

Feminist approaches to transforming food systems: a roadmap towards a socially just transition.

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Transforming food systems to make them healthier, more sustainable and inclusive is closely interconnected with the goals and ambitions of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and leaving no one behind. The importance of making food systems more equitable and sustainable has become critical and is a key driver behind the movement to promote food systems transformation. By shedding light on the existing structural weaknesses and inequalities inherent in existing food systems, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has made this transformation an ever-more pressing priority. Although different readings of the crisis and proposals for solutions exist (eg. Clapp et al, 2020), all stakeholders agree that action is urgently needed.

An equitable and sustainable transformation can only happen by prioritising the long-standing feminist demands, underpinned by calls for the realisation of women's rights and socio-environmental justice. The current health, economic and social crisis has shed light on the deep-rooted inequalities that characterise our food systems, with gender intersecting with race, ethnicity, citizenship status, (dis)ability, age and other social dimensions, to create vulnerability and marginalisation. The pandemic has further exposed the food systems' reliance on women's invisible, underpaid or unpaid and devalued work. Historically, the affective and material labour, the care work that shapes 'social reproduction' and is indispensable to society, has been cast as 'women's work' and is often performed without pay. Further, the invisibility and subordination of women's care and unpaid work has contributed to its appropriation and commodification in different contexts and points in history, becoming a central feature of production of profit in capitalist societies and a salient feature of feminist critique (Kabeer, 1994; Molyneux, 2006; Razavi, 2007).

This is evident in food systems. Not only do women provide key contributions by producing, preparing, processing and marketing most of the food, especially in the rural areas of the global South, they are also responsible for myriad other critical activities, productive and 'reproductive', that allow households, communities and food systems to function and thrive, particularly in periods of crisis and in the absence of well-functioning public welfare systems. Despite being fundamental to the livelihoods, food security and nutrition of households and communities worldwide, these activities often still remain 'invisible' and untargeted, including by social policy, development and, most recently, COVID-19 response interventions. With the emergence of the over-used and under-scrutinised terminology of

“essential worker” during the COVID-19 pandemic (Stevano et al, 2020), it becomes crucial to critically engage with the mechanisms through which the neoliberal food system undermines the wellbeing and dignity of workers on which its functioning depends (Solomon & Hopkins, 2021; The Guardian, 2020).

The available evidence shows that, across regions of the world, women – and especially rural, migrant and indigenous women – are disproportionately represented in low-skilled, low-paid occupations along food systems, with limited or no access to decent employment and social security schemes, and no real pathway out of poverty and food insecurity. Despite some progress achieved in recent decades, rural women continue to face severe discriminations in their access to land, services, finance, markets, information and technologies, which limits their opportunities to participate in and benefit equally from food systems development. Not only that, but almost everywhere, women, youth and minorities are often excluded from representation and decision-making at all levels, while the governance of local and global value chains remains dominated by male-dominated elites, businesses and corporations.

These social and gender inequalities are not only fundamentally unjust, they also have practical and material consequences on women and marginalised groups, and on society at large. For example, women’s improved access to resources and increased productivity have been shown to be strong determinants of children’s levels of education and health (FAO, 2011). Hence achieving gender equality in food systems is not just in line with fundamental human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, it is a strategic investment that can impact positively on all aspects of food systems, including agricultural productivity, agri-food value chain performance, reduction of food losses, and improved dietary diversity and nutrition.

Food systems transformation requires embracing a broader vision of inclusion, based on principles of gender equality and social justice, and exploring connections and actions across scales. Furthermore, a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity to engage and build connections across grass-roots and feminist movements that are at the forefront of food systems transformation and social justice struggles. Strengthening such networks is not only central to shaping supportive and effective national policies, but also fundamental for developing a resounding international response to the challenges that 21st century global food systems face. Addressing the power unbalances at the core of these inequalities in food systems is a momentous task and now, more than ever, needs bold and transformative actions that take us beyond paying lip service to ‘gender equality’. A serious commitment to address the drivers of inequality and exclusion in food systems requires, at a minimum:

1. analysing how gender, intersecting with other social differences and axes of power, is embedded in global relations of production and reproduction, local ecologies and cultures;
2. examining how gendered power relations fundamentally shape, and in turn are shaped by, how global food systems operate at different levels;
3. acknowledging that the environmental, socio-economic and social reproduction crises have the same root causes and require holistic/coordinated interventions to address them effectively.

To achieve this, a bold paradigm shift is needed that questions and challenges power structures and operations within global and local food systems. We conclude our reflection by offering an initial list of cross-disciplinary methodological implications for research and action, and questions that might help us to advance in this direction.

Methodological implications for research and action

We suggest a food systems analysis that adopts feminist political economy, informed by social reproduction approaches, as a theoretical and methodological framework aiming at:

- recognising issues around oppression, power and inequality as structurally relational and shaped by the dominant economic paradigm (ie capitalist production);
- providing a constructive critique and an alternative analysis of the interconnections between reproductive and productive labour in local and global food systems;
- promoting a radical reframing of global relations of production and reproduction to promote: (i) trade, economic, fiscal and social policies that enable better recognition of women's unpaid work; (ii) equal distribution of benefits between women and men small-scale producers and entrepreneurs; (iii) protection of migrant workers and other marginalised groups; and (iv) access to safe, nutritious and affordable food for all, among others;
- addressing the lack of operational and methodological linkages between the macro and micro levels of analysis in food systems.

Together with feminist political ecology – which highlights the interconnectedness of social relations of power with nature, culture and economies, and is committed “to research and practice that empowers and promotes social and ecological transformation for women and other marginalized groups” (Elmhirst, 2018: 10) – this approach will allow: analysis of the implications of food systems transformation in terms of changes in gender and power relations; a restructuring of social, economic and ecological relations; and the identification of alternative economies, ecologies and pathways of sustainability (Di Chiro, 2015; Harcourt & Nelson, 2015; Wichterich, 2015; Wright, 2010).

Furthermore, we argue for the need to systematically monitor and evaluate the unintended consequences of interventions and policies on marginalised and less visible groups, and account for all power relations that can undermine policy and programme outcomes.

Questions that should underpin the formulation and implementation of transformative policies and actions in support of food systems transformation:

- How do we change patriarchal and social norms that reproduce oppression and marginalisation at local, national and global levels? How do we promote new expressions of masculinities and femininities, and effectively challenge a rigid and unequal gender division of labour at all levels (within the household, institutions, across value chains, to mention a few)?
- How can we ensure the implementation of policies, public services and social protection measures that address the existing gender and social inequalities, and encourage a just redistribution of assets and reproductive work? How can these interventions build the resilience of women and men, especially small-scale producers and actors operating in agrifood value chains?

- Which mechanisms can be put in place to allow racialised and marginalised women and men producers, value chain actors and their organisations to sit at the table where decisions are made (ie following the model of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security)?
- How do we address unequal power dynamics between smallholders and small-scale actors – both women and men – and transnational agri-food businesses to avoid the exploitation of women’s and minority groups’ relative positions of economic, social and political exclusion?
- What can donors and development partners do to actively level the playing field for countries in the global South in trade relations, bargaining power and ability to respond to future (health, financial, social) crises while promoting gender equality and social justice? As noted above, this list is by no means comprehensive and is intended to trigger some initial reflections on how to move in the direction of transforming food systems. Unless such transformation is centred on actively promoting gender equality and social justice (ie committed to changing power relations that perpetuate social injustices in food systems), it will not be sustainable or meaningful in the long run.

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