for publications that mention gender and wildmeat, forming the search strategy for the systematic map.

Table S3. Test list of publications known to refer to wildmeat and gender, compiled in consultation with wildmeat researchers, that were used to estimate the comprehensiveness of the search strategy. All publications from the test list were returned from the search strategy, suggesting that the search strategy would sufficiently capture relevant publications.

Table S4. List of unobtainable publications resulting from the keyword searches of the directories included in the systematic review. For these publications, the full text was unavailable because there was not a digital copy, or payment was required.

Table S5. Data extraction and coding strategy for the systematic map, including the data collected, the guidance given to reviewers on how to extract/code the data (including definitions of standardised categories and terms where appropriate), and strategy (extraction or coding).

Table S6. List of roles where one or more women were recorded as present within tropical wildmeat systems, including the stage of the wildmeat system the role operated within, the name of the role, the number of instances women were recorded in the role, a short description of the role and examples of publications that describe the role.

Table S7. Summary of thematic analysis results regarding interactions between women and other actors in wildmeat systems, their power and influence in such systems, and how their roles have changed over time.

Table S8. List of roles for which data regarding the percentage of women occupying the role was available, including the name of the role, the number of records for which percentage data was available for each role, and the average percentage of women occupying the role.

Table S9. Primary reasons for women being either present or absent from tropical wildmeat systems based on descriptive data extracted from publications that discussed gender and wildmeat in the systematic map.

Table S10. List of publications from which data was extracted for the systematic map, including the language, publication type, first author name, publication year, title and source (e.g. journal name, book title).

Figure S1. Count of publications from which data was extracted as part of the systematic map that discussed gender and wildmeat by year published.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Table S1. List of academic and grey literature directories searched with keyword strings in five languages to identify publications that refer to gender and wildmeat, forming the search strategy for the systematic map.

Table S2. List of keywords in five languages (English, Bahasa Indonesia, French, Portuguese and Spanish) that were used to construct the search strings and search six academic and grey

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