



Summary report for SEWA's National Dialogue on Women, Work and Food Systems

Women play major role in shouldering the responsibility of fulfilling the family's food and nutritional needs as well as in the Food systems – in production, processing, trading of food and in making decisions about consumption and purchase of food at household level. And yet their voices are barely heard.

Therefore, SEWA convened a ***National Dialogue on "Women, Work and Food Systems: Voices from Grassroots"*** on ***19th June, 2021***, to offer the informal sector women workers engaged in the food systems across India – including the poor small and marginal women farmers, agricultural laborers, share croppers, small scale food processors, street vendors etc.; a platform to bring forth their issues, challenges and solutions and integrate them into the workings of the UNFSS work-streams.

This dialogue provided these poor women workers an opportunity to enhance their visibility, identity and livelihood in the food system in the presence of over 160 participants including appropriate policy makers, private sector organizations, scientists and individual consumers.

Ms. Manaliben Shah, Vice President, SEWA and Mrs. Kapilaben Vankar, President SEWA, set the stage for the dialogue by highlighting the fact that the current food system scenario is such that ***"Farmers cannot eat what they grow and they are not able to grow what they eat"*** and leading to the burning question of ***"Why does the farmer remain hungry?"***

Prof Ramesh Chand, Member, Niti Aayog gave a key note address appreciating SEWA for taking the lead in organizing such an independent dialogue – the first of its kind in India.... And offered to include the outcomes of this dialogue in the document that India is preparing for the UN FSS pre-summit. He also stressed on the point that to bring about transformation of the food systems in the real sense; instead of the current side-door approach; there is a need for a holistic integrated approach that weaves together the producers, processors, distributors and consumers.

Mr. Pawan Agarwal, Chief Secretary, Ministry of Trade and Commerce applauded Prof Chand's remark and expressed the need for Govt., Civil Society and Private sector to work together to bring about the transformation in the food systems. He acknowledged that SEWA's models such as the RU¹DI, "Bachat Mandal (SHG) model, the Farmer-Producer Group (FPO) model etc. are exemplary and partnerships as mentioned above can help strengthen and scale-up such models and generate numerous decent livelihood opportunity for the poor informal sector women workers in the food systems.

Following the address by Pawan ji, several SEWA's grassroots sisters shared their experiences in context of the food systems. Some of them are as below.

"Over 50% of SEWA's members are small and marginal farmers. They toil hard on fields... they are producers but not managers and the owners of the farms. Therefore, in 2010, SEWA formed RUDI Multi Trading Company owned by these women farmers themselves in Gujarat."

¹ RUDI is an agribusiness enterprise promoted by SEWA, fully owned and managed by over 250000 small and marginal farmers and landless laborers. It integrates informal sector women workers at all stages in the food-supply chain, thereby ensuring fair returns to the farmers, work and income security to landless laborers and food and nutrition security to rural households.



Today 10 years later, RUDI has scaled up to 3 states in India and provides work and income security to over 4000 landless women workers and food security to over a million rural households"... says Heenaben Dave, SEWA's coordinator from Gujarat

Mubarakben, a grassroots entrepreneur says... "Me and my husband were poor farm laborers... struggling daily to make ends meet... we had no work or income security... One day I heard about RUDI and became a RUDIben (RUDI Sales women)... I started with one village and today I sell in 10 - 12 neighboring villages... Now I earn 12000 - 15000 INR per month... Along with income... I have also gained respect in my family, community and village... if our RUDI scales up... several women like me will get better future of work"

Mr. Randhir Singh from ICAR stressed upon skilling of women workers. He also stressed the importance of including women workers in design, implementation and delivery of agricultural extension services.

"I strongly believe that organizing is the key to transforming the food systems... SEWA has organized over 6000 women workers in the conflict affected states of Jammu and Kashmir and provided them with training on new agricultural techniques and technology, communications, marketing, leadership and management. During this current pandemic, when all the local markets as well as international supply chains came to a stand-still... these poor women workers from Jammu, with support from SEWA, connected to customers directly in states of Gujarat and sold their agro produce like Cherry, Apples, Apricots, walnut, saffron and honey.. Those women who were always oppressed... not allowed to go out... despite the economic slowdown were able to sustain their families... this is women's empowerment in true sense..." says Nazrana Malik, a small farmer from Jammu

Mr. Dilip Kulkarni from Jain Irrigations expressed his happiness to join the discussion and expressed the importance of technological and technical trainings for women to increase their participation as well as visibility in the food systems. He also mentioned about the need for research and development women-friendly agro-tools and technology.

Karl Derring, CARE (also AT4) congratulated SEWA for organizing this path-breaking dialogue and giving the informal women workers a platform to share their views in the food system. He agreed to Nazranaben's point and said that it is clear from all that we have heard that collective action is important to success of food system transformation along with addressing the institutional and policy barriers.

Reema Nanavaty, Director, SEWA, thanked all the participants for these rich discussion and summarized some of the key take-away from the dialogue in context of transformation of food-systems from gender perspective as below:

- Advocacy will play a major role in bringing out the need for access to services and resources; to decision making processes, and spaces for women to come together to act together for collective marketing and collective bargaining, but also for collective demand for better services. So there's an advocacy role..



- The production-processing-distribution-consumption nexus needs to be addressed... The RUDI model is a solid working proof for the same and needs to be replicated and scaled for promoting local decentralized food systems, ensuring work and income security to small farmers and landless laborers and generate several decent livelihood opportunities. In this sense it aligns completely with the objective of AT4
- The aforesaid holistic approach of integrating producers-processors-distributors-consumers in the food system will also enable access to integrated services, access to financial services (not just credit, but savings, credit, insurance, pension), access to technological services etc., thereby enabling access to food security as well as social security.
- Emphasis on Capacity Building, in areas like Farm Planning, Farm Management, Marketing, building a supply chain etc. can build climate resilience, improve yield and thus income of small and marginal producers
- Decentralizing food markets and diversifying in terms of product range will open up employment opportunities for the informal sector micro-entrepreneurs; especially in the urban areas.
- Need for Govt to promote 100-miles principle – local production, distribution and local consumption, through Public Distribution System (PDS); to ensure Food security for small and marginal farmers – thereby addressing “Why does the Farmer remain Hungry?”