

Summary report of Webinar on Women, Work and Food Systems

The UN will convene a Food Systems Summit as part of the Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The Summit will launch bold new actions to deliver progress on all 17 SDGs, each of which relies to some degree on healthier, more sustainable and equitable food systems.

The preparatory process for the same has been structured around five themes and four Levers of Change. IFPRI has taken the lead on the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Lever of Change to ensure that gender gets proper weightage and focus in the preparation and the papers which are being prepared by the Technical Working Groups and the outcomes of the UN Food Systems Summit.

It is a matter of pride for us that SEWA has been nominated as Gender Experts to provide inputs in one of the theme (Action Track) - the **Action Track 4: Advance Equitable Livelihoods**

Through its work organizing women workers from the informal economy for over 4.5 decades, SEWA's has understood that women are the back-bone of an informal worker's household and most commonly shoulder the responsibility of fulfilling the family's food and nutritional needs. At the same time, women play a major role in the Food system – in production, processing, trading of food and in making decisions about consumption and purchase of food at household level

Despite their importance in the food system, women are constrained by their lack of land ownership and access to other resources due to patriarchal farming systems and gender discrimination. Additionally, agricultural support systems in India are mostly composed of men, affecting women's access to resources to increase their incomes.

To discuss and deliberate on these issues and possible game changing solutions to address these, IFPRI, SEWA and RECOFT co-hosted a regional dialogue on **Women, Work and Food Systems** on 4th March. The dialogue brought together over 100 participants including economists, academicians, scientists, farmers and farmer organizations, policy makers, consumers, private sector and others from over 10 different.

Dr. Martin Frick, Deputy to Special Envoy of UN Secretary General for the Food Systems Summit 2021 set the stage for the Action Food summit 2021 and the present webinar and emphasized how focusing on women along the food system and empowerment of women were both game changing solution as well as an environmental solution.

Following the remarks of Dr. Martin, SEWA's president Kapilaben Vankar shared the issues and challenges faced by informal sector women workers across the food system emphasizing on the fact that women put their families first, and yet due to lack of access to assets and agency are often deprived from access to nutritional food. She also shared best-practices implemented by SEWA such as RUDI – SEWA's Agribusiness enterprise, Kamala – SEWA's food processing initiative and SEWA Bazaar – SEWA's vegetable value chain - that have helped her and thousands of members of SEWA like her in addressing the aforesaid issues.

“Poor women workers from the informal economy play a major role in the food system - as producer, as distributor, as vendor, as cook, as care-giver... and yet they hardly have a voice or visibility... Therefore, to transform the current food system there is a need for the women workers in the food system to organize... to form

their own food-production, food-processing, agri-business enterprises... to increase their collective strength and to generate decent livelihood opportunities”... says Kapilaben Vankar, President, SEWA

Jemimah Njuki, Director for Africa Region, IFPRI congratulated Kapilaben for her wonderful presentation and informed that she herself was the daughter of a small and marginal farmer from Africa and hearing Kapilaben, she was reminded of her parents.

Explaining the importance of the UNFSS 2021. Jemimah informed that this was the first time where Gender and Women are not thought as an after-note but Gender Equality and Women are at the center. Women are key actors in food system and stark gender inequalities are both a cause and outcome of unsustainable food systems, unjust food access, consumption and production. Therefore, to transform the food systems, through dialogues like the present there is a need to focus and deliberate on women's agency, their aspirations, their necessary skills and access to resources (land, organizing, technologies, etc), issues of norms and patriarchal structures, and policies.

In order to engage different stakeholders actively in the dialogue, the method of breakout sessions was adopted based on five these of the UN Food System Summit as below.

- Action Track 1: Ensure Access to safe and nutritious food
- Action Track 2: Shift to sustainable consumption patterns
- Action Track 3: Boost nature-positive production
- Action Track 4: Advance equitable livelihoods
- Action Track 5: Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress

Some of the interesting highlights of the discussions are as below:

Action Track 1: “Access, affordability and availability of nutritious food should go hand in hand” and “Women play a direct and significant role in Food system and yet all decisions are made by men... therefore, there is a need for sensitizing men”

Action Track 2: “What is being produced, is not eaten, and instead, is exported. What is being eaten, is what has been imported”- this is the key issue in today's food system

“Current policies do not ensure ownership of land to women, or disassociate access to resources and land ownership, thus leading to women's inability to access financial resources, extension services, benefits and entitlements from Govt as a small farmer.”... Prof Nirja Mattoo

Action Track 3: “Protecting and carefully managing the commons, forests, pastures, even the water resources (and farm lands) is very important and uncontested solution to boost nature positive production” ... says Ruth Meinzein-Dick, IFPRI

Action Track 4: “The only real way to address the power imbalance in food systems and in the food chain is if women have the power to organize. So coming together with organizations like

SEWA, for me, is absolutely key to changing the power balance and to ensuring equitable livelihoods” ... says Sue Longley, General Secretary, IUF

“There is a need to emphasize, promote, replicate and scale-up existing models that increase women’s agency in the food systems as well as generate livelihood opportunities for more rural women workers. Some examples of such models are MGNREGA (that ensures access to work near the workers homes and on-demand), Procurement of millet and linking it up to PDS / ICDS etc, SEWA’s RUDI (an agribusiness enterprise fully owned and managed by small and marginal farmers themselves... ensuring food and nutrition security as well as work and income security to its members); Poultry Cooperative in Madhya Pradesh; Safe Harvest Pvt Ltd, etc.” ... Srinivasan Iyer, Ford Foundation

Action Track 5 - “The fact that Agriculture is considered informal is a barrier to women’s rights. Also, farming is a family trade. Therefore, decision-making processes in the family need to be more equitable; women, children should also have a say in these decision”... said Ronny Novianto, SPTN HPS, Indonesia

At the end of the discussion, each group came up with 3 game changing solutions. Some of these game-changing solutions are as below

- Organizing is the key to empower rural women workers and small holder women farmers and make the food systems equitable and just. Promoting their own member-owned and managed supply chain will help building their collective strength, bargaining power and decision-making agencies.
- Policies that treat farm as an enterprise, promote women-owned and managed social enterprises and bring in technology and skills to strengthen the decentralized supply chains.
- Policies that Explicitly recognize and promote the rights of women who are structurally disadvantaged
- Focus on Affordability and accessibility to enable increased effective reach of nutritious food for all
- Promote traditional food through pro-poor and pro-women farmer policies as well as linking consumer directly to producers through producer-led-value chains.
- Reviving, promoting and implementing indigenous practices through technological integration.
- Promote local production and distribution to address the issue of Food Wastage as well as localization of agricultural value chain to generate better, just and equitable livelihood opportunities
- Educate and create awareness about hidden environmental costs of food production to the commons.
- Promote eco-regenerative solutions, management of resources and commons by rural women workers

Additionally, organizing rural women workers and enabling access to financial services and market linkages came out as a cross-cutting solution across all groups.

Mr. V S Parthasarathy, CFO of Mahindra and Mahindra Group summarized the discussions at the dialogue and highlighted that **Organizing** has come out as a key game changing solution that will lead to enabling the other major cross-cutting solutions such as Right to association, right to collective bargaining and access to technology, finance and resources. He also emphasized that solutions like promoting local decentralized value chains fully owned and managed by the women farmers / producers / workers themselves have come up across all the 5 themes and holds a promising solution to address all the issues highlighted by Kapilaben.

Jemimah explained that these solutions will be presented to the leads of each *Action track* to be developed into a game changing solution as well as to the Special Envoy of the UN Food System Summit. She also emphasized that the dialogue also opens mechanisms and channels for us to take up these solutions and implement them within our communities or scale them up.

Expressing gratitude and satisfaction for the rich discussions to all the stake holders, Reemaben, SEWA ended with an optimistic remark that the UN Food System Summit, definitely will help evolve a food system, which was more equitable, more inclusive and one that will free all of them from hunger and starvation.