

How Gender Relations Shape Food Sovereignty

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Introduction

Food sovereignty is a political and social framework that gives people the right to shape the systems through which food is produced, distributed, prepared, and consumed. It challenges a global food model dominated by industrial agriculture, international commodity markets, land concentration, and powerful corporations. Instead of treating food only as a commercial product, food sovereignty emphasizes local decision-making, culturally appropriate diets, ecological sustainability, secure livelihoods, and democratic control over land, water, seeds, and other productive resources.

Gender relations are central to this framework because women and men do not participate in food systems under equal conditions. Women frequently grow crops, harvest aquatic resources, preserve seeds, prepare meals, care for family members, sell produce, and maintain ecological knowledge. However, much of this work is unpaid, poorly rewarded, or treated as an ordinary household responsibility rather than an essential economic and political contribution.

Global evidence illustrates this contradiction. Approximately 36% of employed women worldwide work in agrifood systems. Nevertheless, women working for wages in agriculture earn approximately 82 cents for every dollar earned by men. Female-managed farms also produce approximately 24% less than male-managed farms of a similar size, largely because women have less access to land, credit, equipment, technology, training, and other productive resources rather than because they are less capable farmers (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2023).

These inequalities demonstrate why food sovereignty cannot be achieved simply by promoting local farming or opposing multinational corporations. A local food system can still reproduce patriarchal control, unequal land ownership, domestic violence, excessive workloads, and the exclusion of women from decision-making. Food sovereignty must therefore transform power relations inside households and communities as well as those operating in national and global markets.

The case of Afro-Colombian women in Sivorú, examined by Turner et al. (2022), provides an important illustration. Women's daily food-provisioning practices nourish households, preserve cultural knowledge, support social relationships, protect ecological diversity, and reduce dependence on external markets. Yet their work is frequently normalized and undervalued. This essay argues that gender justice is not an optional addition to food sovereignty. It is a necessary condition for creating democratic, culturally meaningful, and ecologically [sustainable food systems](#).

Understanding Food Sovereignty

La Vía Campesina introduced food sovereignty into international policy debates during the 1990s. The concept was later defined at the 2007 Nyéléni Forum as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food” and to determine their own agricultural and food systems (Nyéléni Forum, 2007, as cited in Turner et al., 2022, p. 405).

This definition contains several connected principles. People should have reliable access to nutritious food, but they should also have meaningful control over how that food is produced. Farmers and other food providers should be able to maintain dignified livelihoods. Agricultural methods should protect soils, water, seeds, biodiversity, and future generations. Food should reflect local histories and cultures rather than being reduced to standardized commodities.

Food sovereignty is different from food security. Food security generally exists when people have sufficient physical and economic access to safe and nutritious food. This objective is essential, but it does not necessarily address where the food comes from, who controls production, how workers are treated, or whether production harms local ecosystems.

A country may improve food availability through inexpensive imports while simultaneously weakening local agriculture. A community may technically have food in its markets, yet poorer households may lack the income needed to purchase it. A corporation may produce large quantities of food while paying workers poorly or displacing small-scale farmers. Food sovereignty asks who possesses power within these arrangements.

Patel (2012) argues that hunger is not always caused by an absolute shortage of food. It is also produced by unequal access, entitlement, and decision-making power. Food sovereignty therefore seeks to democratize the food system rather than concentrating authority in corporations, national elites, or distant markets.

Why Gender Relations Matter

Gender refers to socially constructed roles, responsibilities, expectations, and relationships associated with women, men, girls, and boys. These expectations shape who performs particular forms of work, who controls income, who owns land, who makes household decisions, and whose knowledge is considered valuable.

In many rural communities, men are more likely to be publicly recognized as farmers because they control commercially valuable crops, machinery, livestock, or land titles. Women may perform equally important work in household gardens, food processing, seed selection, water collection, cooking, caregiving, gathering, fishing, and local exchange. However, these activities are often described as assistance or domestic work rather than farming.

This distinction affects access to resources. Agricultural programs may invite the legally recognized male landowner to training sessions even when women perform much of the cultivation. Banks may require land ownership as security for loans, excluding women who farm land registered in a husband's or male relative's name. New machinery may be designed around men's body sizes and working patterns. Market cooperatives may be led by men even when women carry out much of the processing and selling.

Food-sovereignty movements have recognized gender equality in their public principles. Patel (2012) states that within a genuine food-sovereignty framework, "women's rights are non-negotiable." Yet declaring equality does not automatically transform daily relations. Formal participation may coexist with unequal speaking power, unpaid labor, and male control over property or income.

Park et al. (2015) challenge approaches that treat rural communities as unified groups with one common interest. Their argument that "we are not all the same" emphasizes that communities are shaped by gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, and other differences. A food policy may benefit landowners while disadvantaging landless laborers. It may strengthen the family farm while leaving male authority inside that family untouched.

Women's Hidden Work in Food Systems

Food provisioning includes all the activities through which people obtain and prepare the food needed to sustain households and communities. It may involve cultivation, fishing, gathering, purchasing, exchanging, processing, preserving, cooking, storing, and distributing food.

A narrow economic analysis usually gives the greatest attention to products sold in formal markets. Work performed for household consumption is less visible because it may not produce a wage or recorded financial transaction. Nevertheless, the household would have to purchase food or services if that labor were not performed.

For example, a woman who grows vegetables, collects shellfish, dries fish, preserves seeds, prepares meals, and cares for children contributes directly to household survival. Her work may reduce food expenses, improve dietary diversity, transmit knowledge, and maintain relationships of exchange with neighbors. Describing her only as economically inactive ignores the actual value she creates.

Women also carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care work. Cooking cannot be separated completely from childcare, elder care, cleaning, water collection, and care for ill relatives. Agricultural policies that increase women's farming responsibilities without reducing domestic workloads may unintentionally create greater exhaustion rather than empowerment.

Employment alone does not guarantee equality. Women may enter paid agricultural work while remaining responsible for nearly all household duties. Their total working day can therefore become longer than that of men. A gender-sensitive food system must consider the distribution of time as well

as income.

Recognizing women's labor should not romanticize overwork. Praising rural women as naturally self-sacrificing providers can reinforce the expectation that they should continue carrying unequal burdens without adequate rest, income, property, or political authority. Recognition must be accompanied by redistribution of work and resources.

Food Sovereignty in Sivirú

Turner et al. (2022) studied food provisioning in Sivirú, an Afro-Colombian coastal community in the Bajo Baudó municipality of Colombia's Chocó Department. Their research included 22 semistructured interviews involving 24 residents, a focus group with nine female mangrove-cockle harvesters, and participant observation in homes and during harvesting activities.

The researchers found that women's everyday activities were essential to the continued operation of the localized food system. Women cultivated food, harvested coastal resources, prepared and preserved products, maintained ecological knowledge, and supported relationships of exchange. These practices provided culturally valued food while reducing complete dependence on commercial markets.

The Sivirú food system was neither completely isolated from markets nor entirely self-sufficient. Commercial products entered the community, while locally produced goods were also sold outside it. This finding is important because food sovereignty does not necessarily require eliminating trade. It concerns the ability of communities to retain meaningful control over their food systems while interacting with markets on terms that do not destroy local livelihoods and practices.

Women's work supported what Turner et al. describe as the relative autonomy of the community. Household production and local exchange meant that survival did not depend exclusively on purchasing food from distant suppliers. These practices also maintained cultural tastes and cooking techniques that would be difficult to preserve through imported standardized products.

The women were not necessarily using the formal political language of food sovereignty. Nevertheless, their everyday activities embodied many of its principles. Turner et al. conclude that women's provisioning constituted "a distinct and powerful expression of food sovereignty" because it sustained the practical capacity of the local food system (2022, p. 404).

Mangrove Cockle Harvesting and Women's Knowledge

One important food-provisioning activity in coastal Afro-Colombian communities is mangrove cockle harvesting. This work requires knowledge of tides, mangrove environments, weather, species

behavior, suitable harvesting areas, and methods of protecting the resource.

Such ecological knowledge may be transmitted through generations of practical experience rather than through formal agricultural institutions. Women learn by accompanying relatives, observing the environment, testing techniques, and sharing information within the community.

The activity has nutritional, economic, cultural, and ecological dimensions. Cockles can contribute to household diets and may also be exchanged or sold. Harvesting spaces connect women to mangrove territories and reinforce social relationships among participants.

However, describing harvesting as a source of female independence does not mean that the activity occurs under ideal conditions. Women may face physical risks, low market prices, environmental degradation, limited equipment, and inadequate recognition of their knowledge. Their labor may sustain the food system while decision-making authority over land or coastal resources remains elsewhere.

A gender analysis must therefore examine both agency and constraint. Women can exercise knowledge, creativity, and authority through food provisioning while still being disadvantaged by wider economic and patriarchal structures. Empowerment and inequality may coexist in the same activity.

Food Preservation and Cultural Continuity

Food sovereignty also depends on knowledge of preparation and preservation. In Sivrú, fish has traditionally been preserved through methods such as salting, sun-drying, and smoking. These techniques extend the period during which food can be stored and create distinctive textures and flavors used in local dishes.

Women's labor in processing and cooking maintains more than household nutrition. It reproduces cultural memory. Recipes, preservation practices, ingredient combinations, and ideas about suitable foods connect people to family histories, territory, and collective identity.

Commercial food systems often undervalue this knowledge because it is difficult to measure through conventional market statistics. A packaged product sold in a supermarket generates a recorded transaction, while knowledge passed from an older woman to a younger relative may appear to have no economic value.

Yet the loss of such knowledge can increase dependence on externally produced food and weaken cultural diversity. Food sovereignty therefore requires the protection of culinary knowledge alongside land and seed rights.

Cultural preservation should not be used to confine women to traditional domestic roles. Women should have the right to maintain food traditions, change them, enter other forms of employment, and

share domestic responsibilities with men. Culture is not fixed, and respecting tradition does not justify denying individual choice.

Land Rights and Control of Resources

Access to land is one of the most important gender issues in food sovereignty. A person cannot exercise meaningful control over food production without secure access to land, water, forests, fisheries, seeds, and other resources.

Women frequently work on family or communal land without holding individual ownership rights. If a marriage ends or a male relative dies, a woman may lose access to the land she has cultivated for years. Customary inheritance practices may favor sons, brothers, or husbands.

Agarwal (2014) identifies an important contradiction in food-sovereignty discourse. The movement often celebrates the family farm while assuming that the family is a cooperative and equal unit. In reality, property, labor, income, and decision-making may be distributed unequally within the household. Strengthening the family farm without protecting women's individual rights can reinforce male control rather than promote justice.

Collective land rights can protect communities from dispossession and corporate land acquisition. However, collective ownership does not automatically guarantee women an equal voice in decisions. Women must be represented meaningfully in community councils, land-governance bodies, producer organizations, and negotiations with outside actors.

Secure land rights can improve women's bargaining power, investment decisions, access to credit, and ability to leave abusive relationships. Land policy should therefore recognize joint ownership, inheritance equality, collective rights, and women's direct participation in territorial governance.

Markets and Economic Recognition

Food sovereignty is sometimes presented as a rejection of markets. In practice, most rural households combine self-provisioning, informal exchange, wage work, and commercial sales. The question is not whether markets exist but how power and benefits are distributed within them.

Women may grow or process food but lose control when the product becomes commercially valuable. Men may manage sales, transport goods to larger markets, or control the income. This pattern allows women to provide labor without gaining proportional financial authority.

Market access can support women when it is accompanied by fair prices, safe transport, credit, storage facilities, childcare, and control over earnings. Cooperatives can increase bargaining power, but women must be able to hold leadership roles rather than being included only as laborers.

Public policy should also value nonmarket production. Household gardens, local seed exchange, community fishing, food preservation, and reciprocal sharing may provide important forms of security even when they generate little cash.

Turner et al. (2022) show that Sivorú's food system includes both market and nonmarket relationships. Women's practices help families navigate integration into the wider market economy without abandoning all local production. Their work demonstrates that autonomy is often relative rather than absolute.

Gender Blind Food Sovereignty

Food-sovereignty policies may fail when they treat the household or community as a single decision-making unit. A community's right to control its food system does not necessarily ensure that every member has an equal voice.

Local control can reproduce local inequalities. Male elders, landowners, political leaders, or heads of households may dominate decisions. Women may be encouraged to participate in production while being excluded from discussions about land, budgets, market contracts, or community development.

Gender-blind programs may also increase women's labor. An agroecology project may ask women to cultivate additional crops, attend training, maintain records, and participate in meetings without addressing their existing responsibilities for cooking, childcare, cleaning, and water collection.

Portman (2018) argues that gender justice must remain central to food sovereignty because agricultural systems are embedded within broader patriarchal relationships. Changing production techniques without changing those relationships will not produce genuine equality.

Gender-responsive programs acknowledge women's needs and attempt to include them. Gender-transformative programs go further by challenging the rules and expectations that create inequality. They may promote shared household labor, women's land rights, protection from violence, leadership opportunities, and men's participation in care work.

Food Sovereignty and Biodiversity

Local food systems are closely connected to biodiversity. Communities develop knowledge about plant varieties, fishing areas, medicinal species, soil conditions, seasons, and methods of conserving resources. This knowledge supports both food production and ecological resilience.

Pimbert and Borrini-Feyerabend (2019) describe Indigenous and community-conserved territories as territories of life. Their policy brief draws on cases from several regions to show how community governance can support food sovereignty while protecting forests, wetlands, grasslands, coastal

areas, and biodiversity.

Women often possess distinctive ecological knowledge because of their gendered responsibilities. A person who collects water, gathers medicinal plants, maintains household gardens, processes foods, or harvests shellfish observes particular environmental changes. This knowledge may differ from that of men who work with commercial crops, large livestock, offshore fishing, or wage labor.

These differences should not be treated as biological or universal. They result from gendered access, responsibilities, and experience. Women do not automatically possess greater environmental concern, and men do not naturally lack it. Knowledge develops through social practice.

Environmental policies should therefore consult different community members rather than assuming that one leader can represent all local knowledge. Women's participation can reveal information about household nutrition, wild foods, water access, seed diversity, and ecological change that may otherwise be overlooked.

La Vía Campesina and Feminist Food Sovereignty

La Vía Campesina has played a major role in developing food sovereignty as an international political project. It represents peasants, agricultural workers, rural women, Indigenous peoples, and small and medium-scale producers. The movement places local communities rather than corporations at the center of food-system decision-making.

Women's activism within peasant movements has helped expand the meaning of food sovereignty. Female members have challenged violence, unequal leadership, discrimination, and the treatment of women's labor as secondary.

Calvário et al. (2023) argue that women's activism has radicalized food sovereignty by giving it a clearer feminist dimension. This activism does not merely request women's inclusion within existing structures. It questions the patriarchal assumptions through which farming, leadership, ownership, family, and political authority are organized.

A feminist food-sovereignty movement recognizes that opposition to corporate agriculture is insufficient when women continue to experience inequality inside households and social movements. Transformative change must operate at several levels simultaneously.

Women should be able to define agricultural priorities, control resources, participate in organizations, receive fair income, live without violence, and make decisions about their own bodies and futures. Men should participate in domestic and care work rather than treating these duties as naturally female.

Building Gender Just Food Systems

A gender-just food-sovereignty policy should begin by recognizing women as farmers, fishers, gatherers, workers, processors, traders, knowledge holders, and political actors. This recognition must be reflected in law, budgets, data collection, and institutional practice.

Land and inheritance laws should protect women's ownership and use rights. Communal governance rules should ensure that women participate meaningfully in land and resource decisions. Legal rights must also be enforceable because formal equality has little value when women lack access to courts, documentation, or community support.

Agricultural credit and training should be available without requirements that indirectly exclude women. Programs should consider literacy, language, transport, childcare, and timing. Meetings scheduled without regard to domestic responsibilities may prevent participation even when women are formally invited.

Governments and organizations should collect data that distinguish between women and men while also considering age, ethnicity, income, disability, location, and other factors. Treating all women as one category can conceal major differences.

Labor-saving infrastructure can reduce excessive workloads. Reliable water, clean energy, childcare services, safe transport, appropriate machinery, and nearby healthcare can give women more time for education, leadership, paid work, or rest.

Women must have control over income rather than merely contributing labor to profitable activities. Cooperatives and market programs should include transparent payment systems and opportunities for female leadership.

Programs should also engage men and boys. Gender equality cannot be achieved by giving women additional responsibilities while leaving male behavior unchanged. Men should participate in cooking, childcare, household management, environmental protection, and efforts to prevent violence.

Conclusion

Food sovereignty seeks to transform the global food system by giving people greater authority over food production, distribution, and consumption. It promotes culturally appropriate food, ecological sustainability, dignified livelihoods, and democratic control of resources.

Gender relations shape every part of this objective. Women make essential contributions as farmers, fishers, gatherers, processors, cooks, caregivers, traders, and keepers of ecological knowledge. Yet their labor is often unpaid, poorly rewarded, or excluded from official definitions of productive work.

The experience of Afro-Colombian women in Sivirú demonstrates that food sovereignty is enacted not only through international declarations and political demonstrations but also through ordinary activities. Harvesting coastal foods, cultivating crops, preserving fish, preparing meals, sharing resources, and maintaining cultural knowledge allow households to retain a degree of autonomy within an expanding market economy.

These practices should be recognized, but they should not be romanticized. Women may exercise agency through food provisioning while simultaneously facing unequal land rights, excessive workloads, low incomes, and limited authority. Celebrating women's contribution without changing these conditions would preserve rather than challenge inequality.

The argument that gender should be approached through the idea that "we are all the same" is therefore mistaken. Equal human dignity does not mean that every person occupies the same social position or faces the same barriers. Gender justice requires recognition of unequal power and the different ways in which food systems affect women and men.

Food sovereignty can also reproduce injustice when it idealizes households, family farms, or communities as naturally equal. Local control is not automatically democratic control. Women must possess direct rights to land, water, seeds, income, knowledge, leadership, and personal security.

Gender justice and food sovereignty are mutually dependent. Food systems cannot be genuinely sovereign while half of the population lacks equal authority over the resources and decisions that sustain life. Similarly, gender equality cannot be achieved without transforming the systems through which food, labor, land, and ecological wealth are controlled.

A meaningful food-sovereignty movement must therefore challenge corporate concentration, environmental destruction, colonial dispossession, racial inequality, and patriarchy together. Only then can localized food systems nourish households while supporting dignity, autonomy, cultural continuity, and ecological resilience.

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