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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN FST

Why do women matter in food systems?

Women play a critical role across food systems by contributing to:



- Agricultural production and livestock management
- Management of natural resources such as land, water, and forests
- Food processing, storage, and preparation
- Household nutrition and food choices

Women are often key knowledge holders and managers within food systems, particularly at household and community levels.

However, much of their contribution remains informal, unpaid, or under-recognised.

What does women's empowerment mean in food systems?

Strengthening women's agency, access, and recognition across all stages of the food system, which includes:

- The ability to make meaningful decisions related to food production, income, and consumption
- Access to productive resources such as land, credit, inputs, and technology
- Recognition as farmers, workers, entrepreneurs, and leaders

Without decision-making power and control over outcomes, increased involvement can place additional burdens on women.

How women's empowerment operates across the food system?

Women's empowerment is relevant across multiple stages of the food system, as shown below:

Stage	How women participate?	What empowerment enables?
Production	Farming, livestock care, natural resource management	Access to inputs, land, knowledge, and decision-making
Processing/ value addition	Post-harvest handling, food processing, storage	Skills development, enterprise opportunities, income control
Marketing and distribution	Local markets, collective sales, informal trade	Market access, bargaining power, improved price realisation
Consumption and nutrition	Household food choices, care and feeding practices	Improved nutrition outcomes, agency in food decisions
Institutions and collectives	SHGs, FPOs, community organisations	Voice, leadership, and formal recognition

But ... women often face various barriers shaped by social norms, institutional arrangements, and market structures.



Limited access to land ownership and control over productive assets



Restricted access to formal credit and financial services



Inadequate access to extension services, training, and information



Heavy unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities



Limited representation in formal institutions and markets

In some cases, interventions that increase women's participation without addressing these constraints can unintentionally increase workloads without improving agency or benefits, highlighting the importance of thoughtful design.

Why is women's empowerment central to food systems transformation (FST)?

FST aims to improve nutrition, livelihoods, sustainability, and equity.

Improving household and community nutrition outcomes



Supporting diversified livelihoods and income security

Enhancing productivity and sustainability of food production

Empowerment is often achieved through collective organisation, enabling women to engage with institutions, markets, and services on more equitable terms.

Collective organisation can strengthen women's position within food systems

Platforms such as:

- **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**
- **Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs)**
- **Women-led collectives and cooperatives**

enable women to:



Collectives help convert participation into sustained empowerment by reducing individual risk, strengthening negotiation capacity, and creating supportive spaces for learning and leadership.

By strengthening collectives, FST efforts can achieve broader, more resilient, and longer-term impacts.

References

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