

## Concept Note for Women's Agency and Gender Equity in Food Systems, An Independent Food Systems Dialogue: Asia and Africa

**Date:** Thursday, June 10, 2021, 2-4 pm IST

### **Background**

The HLPE global narrative report 2030 (2020: p 7-8) emphasized that “agency” and “sustainability” are vital dimensions of food security that flow directly from the principle of the right to food, and while not new, they need to be elevated within conceptual and policy frameworks. Agency goes beyond access to material resources in that it includes empowerment—the ability of people to take actions that help improve their own wellbeing, as well as their ability to engage in society in ways that influence the broader context, including their exercise of voice in shaping policies (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005). Agency, especially of marginalized groups, is constrained by a host of larger structural inequities they confront at multiple institutional levels, including local power dynamics, wealth disparities, gender norms, and governance structures (Peter, 2003).

In the context of the climate crisis and the inability of rural populations to survive on agrarian livelihoods in much of the global south, especially South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, men are moving out of villages in search of non-farm employment, leaving primary agricultural production increasingly feminized. At the same time, women across these cultures are seen to be responsible for ensuring household food security, due to their domestic and care roles within existing gender divisions of labour. Despite this responsibility for food production, the purchase and sale of food, processing, and ensuring adequate household consumption, women have few rights to resources, including land, money and labour. They are underrepresented in decision-making bodies within food systems and their priorities hardly addressed.

A focus on women's agency is then vital for ensuring food security especially in contexts of climatic variability and economic precarity (Burchi and de Muro, 2016; Rao et al. 2019). It signifies the capacity of individuals or groups of women to make their own decisions about what foods they eat, what foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed and distributed within food systems. Governments have an important role to play in the process of strengthening both the individual and collective capacity of women, especially those most vulnerable, to have a greater role in shaping their food systems through creating and supporting democratic, inclusive and participatory spaces and mechanisms for debate and action. This will ensure that the diversity in women's positions as well as experiences across contexts are recognized in policy processes and addressed in sensitive ways to ensure food and nutrition security outcomes.

## Dialogue Objectives

In this dialogue, we seek to explore the ways in which the concept of women's agency (including empowerment) can be operationalised in food systems, in both policy and practice. Given the centrality of women's agency to household food security, and indeed the achievement of the SDGs, we focus on identifying strategies and mechanisms to strengthen and support women's agency. Investing in women's agency is now urgent, as despite considerable global awareness and progress on gender equality over the past four decades, several challenges remain to the exercise of women's agency in food systems.

These include:

- a) The invisibility and devaluation of women's work, both productive and unpaid care;
- b) Lack of entitlements and unequal access to assets, especially land, water and credit;
- c) Lack of recognition of women's knowledges, with effects on peer learning and dialogues with modern science for strengthening women's capacities and choices;
- d) Low levels of leadership and representation in decision-making bodies
- e) Structural inequities, resulting in violence against women related to food insecurities, with adverse consequences for health and nutrition; and
- f) Lack of investment in building women's collective agency for inclusion and equity.

Several ideas have emerged in the Wave 1 solutions of the Food Systems Summit around women-led enterprises to grow and sell nutritious and neglected crops ([AT1, 10, p. 31](#)), launch a new alliance to end anaemia ([AT1, 15, p. 44](#)), promote breastfeeding ([AT2, 9, p. 27](#)), women's empowerment ([AT2, 17, p. 50](#) and [AT4, 19, p. 66](#)), strengthening labour regulations by placing people's dignity and rights at the centre ([AT4, 1, p. 5](#)), securing land tenure rights ([AT4, 4, p. 14](#)), farmer field and business schools ([AT4, 17, p. 56](#)), amongst others. Based on these solutions, the need to rebalance agency amongst different stakeholders has emerged as an action area for radically transforming food systems. Key elements include social dialogue, mobilizing civil society, integrating gender transformative approaches in food systems and measurement of women's empowerment. In this dialogue, we hope to contribute to identifying pathways for operationalising women's agency in research, policy and practice.

## Themes for discussion

Suggested below are a few broad themes for discussion, critical to creating an enabling environment for strengthening women's agency and gender equity:

### **1. Strengthening the interface between women's knowledges and science:**

Traditional crops, often nutritious, but considered low value and low status, generally lie in women's domain. Women possess deep knowledge of these crops, their growing conditions, seed selection, preservation etc. Scientific research over the past few decades has engaged with many of these 'neglected' crops, whether millets or tubers and roots, selecting and developing traits to make them more resilient and profitable. Yet adoption has been slow, mainly due to the lack of engagement with both women's priorities and resource constraints. Where a mutually respectful interface between women farmers and science has been facilitated, however, such as through ICRISAT's Smart food campaign (AT1, 10), or peer learning through CARE's Farmer Field and Business Schools (AT4, 17), women's equitable participation has ensured the strengthening of agricultural knowledge and productivity enhancement.

**2. Building and investing in women's individual and collective agency:**

Agency for poor rural women involves challenging multiple power hierarchies from the level of the household and community to labour and product markets as well as state policies. Changing power relations including social norms require collective action. Alongside traditional forms of sharing labour and resources, new models for exercising collective agency are emerging – ranging from self-help groups and cooperatives to producer organisations and social entrepreneurship. However, given the diversity of women and contexts, while some form of organising is essential to guard against exploitation and ensure that rights are not violated, this process needs to be intentional and requires investment. Legal and policy frameworks that provide space for participation and enable agency are important, but these need to be operationalised through a process of social mobilisation, dialogue and training.

**3. Alternate pathways to improving nutritional outcomes:**

A key challenge to improving nutritional outcomes, especially overcoming micronutrient deficiencies, is the lack of access to and affordability of diverse and healthy diets to a large majority of people (SOFI, 2020). Women's empowerment and control over the food system is central to addressing this problem. Entry-points can vary from breastfeeding to growing homestead gardens, the diversification of cropping systems on small plots of land, or the cultivation of naturally bio fortified plants. All these require dialogue and critical questioning of culturally and contextually specific nutritional knowledge, alongside strategies that realign consumption practices to make diets more nutritious.

**4. Rights, Entitlements and Representation:**

Amartya Sen (1981) in his analysis of poverty and famines pointed to the importance of entitlements – in terms of ownership, exchange and legal rights – to ensure food security. Globally, women lack land rights, and linked to this, rights to water, credit, labour, extension services, membership in cooperatives and decision-making bodies. This needs to be changed. Laws and policies need to guarantee women's human rights, ensuring equal entitlements to resources as male 'farmers', and recognize women's paid and unpaid, productive, domestic and care labour, central to nutritional outcomes. Laws however need to be enforced to achieve gender equity and this requires not just recognition of women's contributions to food systems, but equally representation in decision-making bodies at all levels, whether related to policy-making, service provision or agricultural research.