

Women's Agency and Gender Equity in Food Systems A UNFSS Independent Dialogue: Asia and Africa Discussion Prompts

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 policy and practice. Given the centrality of women's agency to household food security, signifying 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, 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. A lot of ideas have already been generated; this dialogue seeks to clarify the theory of change, while also identifying operational principles, especially in relation to strategies and pathways for building women's individual and collective agency in food systems, ensuring access to rights and entitlements, including in crises, bridging the gaps between food production and nutritional outcomes, and ensuring representation across institutions.

Discussion Group 1 – Understanding Women's Agency in the Food System Discourse

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. Despite the recognition of women's central role in food production, the purchase and sale of food, processing, and ensuring adequate household consumption, women confront a host of structural barriers that limit their agency within food systems. They have few rights to resources, including land, money and labour, are underrepresented in decision-making bodies within food systems and their priorities are hardly addressed. The critical role of women within food systems, including those in invisibilised communities such as migratory pastoralists, or indigenous groups, needs visibility.

Questions

- How might we further elaborate and complement the theory of change between women's agency and the transition to a more sustainable and equitable food system, contributing to SDG2?
- What are some of the major roadblocks to developing women's agency in Africa and Asia (such as poverty, lack of resources, community structures, or the lack of recognition of women's unpaid domestic and care work)?
- What kinds of policies can create an enabling environment for women's agency, especially in farming and allied systems, without reinforcing existing gender divisions of labour and rights?
- Are there any successful ground-level examples/experiences of strategies that have enhanced women's agency and consequently ensured both nutrition and livelihood outcomes?

Discussion Group 2 - Building and investing in women's collective agency

Agency for poor rural women involves challenging multiple power hierarchies from the household and community levels to labour and product markets as well as state policies. Changing power relations including social norms requires 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.

Questions:

- Many interventions that seek to operationalise women's agency face backlash from traditional power structures including the extended family, the village council, and even the state. How can this be addressed effectively, by both grassroots organizations and local government institutions?
- Most models for building collective agency have been implemented in rural areas. Can these models be used in urban contexts for vulnerable groups of migrant workers, sex workers, transwomen and domestic help? What might be different in urban settings?
- What are the key resources required for sustaining women's collective agency?
- Despite the centrality of women's agency to building sustainable food systems, this has not always translated into public/private investments. How can we make developing women's agency a policy priority and direct more funds and resources towards it?

Discussion Group 3 - 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 and processing. 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.

Questions:

- Women's knowledges span across several food systems domains, such as production (indigenous crops), collection (wild and forest produce), livestock rearing, consumption (traditional culinary knowledge) and processing (salting, drying, pickling). How can civil society, research and policy actors not only recognize and preserve, but also elevate the importance of these knowledges in the discourse around food systems?
- How can policy makers and implementing agencies, through their extension and outreach activities, involve women as active agents in the production and dissemination of diverse knowledges about regenerative agricultural practices and localised food systems?

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- How can scientists position the value of local women's knowledge as equally relevant to agriculture and food science?
- What are some successful examples/experiences of mutually collaborative practices between women's knowledge and science and technology, in agriculture, livestock rearing, food processing and consumption? How can we build on these?

Discussion Group 4 - 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 biofortified 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.

Questions:

- In most parts of the world, women are responsible for household consumption and therefore nutrition. How can we improve their access to the knowledge, resources and support they require to improve their family's food and nutrition security?
- Food-based dietary guidelines, while a useful standard, are often generalised and not accommodating of local cultures. Can making women equal participants in the production and dissemination of context-specific nutrition information contribute to better adoption of dietary guidelines?
- How can men be brought into the discourse around nutrition and household consumption, as they not just exercise control over family finances, but also help reproduce social norms contributing to the intergenerational cycles of malnutrition in women?
- Encouraging local production and consumption (through kitchen gardens, backyard poultry and community wet markets) can help increase women's autonomy over household consumption and reduce dependency on markets. How can this be made a policy imperative, especially in LMICs?

Discussion Group 5 - 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, agricultural research or producer organisations.

Questions:

- In several countries of Asia and Africa, women lack land rights, and therefore legal recognition as farmers. This exposes them to both exploitation of their labour and the threat of eviction. How can legal safeguards be granted, and their implementation monitored, particularly for women in remote rural communities?
- What are the gaps in current legislation on women's rights and entitlements, especially in Asian and African countries, in relation to agriculture, nutrition and food systems? How can policies related to the food system be made more gender sensitive?
- There have been many efforts to increase the representation of women in local decision-making bodies, including local governments, producer organisations, agriculture, nutrition and health extension, yet gendered power structures often work against women's voice and agency. How can representation be made substantive, and not merely nominal, for women?