

## GENDER MATTERS IN AGROECOLOGY

# Toward a Feminist Agroecology: achieving a socially just and sustainable food systems transformation

Food systems must be transformed if we are to feed the world without destroying the planet. Agroecological principles are central to creating and sustaining that change, but their transformative potential must be strengthened by better integrating critical gender and social inclusion considerations into agroecological approaches. In order for agroecology to achieve its espoused twin aims of social and ecological wellbeing, women and other historically marginalized stakeholders must be empowered and centered as the movement's protagonists.

Based on the article 'Toward a Feminist Agroecology'<sup>1</sup>, this brief outlines key gender issues that must be addressed to achieve an equitable and sustainable agroecological transition.

### A gender equitable agroecological agenda

Global food systems have extended dangerously past planetary boundaries and beyond a "safe and just operating space for humanity". The urgent, interrelated and intensifying crises of global warming, biodiversity loss, and water and soil degradation are gravely imperilling the very agri-food systems that contribute to fuelling these phenomena.

Agroecology is quickly gaining ground as a potential solution to these interconnected global crises, and major global initiatives have been recently launched to accelerate this process. Examples include the establishment in 2021 of the [Transformative Partnership Platform on Agroecology](#) ('Agroecology TPP'), as well as the [Coalition for Food System Transformation through Agroecology](#) ('Agroecology Coalition'), which was created during the UN Food Systems Summit held in September 2021. While these are promising steps forward, agroecological approaches may worsen social inequalities if they are not based in feminist ideologies.

Despite the agroecology movement's emphasis on social equity and power dynamics in agriculture, issues related to gender and other intersectional inequalities have not received adequate attention in agroecological policy and science. A lack of emphasis on agroecology's political and social dimensions risks reducing agroecology to a set of technocratic practices and diluting its transformative potential.

Both the Agroecology TPP and the Coalition aim to address these challenges by building upon the 13 principles of agroecology posited by the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) on food security and nutrition (which advises the intergovernmental Committee on World Food Security).<sup>2</sup> The following analysis illustrates the relevance of gender issues to every principle—not just the patently social ones—and highlights the need for a more sustainable and just agroecological transition, while showing some of the entry points for redressing existing inequities.



# HLPE's 13 defining principles of agroecology through a feminist lens

Agroecology is not only about lowering agrichemical inputs and increasing sustainability; it is about self-determination and reclaiming control of one's own food, land, and body. A feminist agroecology which values the equitable contributions of all genders leads to a more creative, versatile, and transformative movement. By the same token, agroecological pursuits which do not consider and challenge the social inequalities produced at the intersection of different axes of discrimination (such as gender, age, socioeconomic, status, caste, and so on) risk perpetuating or accentuating marginalization.



## 1 Recycling

*Preferentially use local renewable resources and, as far as possible, close resource cycles of nutrients and biomass*

Recycling is central to the concept of a circular economy in which no external inputs are needed and no waste is created, as all resources are recycled in a closed loop. Women and resource-poor farmers who face specific exclusions from markets due to barriers to entry and lack of access to extension and credit stand to benefit from closing the resource loop.<sup>3</sup> The classic example of

on-farm resource recycling is composting waste to use as fertilizer, thereby reducing waste as well as the application of external inputs. Yet, even certain composting techniques can be difficult to access for rural women and other marginalized groups, and can divert organic materials used by women (such as manure used as fuel for cooking fires) to other uses.<sup>4,5</sup> **A feminist agroecology questions the implications of closing resource loops, who gets to decide how resources are allocated and recycled, and whose labor will support changes in resource allocations.**



## 2 Input reduction

*Reduce or eliminate dependency on purchased inputs and increase self-sufficiency*

Low-input farming can be more labor-intensive and can increase drudgery, disproportionately impacting women and girls who are frequently tasked with time-consuming agricultural activities.<sup>6,7</sup> This is of particular concern as women already face longer workdays and a more severe

time deficit than men in general, given their typically heavy household reproductive and care work.<sup>8,9</sup> **Agroecology must be informed by the feminist imperatives of making women's work visible and valued, and redistributing that work equitably across gender groups to avoid placing a disproportionate burden on women's shoulders for the sake of agroecological transformation.**



## 3 Soil health

*Secure and enhance soil health and functioning for improved plant growth, particularly by managing organic matter and enhancing soil biological activity*

Gender equality and sustainable soil management are linked in many ways. Women are frequently relegated to less fertile lands and lack access to resources to improve these soils. Despite rural women's roles in soil management, gender-based inequalities in decision-making mean women's knowledge, preferences, and priorities in this domain are given less value and weight than men's.<sup>6</sup> This can negatively impact soil health by excluding part of the available knowledge around sustainable soil management.<sup>10</sup> **Agroecology must recognize women's essential contributions to sustaining soil health and support their decision-making power in this regard, as well as redressing discriminating factors such as inequitable land tenure arrangements.**



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## Animal health

*Ensure animal health and welfare*

Animal husbandry involves a highly gendered division of labor in many contexts, leading to distinct experiences and knowledge bases among diverse groups of rural women and men.<sup>11,12</sup> For example, chickens are considered women's responsibility whereas cattle are men's domain in Brazil and Uganda, respectively.<sup>13,14</sup> Animal care—as an extension of care work—is often seen as 'women's work'. In agroecological approaches that rely on livestock as part of a low-input system, women's work burden may increase in agroecological transitions that are

not gender-responsive. Understanding the social relations and gender norms that mediate farmers' differentiated experience with, knowledge around, and priorities for the care of specific types of animals (e.g. smallstock, livestock, poultry) is essential to developing gender-equitable agroecological policy and initiatives.<sup>11</sup> **A feminist agroecology has the potential to unlock a far greater breadth of knowledge about the care of different types of animals than approaches which do not take all stakeholders' perspectives into account, and ensures that the labor and benefits of animal care are equitably distributed.**

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## Biodiversity

*Maintain and enhance diversity of species, functional diversity and genetic resources, and thereby maintain overall agroecosystem biodiversity in time and space at field, farm and landscape scales*

Gender roles and power relations interact with biodiversity loss, and with biodiversity conservation, in important ways.<sup>15</sup> Although gender roles are nuanced and highly contextual<sup>6</sup>, in many communities, particularly in Africa and Asia<sup>15</sup>, women are seed keepers and foragers of wild plants, whereas men have other responsibilities related to biodiversity such as procuring wild meats.<sup>5</sup> Enhanced gender equality has been found to support better biodiversity conservation.<sup>16</sup> What's more, enhanced or restored biodiversity can relieve women's disproportionate labor burden by making households more self-sufficient.<sup>17</sup> **The inclusion of women's particular and profound knowledge about usage, management, and conservation of diverse species—and of gender-specific needs and priorities—serves to support a more resilient, biodiverse, and socially just agroecology.**

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## Synergy

*Enhance positive ecological interaction, synergy, integration and complementarity among the elements of agroecosystems (animals, crops, trees, soil, and water)*

While the standard understanding of synergy as an agroecological principle focuses solely on ecological elements, there are also enormous opportunities for synergies between social and ecological goals.<sup>17,18</sup> Gender-responsive and socially inclusive agroecology can have higher rates of success by bringing together diverse sets of knowledge and skills and including voices

which are often silenced or undervalued.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, agroecology that is not intentionally gender-responsive or feminist could create significant trade-offs, such as placing an undue burden on women to perform labor intensive low-input farming to serve the 'greater good' of combatting climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation.<sup>20</sup> **Agroecology that advances and recognizes social aims as essential parts of a holistic socio-ecological movement can strengthen autonomy, sovereignty, and increase rights and control over resources and land-use decisions.**

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### Economic diversification

*Diversify on-farm incomes by ensuring that small-scale farmers have greater financial independence and value addition opportunities while enabling them to respond to demand from consumers*

While women perform a vast array of roles in agricultural production, they “face a surprisingly consistent gender gap in access to productive assets, inputs and services”<sup>19</sup>, leaving them with lower overall levels of productivity, limited land and land access, and less overall ability to

achieve broader economic and social goals<sup>9</sup>. The diverse economic opportunities advanced through agroecology should meet the priorities and capacities of all genders and be equitably distributed.<sup>19</sup> **Agroecology, as a low-input form of agriculture, can help close the gender gap in access to productive assets, inputs and services, while contributing to a more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunity.**

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### Co-creation of knowledge

*Enhance co-creation and horizontal sharing of knowledge including local and scientific innovation, especially through farmer-to-farmer exchange*

Recognizing farmers and consumers as the central actors of food systems and the primary, decentralized drivers of the agroecology movement brings together an incredibly diverse array of farming practices and culturally specific knowledge systems. Agroecology is de-colonial: it recognizes and revalues Indigenous and local knowledge as valid and not subordinate to ‘modern’ scientific knowledge<sup>20</sup>. Likewise, it **recognizes the legitimacy of the knowledge and experiences of all genders on equal footing**, and brings marginalized knowledge to light. More fundamentally, it **recognizes women as farmers in their own right**, and not only as helpers on their husband’s farm, **and encourages their valuable contribution in farmer-to-farmer exchanges.**

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### Social values and diets

*Build food systems based on the culture, identity, tradition, social and gender equity of local communities, that provide healthy, diversified, seasonally and culturally appropriate diets*

As the predominant and often de facto care-takers and food-preparers in societies across the globe, women are at the center of family nutrition. Despite this, women and girls often suffer the greatest health threat from malnutrition<sup>21</sup>. There is evidence that women’s increased ability to organize and to assume leadership roles leads to improved food and nutrition outcomes for households and communities<sup>22,23</sup>. **As such, gender equality and women’s empowerment find synergy with improved dietary diversity, nutrition, and overall wellbeing for all.**

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### Fairness

*Support dignified and robust livelihoods for all actors engaged in food systems, especially small-scale food producers, based on fair trade, fair employment, and fair treatment of intellectual property rights*

Women’s empowerment and human rights for all marginalized peoples and genders are a goal in and of themselves. In addition, supporting women’s empowerment and achieving gender equality are integral to successful and resilient agroecological endeavours and sustainable natural resource management<sup>24</sup>. Agroecological approaches can

disrupt conventional practices in which men control a greater share of crops and income. Even within ‘fairness’ schemes like fair trade, however, gender inequity will continue to be a problem unless equity is intentionally pursued from the beginning and women and marginalized peoples are included in leadership roles and contribute to defining the agenda, including what ‘fairness’ means to them<sup>25</sup>. **A deliberate focus on equity is essential for an agroecological transformation that not only addresses individual circumstances of unfairness but also their root causes.**



## 11 Connectivity

*Ensure proximity and confidence between producers and consumers through promotion of fair and short distribution networks and by re-embedding food systems into local economies*

Although it is acknowledged that connectivity, support networks, and collective action are integral to scaling agroecology up and out, the type and quality of access that farmers have to different organizations and programs is highly gendered.<sup>19</sup> Rural women tend to have less access to official farmer networks and rely on more

informal networks than men. Supporting women's access to networks, economic connections, and opportunities for collective action is mutually beneficial to women and agroecological processes.<sup>22,23</sup> Women-to-women and farmer-to-farmer networks have also supported women's economic diversification (and thereby agroecology Principle 7). **Agroecology should support the empowerment of marginalized farmers at different scales for mutual support and to pursue collective action and self-led governance.**



## 12 Land and natural resource governance

*Recognize and support the needs and interests of family farmers, smallholders, and peasant food producers as sustainable managers and guardians of natural and genetic resources*

Land tenure is at the heart of many significant disadvantages for women and marginalized farmers. Rural women often lack secure land tenure, which hinders their influence in land-use decision-making and grants them less access and rights to other resources and assets, including credit and income produced from the land that they cultivate.<sup>24,25</sup> Furthermore, the lack of control over land that many rural women experience

contributes to their invisibility and low levels of self-identification as farmers in their own right. In addition to enhancing recognition, agency and food sovereignty for women, gender-equitable land and resource governance can directly improve global food security.<sup>26</sup> **Valuing and supporting the rights of women and marginalized people as land and resource managers with valid knowledge and skills can contribute to more effective governance with more equitable benefits for a diverse range of stakeholders.**



## 13 Participation

*Encourage social organization and greater participation in decision-making by food producers and consumers to support decentralized governance and local adaptive management of agricultural and food systems*

While the HLPE's inclusion of participation as a principle of agroecology focuses on the participation of producers and consumers, participation should be expanded to encompass

the equitable inclusion of the diversity of those stakeholders, with particular attention to those who are generally marginalized in decision-making processes. Inclusive and empowering participation grants all genders a voice with equitable weight and influence.<sup>27</sup> **Equitable participation must be a consideration in agroecological approaches, starting from the earliest phases, to be more than nominally inclusive, and to achieve a fair systems transformation.**

# Conclusion

Agroecology offers opportunities for enhancing gender equality and social inclusion, but also poses risks if equality is not intentionally pursued. The priorities, capacities, knowledge, and agency of all genders and marginalized groups should be central to agroecological transitions, and considered with equal weight and legitimacy. Benefits, costs, and risks associated with agroecology must be equitably distributed. When efforts to challenge structural inequalities are explicitly integrated throughout the stages of an agroecological transition, agroecology holds promise as a more resilient and empowering movement.

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