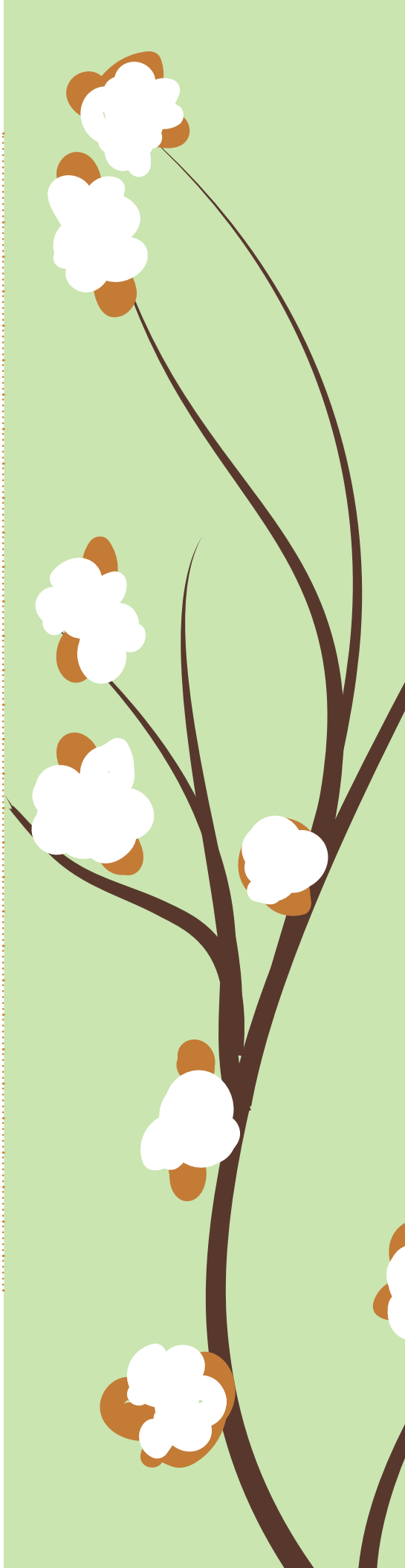
Invisible Food Producers

Women's Critical yet Hidden Role in Food Sovereignty

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development
2025

List of Abbreviations

DoF	Department of Fisheries under the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives in Thailand
ADB	Asian Development Bank
APC	Asian Peasant Coalition
APWLD	Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development
BIGWAS	Banana Industry Growers and Workers against Sumifru
CBF	Community Based Fisheries
CPOC	Cross-Programme Organising Comittee
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FTAs	Free Trade Agreements
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GM	Genetically Modified
IFI	International Financial Institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMUL	Inboard Multi-day Boats
IP	Intellectual Property
Kg	Kilogram
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NAFSO	National Fisheries Solidarity Movement
NBSB	Beach Seine Craft
NPFPU	Northern Province Fisher People's Union
OFRP	Out-board engine Fibreglass Reinforced Boats
PANAP	Pesticides Action Network Asia Pacific
PCFS	Peoples' Coalition on Food Sovereignty
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SDF	Sustainable Development Foundation
TRIPS	Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
UN FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
US	United States
WSRC	Women Studies and Resource Center
WTO	World Trade Organization



Introduction

Women have always been a crucial actor in food production—from saving seeds, keeping and breeding livestock, catching fish to protecting the forests—these are roles that rural women have long been doing in order to ensure food for the family and their communities. From preparation of inputs, propagation and breeding, production, harvesting, up to the marketing and distribution of food to consumers, women are present and play critical roles in each of these steps.

The contribution of rural women in agriculture is so immense that they can help turn the tide on hunger and poverty. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO) estimates that there would be 'up to 150 million fewer hungry people' if only women farmers have the same access to production resources as men, thereby significantly increasing agricultural output.[1]

With the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 came the rise of imperialist globalisation, triggering increased control over the food systems that have long nurtured rural communities, particularly in the Global South. Over time, food production has shifted from providing food to communities, to providing commodities to be sold in global markets. Actors in the production networks have also shifted from local entities to a host of other global actors and institutions including microfinance institutions and banks who, from miles away, control policies and finance that influence food production at very local levels.

Across Asia and the Pacific, current and emerging trends in food production are alarming. Despite its much-touted justification, globalisation and corporate control over food and agriculture are only causing further hunger and poverty, ironically among the food producers themselves. The ongoing economic, environmental, climate, public health and security crises expose the weaknesses of these systems as well as exacerbate their negative impacts on the livelihoods of food producers and people's access to food. Disruptions in local and global supply chains and uncertainties in food production caused by the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war between Ukraine and Russia, are pushing fuel and food prices up, while benefitting speculative investors that profit from food price volatilities at the expense of farmers and consumers. Heavily indebted countries are being pushed deeper into debt because of high food import bills. Together, these crises are resulting in widespread hunger, especially among poor families and food producers in the Global South whose local food production systems have been forced to reorganise for the global market. Women are most affected by debt, hunger and other effects of economic crises as they are more likely to be informally employed and doing more unpaid care work compared to men. Women food producers are particularly vulnerable because of structural barriers in accessing land, finance and other resources.

But people are fighting back. The rise of imperialist control over food systems is met with resistance from the ground and is being resounded at the regional and global level. Peasant movements and people's organisations such as La Via Campesina, Peoples' Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS), Asian Peasant Coalition (APC) and Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) are mobilising and organising against WTO. Together, they have intensified campaigns on the ground, not only opposing imperialist control but also advancing people's right to self-determination such as food sovereignty.

1 UN FAO. 2011. *The State of Food and Agriculture.* https://www.fao.org/4/i2050e/i2050e.pdf

What is Food Sovereignty?

The 2007 Nyeleni Forum defined food sovereignty as 'the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.

The People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS) further elaborated on the need for changes in social relations, including in production, through people's struggles when it described food sovereignty as: the 'power of people and communities to assert and realise the right to food and produce food and fight the power of corporations and other forces that destroy the people's food production systems and deny them food and life. The culmination of our struggle for food sovereignty is the actual or full realisation of people's democracy in all aspects of the food and agriculture systems including production and social relations, national policies and programmes.'

During the Convening on Feminist Food Sovereignty conducted by APWLD in 2022, participants highlighted that feminist food sovereignty not only recognises the role of women in the entire food production process but also recognises them as leaders in protecting and advancing traditional knowledge—in taking back land, other resources and food production processes and in promoting agroecology. Feminist food sovereignty aims to end patriarchal attitudes towards women as well as corporate power, both of which enable women's oppression and control of agriculture among the elite.

In 2022, APWLD held a Feminist Food Sovereignty Convening to determine emerging issues in agriculture, to learn from the food sovereignty movement and to build connections that will enable us to collectively address structural barriers and challenges in building feminist food sovereignty. Members and partners discussed the importance of documenting the role of women in food systems and strengthening feminist analysis on women's roles in food production networks and their struggles in promoting food sovereignty. [2]

APWLD, led by its members and partners through the Cross-Programme Organising Committee (CPOC), then initiated a multi-country rapid research in 2023 to further enrich APWLD and its allies' understanding of corporate capture in the food systems and its impact on the environment and food security and sovereignty of women and their communities in Asia and the Pacific, especially rural, indigenous and urban poor women.

During the Convening, the existing definition of Food Sovereignty was explained in detail to highlight what feminist food sovereignty means in theory and in practice.

Feminist food sovereignty puts emphasis on and recognises feminist leadership in the struggle against the colonial and corporate capture of food systems that extract huge profits from privatising the commons, violating human rights including women's rights and destroying the environment. This struggle involves community organising in securing local food systems, as well as fighting back against the patriarchal and neoliberal policies and institutions such as the FAO, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, WTO and other International Financial Institutions (IFIs) that enable the corporate capture of agriculture. Feminist food sovereignty also denounces the destruction of the environment and food systems on which communities rely on, often caused by extractive industries such as mining, deforestation and land conversion that lead to land-grabbing and community displacement. It promotes and supports alternative programmes and strategies that include advancing agroecology and traditional knowledge on agriculture and preserving these knowledge systems passing them on to the younger generations.

This paper brings together the results of the multi-country rapid research on women and food sovereignty conducted by APWLD members from Indonesia (SERUNI), Kyrgyzstan (JIPAR), Pakistan (Roots for Equity), the Philippines (Women Studies and Resource Center – Southern Mindanao), Sri Lanka (National Fisheries Solidarity Movement) and Thailand (Sustainable Development Foundation). They shared their national issues and analysis on various food production systems: fisheries and aquaculture, livestock and dairy and monocrop plantations. This synthesis intends to help in the capacity-building of APWLD members, partners and allies in resisting corporate capture and reclaiming food sovereignty.

2 Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2023.). *Unravel Neoliberal Trade: A failed solution to food sovereignty.* https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/UnravelNeoliberalTrade_APWLDFoodSovereignityBriefer.pdf

Multi-country rapid research: Our partners, themes and areas

SERUNI, a progressive women's organisation in Indonesia conducted their research on the role of women in palm oil agricultural production in the Kandis sub-district in Siak Municipality in Riau province.

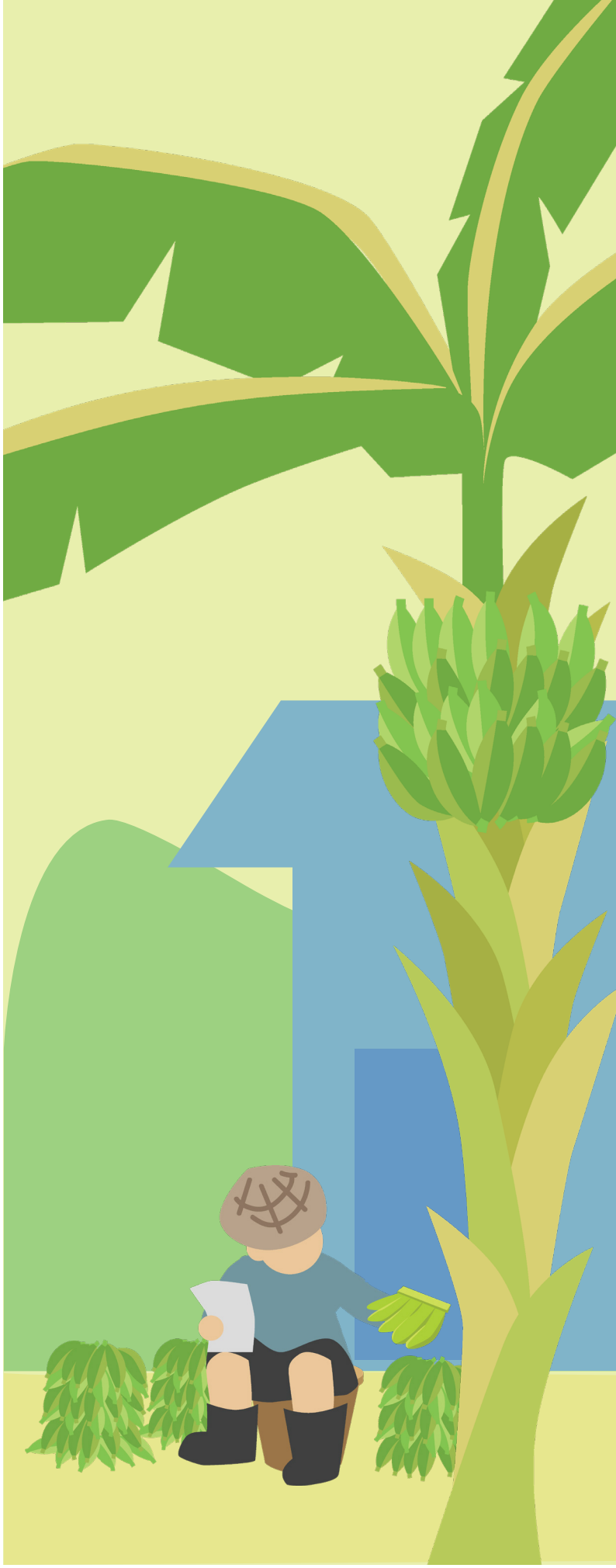
Women's public foundation '**JIPAR**', a women's organisation in Kyrgyzstan conducted their research on the role of women in agricultural networks of dairy production in Krasnaya Rechka in Chui region, a leading milk production area in the country.

Roots for Equity, a peoples' organisation in Pakistan conducted their research on women agricultural workers in cotton and sugarcane plantations in five villages in Khairpur, Sindh.

Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC) – Southern Mindanao, a research institution in Southern Philippines, conducted their research on women agricultural workers in banana plantations in the municipality of Compostela Valley in Davao de Oro province.

National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), a network of small-scale fishers in Sri Lanka, conducted their research on women fishers in four districts in the Northern Province, namely Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Mannar.

Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), a non-profit organisation working with grassroots communities in Thailand, conducted their research on small-scale fishers in Ban Don Bay in Surat Thani province.



Food production systems in Asia and the Pacific

With its diversity of natural and biological resources, favourable climate and vast agricultural lands, the Asia and the Pacific region is a significant actor in the global food production systems, with a production value of nearly 2.1 trillion USD.[3] Of the 1.2 billion people employed in the agricultural sector at the global level, the region employs more than 700 million people, most of which are smallholder farmers.[4, 5]

While rice is the main crop in the region, other important crops are cultivated including sugarcane, wheat, maize, tea and coffee. Rubber and palm oil are also grown in plantations, while various fruits and vegetables are among 'Asia's biggest agricultural export'.[6]

Agricultural production also encompasses the forestry and fisheries sectors, whose contribution to food production has also been widely recognised. Livestock agriculture also greatly contributes to essential food and nutrition needs of the people, with the production of meat, milk and eggs, as well as animal products such as wool and leather.[7]

Ironically, the people of Asia and the Pacific are experiencing hunger, malnutrition and poverty despite the agricultural richness of the region. FAO estimates that there are 370.7 million undernourished people, including vulnerable groups such as women and children, experiencing nutritional deficiency as they lack access to sufficient food and are unable to afford a consistent healthy diet.[8] The sector is also challenged by the declining productivity due to conflict; extreme weather events due to the climate crisis; shifting from subsistence, sustainable crop production to cash crops for exports; conversion of huge agricultural lands into other uses; environmental pollution and biodiversity loss. Land ownership and access to productive resources such as forests, fishing and grazing grounds remain a struggle among smallholder farmers and Indigenous Peoples. Worsening economic conditions are also driving food producers away from rural areas, seeking other opportunities in urban areas or even overseas. Along with elder farmers, women are usually the ones left in the communities, who, despite playing significant roles in the production, remain challenged by systemic barriers that impede their food sovereignty.

Across the different sectors or industries, the similarities among the women food producers in fisheries and aquaculture, dairy and livestock and monocrop plantations are glaring. Women's role in production systems are often overlooked and, in worse cases, invisible as the work that they do (such as mending nets, milking cows, etc.) are viewed as part of their care work and responsibility for the household. They are not given proper valuation and are thus often unpaid and rendered invisible in critical decision-making processes and in government statistics, worsening the neglect for their welfare and development. Neoliberal policies and practices that open the market and local labour force to private investments or exports are implemented in the name of national economic development. However, none of the women who shared their experiences have felt the positive change in their lives due to the intensified commercial and corporate food production.

The following section aims to understand the various agricultural sectors, determine the role of women in the production systems and expose the struggles and challenges that they are experiencing.

3 Ganbold, S. (27 February 2024). *Topic: Agriculture in the Asia-Pacific region. (2024, February 27). Statista.* https://www.statista.com/topics/11497/agriculture-in-the-asia-pacific-region/#topicOverview

4 United Nations Thailand. *(7 October 2024). FAO Asia-Pacific calls for urgent action to protect 'Right to Foods.'* [Press release] https://thailand.un.org/en/280756-fao-asia-pacific-calls-urgent-action-protect-%E2%80%98right-foods%E2%80%99

5 UN FAO. (2023). *Tracking progress on food and agriculture – SDG indicators 2023.* https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3a8baf8c-960d-4105-9538-e4bd9b1d4503/content/index.html

6 Ganbold, S. (27 February 2024). Topic: *Agriculture in the Asia-Pacific region.* (2024, February 27). Statista. https://www.statista.com/topics/11497/agriculture-in-the-asia-pacific-region/#topicOverview

7 National Academy of Sciences. (2003). *Air Emissions From Animal Feeding Operations.* https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/10586/chapter/4

8 FAO. (2023, December 11). FAO report: In 2023, in *Asia-Pacific millions of people have been unable to afford a healthy diet – women fare worse than men.* https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/fao-report--in-2023--in-asia-pacific-millions-of-people-have-been-unable-to-afford-a-healthy-diet---women-fare-worse-than-men/en#:~:text=The%20latest%20statistics%20indicate%20that,than%20men%20being%20food%20insecure

Fisheries and aquaculture: Is it worth the catch?

For a significant number of people around the globe, fisheries and aquaculture is a source of food and nutrition, as well as livelihood and local economy development. According to FAO, the total fisheries and aquaculture production reached a record of 214 million tonnes in 2020, comprising 178 million tonnes of aquatic animals and 36 million tonnes of algae, largely due to the growth of aquaculture, particularly in Asia.[9]

Majority (84 per cent) of the fishers and fish farmers are in Asia, while data for Oceania (which includes Pacific island nations and territories, Australia and New Zealand) indicates less than one per cent of the population engaging in the fisheries and aquaculture industry.[10] Overall, the fisheries and aquaculture sector employs an estimated 58.5 million people as full-time or part-time workers in the primary production sector, with more than 49 million coming from Asia and around 400,000 from Oceania. Women comprise 21 per cent of the labour force, but the number increases to 50 per cent[11] when accounting for the entire value chain—from pre- to post-harvest processes. Despite playing significant roles in the sector, women are often engaged in 'the informal, lowest paid, least stable and less skilled segments of the workforce'[12] and often subjected to gender-based restraints.

9 Food and Agriculture Organisation. (2022). *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022. Towards Blue Transformation.* FAO Knowledge Repository. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0461en

10 Food and Agriculture Organisation. (2022). *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022. Towards Blue Transformation.* FAO Knowledge Repository. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0461en

11 Food and Agriculture Organisation. (2022). *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022. Towards Blue Transformation.* FAO Knowledge Repository. https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0461en

12 Food and Agriculture Organisation. (2022). *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022. Towards Blue Transformation. FAO Knowledge Repository.* https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0461en

Thailand fisheries and aquaculture sector

Thailand is one of the top fish-producing nations in the world, ranking 15th in world capture fisheries and 10th in world aquaculture production in 2019. The national fishery production is generally composed of around 60 per cent from capture fisheries and around 40 per cent from aquaculture.[13] In 2019, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from fisheries was less than one per cent and the fish available for consumption was 29.50 kilogram (kg) per capita. The Department of Fisheries (DoF) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives is responsible for the promotion of the Thai fishing industry while ensuring the sustainability of aquaculture and capture fisheries.

The Ban Don Bay in Surat Thani province is among the most productive coastal areas in southern Thailand. It is an important aquatic ecosystem that serves as a natural spawning, nursery and feeding ground for many shellfish such as oysters, blood cockles, green mussels, short-necked clams, mud crabs, shrimp and other fish, thus making it an excellent area for shellfish aquaculture.[14] By virtue of a Cabinet Resolution in 2009, Ban Don Bay is recognised as among Thailand's international and national water of importance.

Prior to the introduction of various economic programmes in the 1960s, natural resources from both coastal and inland ecosystems were easily accessed and were areas where communities fished for subsistence. In the mangrove forests, aquatic species such as crabs, shellfish, shrimps and fish thrive. Fishers used homemade gear such as bamboo fish traps, harpoons and nets for catching food for household consumption and sharing with the community. People used local and traditional systems to sustainably manage the resources, such as using bamboo stakes to demarcate their boundaries and community responsibility was widely observed. The resources were openly shared even with those from other communities, such as gardeners or northerners and paddy farmers, putting into practice the 'friend from mountain-paddy farm-sea' system,[15] until forest concessions and commercial aquaculture were introduced and implemented.[16]

13 Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center. (2022). *The Southeast Asian State of Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022. SEAFDEC Institutional Repository.* https://repository.seafdec.org/handle/20.500.12066/6752

14 Sawusdee, A. (2010). *Fishing Status and Management Proposal in Ban Don Bay, Suratthani Province, Thailand. Walailak Journal of Science and Technology. ResearchGate.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268380949_Fishing_Status_and_Management_Proposal_in_Bandon_Bay_Suratthani_Province_Thailand

15 This concept highlights the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the importance of diversified livelihoods for fishing communities. It emphasises that sustainable fishing practices need to consider not only the marine environment but also the surrounding landscapes and the diverse activities of the community. This holistic approach is crucial for both food sovereignty and the overall well-being of coastal communities.

16 Suanthong, P. & Thinbangtieo, O. (2019). *The political ecology of the coastal resources management in Ban Don Bay, Surat Thani Province. Burapha Journal of political economy, 7(2), 101-102 (in Thai).* https://so01.tci-thaijo.org/index.PHP/pegbuu/article/view/238106

Subsequent development projects led by the DoF, with loans from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in the 1960s, paved the way for the privatisation of fisheries resources. This consequently subdued and repressed local resistance against the restrictions from among local fishers and farmers. From the late 1980s to early 2000s, further economic expansion took place increasing commercial aquaculture ventures, including shrimp and shellfish cultivation, in coastal regions. The most noticeable modification was the commercial cultivation of tiger prawns. During 1993–2002, both local and non-local investors rented or purchased more land for shrimp cultivation. Their main objective was for domestic and international sales.[17]

The livelihood and occupation of small-scale fishers in Ban Don Bay, Thailand are currently in a critical situation because of external pressures such as the expansion of the shellfish farming areas. Majority of fishers who live in coastal areas are unable to access common resources as in the past, thus reducing the livelihood area in the sea by as much as 59 per cent. Local fishers, particularly small-scale fishers and women fishers who make a livelihood in shallow coastal waters, are unable to engage in local fishing because shellfish farming sites occupy all public areas. In certain areas, shellfish farming sites have even been illegally expanded into canals and areas where shellfish are not naturally grown or cultivated.

The unchecked expansion of commercial shellfish farming has resulted in a significant conflict between shellfish farmers (usually brought in by the companies) and local small-scale fishers. Expanding the area for shellfish cultivation to the entire area of Ban Don Bay obstructs navigation and is considered illegal according to the law of the Marine Department as it encroaches on the waterways in public places, not to mention the fishing grounds of the local fisherfolk. During Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with women fishers from the Ban Don Bay area conducted by the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), participants expressed their worries with security threats as shellfish operators are brandishing weapons to deter the local fisherfolk who might get close to the shellfish farms.

Moreover, mollusks, particularly cockles, are harvested by the clam dredge method[18] which affects and destroys marine ecosystems. The rising of tides cause the subsoil in the sea to spread, transporting these sediments into the mangrove forest. Aquatic larvae inhabiting the mangrove region are unable to grow and thus, die in significant numbers. In the same vein, sea grass, which is food for marine animals, is also damaged.

'We need to change careers or find more jobs. Some fishers' families went to work as construction labourers or as general contractors or to engage in agriculture. Fishers who use nets would quit fishing if they couldn't go fishing in an area where mussels could be cultivated. Some of the women were employed to unpack crabs from the manufacturers, looking for mussels along the coast in order to work in a city factory. Some fishermen left the community to find work, such as working in palm plantations. It all depends on who can find work.
- Women fishers in Ban Don Bay, Surat Thani, during an FGD

17 Suanthong, P. & Thinbangtieo, O. (2019). *The political ecology of the coastal resources management in Ban Don Bay, Surat Thani Province. Burapha Journal of political economy*, 7(2), 101-102 (in Thai). https://so01.tci-thaijo.org/index.PHP/pegbuu/article/view/238106

18 Clam dredging method is one way to harvest clams using dredges that are towed across the seabed. Dredging tools and implements range from the simplest ones like bamboo or wood and iron bars, but large-scale dredges are operated from boats. Dredging can have significant ecological impact by disturbing habitats, damaging parental stock or catching pre-juvenile clams that will affect the stock population in the area.

Sri Lanka fisheries and aquaculture sector

In Sri Lanka, the agriculture and fisheries sectors contribute significantly to the national food production. Sri Lanka has a 1,610 km long coastline consisting of beaches, lagoons, estuaries, marshes, bays, islets and coasts which contribute to the fisheries. Its rich mangrove forests, coral reefs and seaweed varieties serve as feeding and breeding grounds that are critical to biodiversity. Small-scale fishers comprise the majority of the fishing industry in the country where 80 per cent of the fisher population engage in and contribute to 65 per cent of fish production of the country. Small-scale fishers fish for subsistence and local consumption.

The fisheries sector in Sri Lanka employs around one million people as active fishers and support services in coastal, deep sea and inland and aquaculture subsectors. While small-scale fishers make up the majority of the labour force who engage in the various processes of production, the fishing industry in Sri Lanka 'has always been dominated by the private sector' who have the necessary resources that can finance and support large fishing boats and post-harvest facilities.[19]

19 Food and Agriculture Organisation. (2006). *Fishery Country Profile - Sri Lanka.* https://www.fao.org/fishery/docs/DOCUMENT/fcp/en/FI_CP_LK.pdf

Although the sector's contribution to the country's GDP is pegged at 1.3 per cent annually, its contribution to the nutritional and economic needs of the people are significant. More than half of the animal protein intake comes from fisheries and the sector provides livelihoods to more than 1.5 million people or about 7.5 per cent of the total population.[20]

The aquaculture industry in Sri Lanka has been growing since the 1980s, but in the Northern Province it is still in its infancy. The province offers some of the best sites for the development of high-value aquaculture products for export. Cultivation of sea cucumbers and seaweed, crab fattening and sea bass farming are currently being piloted in the province with support from the private sector.

A number of events greatly impacted the growing fisheries and aquaculture industry.

The 26-year civil war that started in 1983 and was fought on ethnic lines between the Sri Lankan government and rebel group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), killed around 100,000 and displaced 800,000 people. It is said to have 'set development back by decades'.[21] While most of the internally displaced people were resettled by 2012, more than 7,000 families are still waiting to return to their original lands.[22] With their husbands, fathers, brothers and other men in the family lost to the civil war, a considerable number of households (more than 60,000 of almost 380,000 affected families) are now headed by women.[23]

Further, on 26 December 2004, a deadly tsunami hit two-thirds of the island's coastline, affecting almost 80 per cent of the active fishers and destroying more than 75 per cent of the fishing fleet.[24] The tsunami also damaged critical harbours, landing sites, facilities and many other resources from both private and public operators.

The damage of these two crises to the fishing industry is immeasurable and nearly caused the end for the industry. Fish catch drastically dropped, which further devastated the local and national economy. Post-conflict, fisheries production has steadily increased but is nowhere near pre-conflict figures.[25]

20 Food and Agriculture Organisation. (2006). *Fishery Country Profile - Sri Lanka.* https://www.fao.org/fishery/docs/DOCUMENT/fcp/en/FI_CP_LK.pdf

21 AlJazeera. (2023, July 27). *What are Black July massacres that triggered Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war?.* https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/27/what-are-black-july-massacres-that-triggered-sri-lankas-26-year-civil-war

22 Asian Development Bank (ADB). (n.d.). *Northern Province Sustainable Fisheries Development Project (PDA).* https://www.adb.org/projects/49325-003/main

23 Asian Development Bank (ADB). (n.d.). *Northern Province Sustainable Fisheries Development Project (PDA).* https://www.adb.org/projects/49325-003/main

24 FAO. (2006). *Fishery Country Profile - Sri Lanka.* https://www.fao.org/fishery/docs/DOCUMENT/fcp/en/FI_CP_LK.pdf

25 Asian Development Bank (ADB). (n.d.). *Northern Province Sustainable Fisheries Development Project (PDA).* https://www.adb.org/projects/49325-003/main

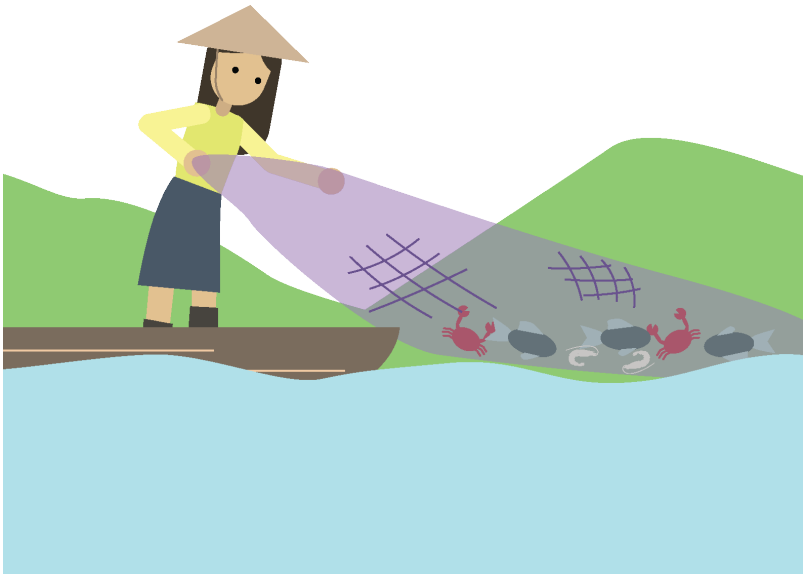
According to Soosai Anandan, Advisor to the Northern Province Fisher People's Union (NPFPU) in Sri Lanka, the Northern Province fishers contributed 40 per cent of local fish production in the country before the civil war began.[26] Almost 30 years of internal conflict, the tsunami in 2004 and multiple civilian displacements over the years have crippled the economy and disrupted livelihoods in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Poverty, destitution, hunger and malnutrition has become widespread in the war-torn country. The impact of militarism in the area persisted, with the coastal land, marine waters, agricultural lands and mangrove forests remaining under military occupation in the name of national security. The military occupation and operations have also contributed to the displacement of farmers and fishers, driving them to live in camps without any economic opportunities for their survival. The fishing equipment, fishing gear, coasts used for docking boats, post-harvest practices and other sources of daily income were totally lost or destroyed.[27] The women in the fishing families are the worst affected. Their breadwinners in the family either lost their lives, disappeared or were detained in the name of security.

How does one rebuild a nation ravaged by internal wars and a declining economy? Unfortunately, the neoliberal policies and trade liberalisation that the country adopted further exacerbated the situation of small-scale food producers. Policies that opened up and flooded the domestic market with imported food only served to displace local products. What was traditionally a subsistence way of fishing became geared towards competition with imported products and any assistance provided to small-scale food producers through government extension services were limited to the chemical inputs that farmers and fishers are persuaded to use in their production. The advent of trade liberalisation policies allowed for the wide-scale conversion of coastal areas into aquaculture farms, which used chemicals and other inputs such as hormones to grow prawns for export to Europe, Japan and United States (US) markets.

The country in particular saw an outpouring of Chinese investments, both from the public and private sectors. In the fisheries industry, sea cucumber and sea leech farming have massively expanded in the coastal areas, the extent of which has driven about 3,200 small-scale fishing families from their source of livelihoods. Large-scale commercial sea cucumber farming spanning 5,000 acres in the Northern and Eastern provinces shut out traditional fishers and damaged the marine ecosystem with their large nets trawling the shallow sea waters affecting the marine habitats. This prevents the breeding of fish, crabs and prawns thus posing a serious threat to the long term sustainability of the sector in this region.

The national economic crisis worsened the situation of women, particularly in the fisheries industry. Small-scale fisher women selling fish, working in postharvest practices, catching prawns and crabs in lagoons and shallow seas have lost their livelihoods as they are unable to access resources or afford the necessary production materials and equipment. Fishing grounds that used to be accessible for women fishers have been sold off or leased to private investors to establish large-scale commercial fish farms. The high cost of fishing equipment, including fuel for motorised boats and kerosene for lighting has meant that women fishers are unable to compete. This also meant that for fishing families, it is the woman who bears the burden to generate additional financing either for the fishing activities or when food becomes scarce in the household.

The diminishing marine resources, restrictive policies, the lack of appropriate support from the state and high costs of fish production in the case of Sri Lanka, leave fishers no choice but to seek alternative sources of income and economic activities in order to fend for their families.



26 Anandan, S., (2023, September 1). Key informant interview during the NPFPU Annual General Meeting in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

27 Joseph, F. (2023,September 1). *Sharing of Francis Joseph, the Cooperative Society federation leader in Kilinochchi district during the NPFPU Annual General Meeting in Jaffna , Sri Lanka.* Key informant interview.

Women's role in the fisheries and aquaculture sector

There are several stages in the fishery value chain, from the producer to the consumer.

Women play various roles in production, processing, marketing and management of fish and other aquatic resources, but they are mostly categorised as small-scale fishers. In small-scale fisheries systems, men are primarily responsible for managing the vessels and heavy-duty fishing equipment while majority of women's responsibilities are pre-departure and post-return and management of harvests such as crabs, fish, shrimp and shellfish, removing nets, selling, processing, cooking, repairing loops, cleaning tools and fixing nets among others. Pre-departure, women are mobilised to prepare the necessary funds and resources from food to expenses for fuel, spare parts, engines, nets and other basic needs. At the harvesting stage, fishers directly work in the sea, lagoon or inland waters, utilising either a single day fishing vessel (mechanised or non-mechanised) or multi-day fishing vessels, or in the case of women fishers, they harvest or catch fish using their hands or simple implements. Once the small fishing vessels return to the anchorage point, the women help to collect, select, grade and sell the fish from the net. Fish selling, management of daily earnings, savings and loan payments, post-harvest production and processing of fish and food sales are tasks borne by the women.

Despite the critical roles of women in the fish value chain, their contributions are overlooked and unrecognised. Performing what are often unpaid tasks render them 'invisible' and unaccounted for in relevant fisheries management plans and fisheries statistics.[29] Most of the work that women do in the fisheries production system, such as net repair, is seen as part of their household duties. Their contributions in fish value chains and agricultural activities in general, are not proportionate to the benefits they get. This mainly emanates from deep-rooted gender inequalities in social, cultural and economic factors, which unfortunately are part of norms in largely patriarchal societies.[30]

The pre-harvest, harvest to post harvest cycle in the fish value chain are highlighted in Figure 1.

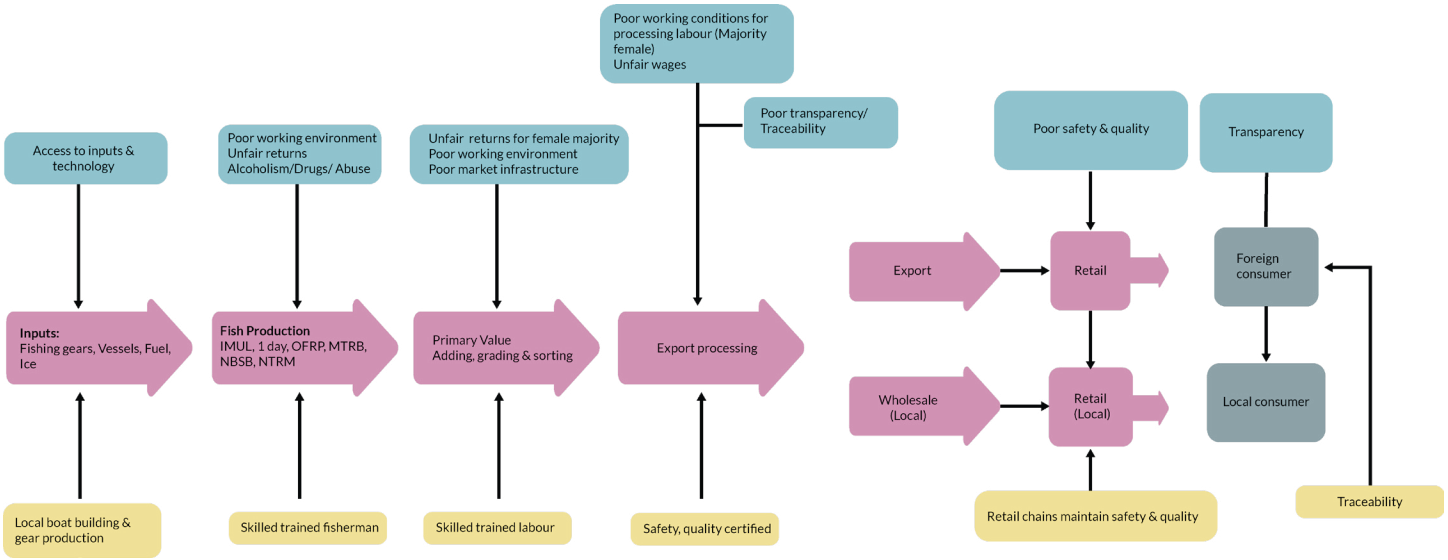


Figure 1: The different stages of fish production from catch to consumers. [28]

28 Achini D., De Silva M. & Kularathne, M.G. (2020). Fair and sustainable fish and seafood value chain: A case of Sri Lanka. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363844649_Fishing_for_Life_2022_South_and_South-East_Asian_Conference_on_Small_Scale_Fisheries_and_Aquaculture_BOOK_OF_ABSTRACTS_Sri_Lanka_Forum_for_Small_Scale_Fisheries_SLFSSF

29 Ameyaw, A.B., Breckwoldt, A., Reuter, H. & Aheto, D.W. (2020). From fish to cash: Analyzing the role of women in fisheries in the western region of Ghana. Marine Policy, Volume 113. ScienceDirect. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.103790

30 Omeje J. E., Achike A. I., Sule A. M., Arene C. J. (2021). Gender Roles and Economic Differentials in Aquaculture of Kainji Lake Basin, Nigeria. *Research on World Agricultural Economy*, Volume 2 Issue 2. doi: 10.36956/rwae.v2i2.353

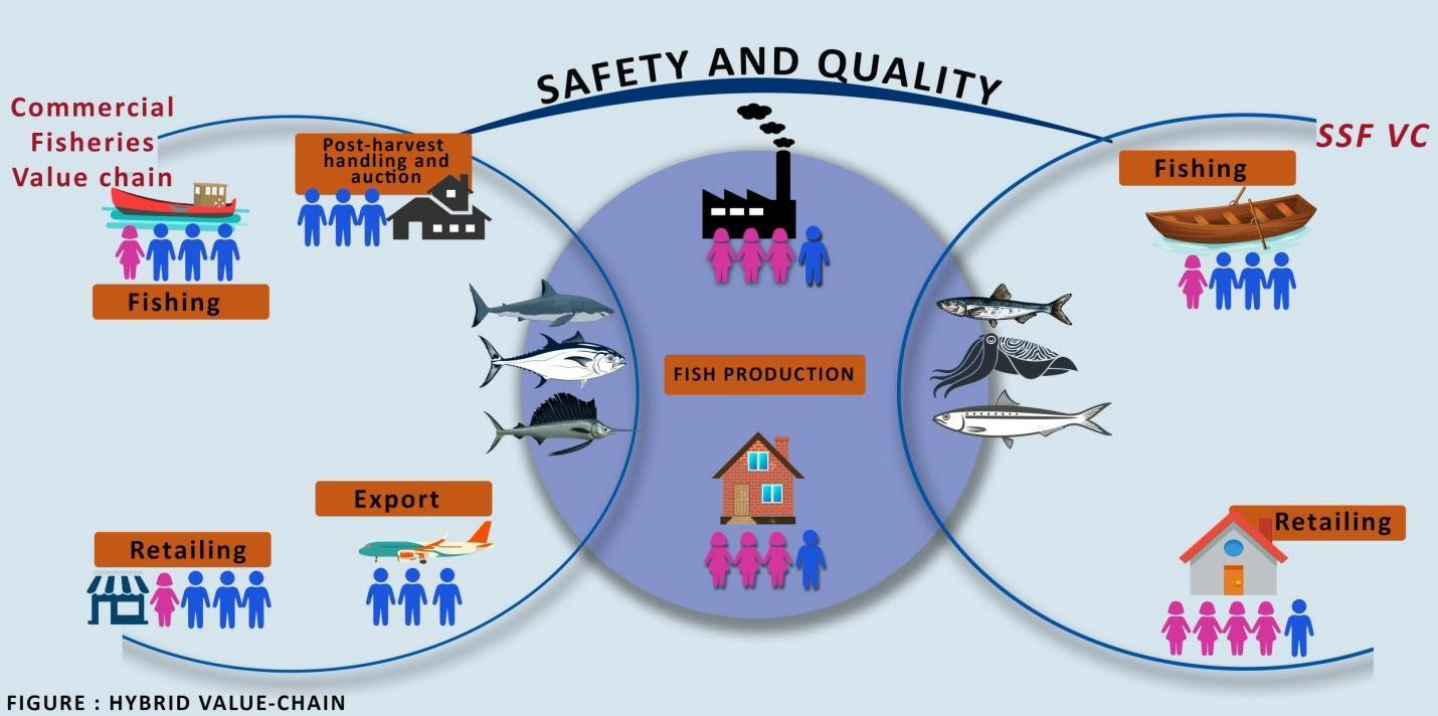
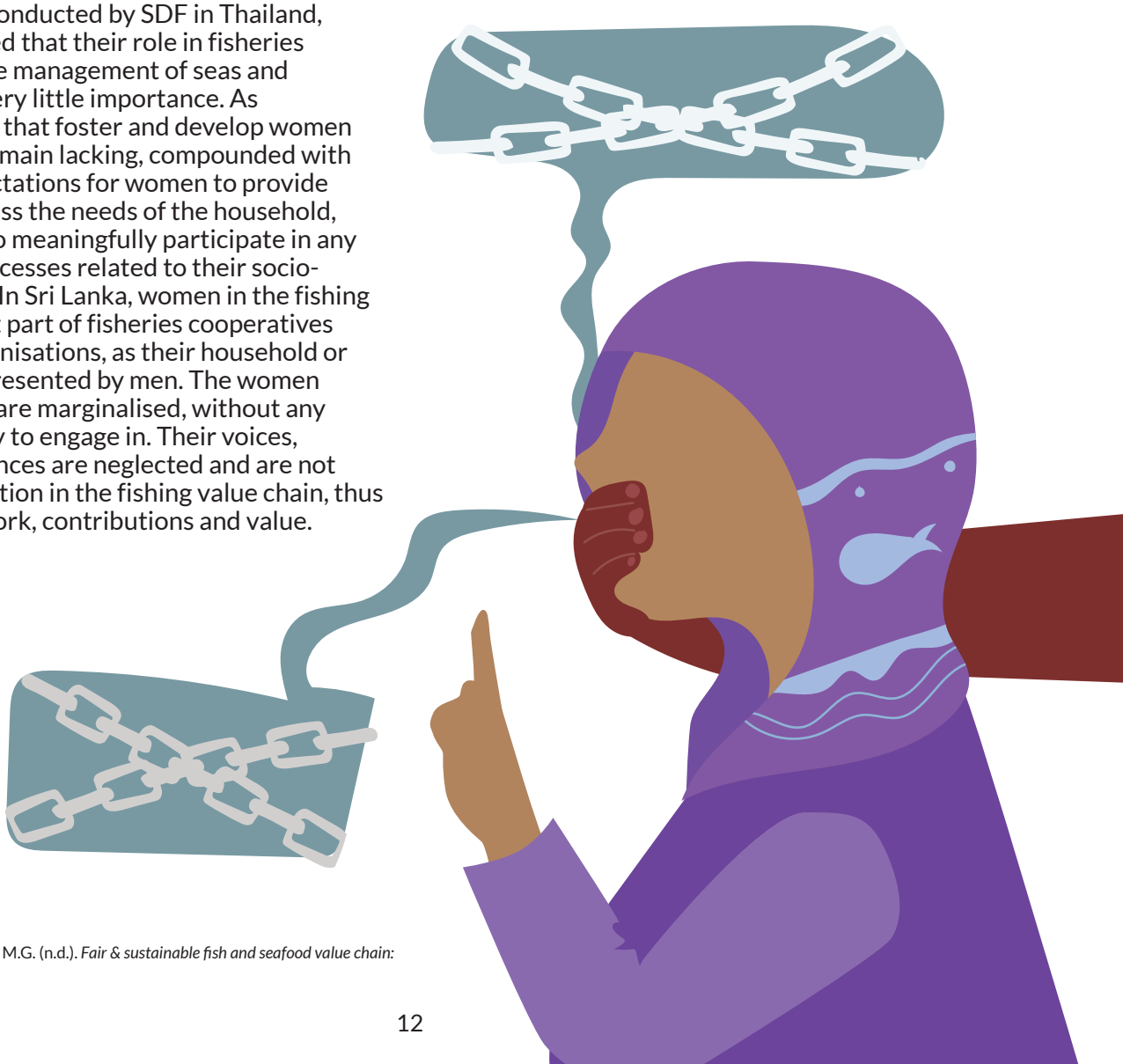


Figure 2: Gender distribution in hybrid fishery value chain[31]

Through the FGDs conducted by SDF in Thailand, the women expressed that their role in fisheries management and the management of seas and coastlines is given very little importance. As government policies that foster and develop women fishers' capacities remain lacking, compounded with the traditional expectations for women to provide care work and address the needs of the household, women are unable to meaningfully participate in any decision-making processes related to their socio-economic activities. In Sri Lanka, women in the fishing communities are not part of fisheries cooperatives or other similar organisations, as their household or family are often represented by men. The women fishers in the family are marginalised, without any space or opportunity to engage in. Their voices, demands and grievances are neglected and are not taken into consideration in the fishing value chain, thus invisibilising their work, contributions and value.



31 De Silva, A.M. & Kularathne, M.G. (n.d.). *Fair & sustainable fish and seafood value chain: A case of Sri Lanka.*

Livestock and dairy sector: Potential for local products

Milk and dairy products have traditionally been a vital component of families' diets at the community level and dairy production serves as an important source of income for rural communities. Milk is collected daily and on average, each family sells up to 30 litres of milk per day (assuming they have three to five cows). More often, however, they are left with little or no milk for their family's consumption after the marketing of their own produce.

Livestock and dairy sector in Kyrgyzstan

The dairy sector in agricultural production is considered the largest in Kyrgyzstan's food industry, according to the National Statistical Committee's estimates. The country is reported to have produced dairy products valued at 12 billion soms (about 135 million USD) in 2022.[32] There is a high demand for dairy products both in the domestic market, as well as from bordering countries. Kyrgyzstan supplies dairy products to the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), particularly to Kazakhstan and Russia. The EAEU currently includes five countries: Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that have all signed the Customs Code.[33] This Code aims to standardise the quality of goods and establishes a unified procedure for the movement of goods across EAEU borders. It also mandates the import customs duty rate which is 15 per cent of the customs value, either in euros or US dollars.

Having healthy and adaptable breeds of milking cows is crucial to ensuring a high quantity and quality of milk from local dairy production. Through FGDs, 16 women milk producers shared more insights and experience in dairy production. For example, they shared that local cow breeds such as the Aulieatinska breed are less prone to infections, digestive issues and other diseases. Another common cow breed is the Alatau breed, a local dairy breed highly suitable for machine milking. Livestock farmers are able to save money on veterinary services and can expect better production and income since local breeds have a better chance of living longer and remaining productive for an extended period.

On average, women in the community keep one to five cows on their farms, depending on the availability of resources for their upkeep. In the village of Krasnaya Rechka, one family produces an average of around 3,000 litres of milk from one cow per year. However, experts suggest that by adhering to all requirements for feeding and care, the quantity of milk produced could double. The space required is a minimum of 10 square meters per cow and sufficient feed must be prepared for the winter and spring periods.

Favourable climate is also crucial in milking and dairy production. Milk yields decrease during the winter, lasting only for two to three months. In the spring and summer, milk yields are higher due to the more favourable weather. In 2021, the country's milk and dairy products supply reached 100.27 per cent. However, there was a shortage of raw milk come winter due to the rising cost of feed—an effect caused by the drought that happened that year leading to a price increase during the period. Currently, the country remains highly vulnerable to the climate crisis, with the scale and frequency of climate-related disasters such as extreme heatwaves, droughts and floods having increased by 150 per cent.[34]

Equipment for storage as well as ensuring hygiene, such as refrigerators, are necessary to achieve the quality and shelf-life of the dairy products. Cows are milked twice daily, in the morning and evening, yielding an average of six to 10 litres per day. The milk is then filtered, cooled and sold to intermediaries. The average purchase price for one litre of milk is 32 soms (0.36 USD) and intermediaries visit the villages every morning to collect the milk.

Women dairy farmers from Kyrgyzstan shared during the FGDs that they find it convenient to sell their milk to intermediaries, especially if they do not wish to deal with the complexities of organising and managing milk deliveries to the factories. In some cases, when the factory stops its milk intake (due to tardy deliveries), intermediaries can utilise their networks and contacts to sell the milk to another facility. Delivering milk to the factories involves adhering to specific technical and legal standards, which women may not be able to meet on their own. Thus, it is easier for them to work with intermediaries who possess the necessary infrastructure and knowledge.

Additionally, large dairy companies prefer to work with milk collectors or intermediaries rather than work with women directly because of practical reasons—they need large volumes of milk which small-scale dairy producers are unable to meet, making it an unprofitable scheme for the companies.

32 Women's public foundation "Jipar". (2023). *The role of women in the community of Krasnaya Rechka in the agricultural networks of dairy production and Their Struggle for Food Sovereignty* [Unpublished]

33 *Treaty on the Customs Code of the Eurasian Economic Union*, opened for signature on 11 April 2017, Customs Code of the EAEU (entered into force 1 January 2018). https://eec.eaeunion.org/upload/medialibrary/9dd/Customs-Code-of-the-EAEU.pdf

34 Government of Kyrgyz Republic. (2023, January 10). *On amendments to the Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic dated January 29, 2018 No. 58 "On the Concept of Comprehensive Protection of the Population and Territory of the Kyrgyz Republic from Emergency Situations for 2018-2030"*. Center for Emergency Management and Disaster Risk Reduction. https://cesdrr.org/uploads/2023-news/2/%D0%9F%D0%9E%D0%A1%D0%A2%D0%90%D0%9D%D0%90%D0%92%D0%9B%D0%95%D0%9D%D0%98%D0%95.pdf

The domestic market is favourable for locally produced dairy products, which includes milk, kefir, sour cream, cottage cheese, yogurt and butter. However, small-scale producers, especially women dairy farmers, are unable to produce sufficient volumes to meet the local demand as they receive little support from the state to improve their production, such as access to land,storage facilities, good cow breeds among others.

'Unfortunately, the productivity of cows is generally low due to insufficiently good breeding and feeding practices. Women note that they cannot produce an adequate amount of fodder, forage and animal feed primarily due to the lack of arable land, a shortage of quality seeds and mechanisation services, as well as a strong dependence on natural pastures. The feed for cows mainly consists of low-quality hay and no supplementation is provided with plant residues of grains, wheat, sugar beets, corn and legumes.'

- N. Zhyrgalbaev, Head of the milk co-operative in Chui region, Kyrgyzstan.

For instance, the state programme for financing the agricultural dairy cluster called 'Agricultural Financing-11' requires farmers to provide a full package of documents to two banks. The dairy business applying for the financing programme must be registered at least six months prior. On top of these, the interest rates of the lending institutions are high—nine per cent per annum in Kyrgyz soms and five per cent in US dollars. These conditions are only suitable for large dairy farms, not for small-scale farms. Difficulties in accessing financing support pose hindrances in the development of dairy production and the ability of women with small farms to achieve a sustainable income.

Women's role in livestock and dairy production

In rural agriculture, men's tasks typically include building and repairing cattle pens, vaccinating, working in the fields, caring for and feeding cows and calves. Men are also responsible for driving animals to distant pastures. On the other hand, women often engage in milking, processing raw milk to produce cheese, cottage cheese and other dairy products for their families and the local market. They are also responsible for sterilising, filtering, cooling, preserving and storing milk and its products. Women take care of the feeding and health of the cows, as well as maintaining the cleanliness of livestock premises. Women milk cows manually without milking machines, two to three times a day, which is very hard work for women's hands and health, especially in the winter time.

Growing animal feed: Feed is grown on farmers' fields or purchased from other farmers. The feed base may include hay, silage, grain and other feed.

Feeding and animal care: Providing a comfortable environment for dairy cows includes proper diet, light, ventilation and access to water. This is especially important during spring and summer time when cows feed on pastures resulting in more milk yields for the community. Cows must receive sufficient feed and water to maintain their health and it is important that they receive regular vitamins and vaccinations.

Milking cows: Milk is usually collected from cows in the morning and evening. Most poor women milk by hand while rich families use milking machines.

Family milk storage: Milk is cooled to preserve its freshness and quality and to prevent the growth of bacteria and other microorganisms. Chilled milk is stored in special containers and placed in refrigerators. During storage, milk should be protected from light and other external factors that can affect its quality. It is more difficult to preserve the quality of milk during the hot season.

Transportation: Should the farming family decide to sell the milk to a factory, it must be taken quickly or in a short period of time so that it does not sour. Similarly, if the family wants to sell the milk in the local markets, they need to leave early and sell it while it is still fresh (sellers need to have special documents confirming the quality of milk).

Kyrgyzstan remains a largely patriarchal society where women are still discriminated against and are unable to participate in crucial decision-making processes, particularly in agricultural production. They cannot make decisions on how many cows to keep, how and what to feed the cows, where and to whom to sell milk and dairy products—all of these decisions are made by men in their households. Women's double burden of participating in production systems while balancing care work at home is starkly observed in the rural communities in Kyrgyzstan where women spend 1.3 times more time on domestic work compared with their urban counterparts.[35]

Despite the domestic demand for locally-produced dairy products, small-scale dairy producers face tough competition from imported products, usually from Russia and Kazakhstan who have also penetrated the markets. International corporations and large local dairy companies apply modern technologies and innovations in milk production and processing, allowing them to produce more volume. Women dairy farmers are unable to beat the low cost of diluted, pasteurised milk from large-scale factories.

Corporations introduce foreign investments in the dairy sector that are inaccessible to small women's farms, resulting in no job creation or improvement in the living standards of local producers. Neoliberal trade policies created dependency among local milk producers on imported materials and technologies, affecting their independence and sustainability.

As a member of the WTO and EAEU, Kyrgyzstan is party to various multilateral and bilateral trade agreements, adopting a 'liberal trade regime'.[36] Kyrgyz food producers depend on neighbouring countries for vital production resources such as fuel and grains, which in turn are essential inputs for livestock and dairy production. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when fuel costs for dairy production equipment and machineries shot up and livestock fodder such as hay and alfalfa prices increased by 50-100 per cent, it was the small-scale farmers, especially women farmers, who suffered from income losses because they were unable to sell their products due to border closures and mobility restrictions.[37]

35 National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic and UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia. (2023). *Statistical Digest: Sustainable Development Goals and Gender in the Kyrgyz Republic.* UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia. https://eca.unwomen.org/ru/digital-library/publications/2023/03/statisticheskiy-sbornik-celi-v-oblasti-ustoychivogo-razvitiya-i-gender-v-kyrgyzskoy-respublike

36 Esenaliev, D. & Asylbek kyzy, G. (2017, June 16). Eurasian Economic Union policies and practice in Kyrgyzstan. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2017/eurasian-economic-union-policies-and-practice-kyrgyzstan

37 Junussova, M., Mogilevskii, R., Maulsharif, M., Macchioni Giaquinto, A., Mane, E., Enikeeva, Z., Ianova, M., Niiazaliev, B. & Chalbasova, S. (2024). Gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food security, agricultural production, income and family relations in rural areas of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. UN FAO. https://doi.org/10.4060/cd0401en

Plantations—a legacy of colonialism

Corporate-controlled global agriculture production has its roots in the colonial era. Western colonialism extracted resources and labour from the colonised countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific through controlling their socio-political and economic systems. The colonised countries' food systems were reoriented away from meeting local needs and shifted more towards producing for the consumption and trading of colonisers. The British, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and French colonisers, for example, grabbed lands in Asia to build plantations of sugar cane, coconut, tea, cotton, rubber, tobacco and spices among others to be shipped out and traded. Colonialism transformed local food systems into zoned monocrop plantations which prepared them for the current global industrial production system.

The Sakai People of Indonesia

The Sakai People in Indonesia were the first settlers to inhabit Kandis and establish settlements where they lived in forests and cultivated local crops. They built high houses, planted rice and *mengalo* (Poison Yam), hunted animals and fish in the river, collected various types of rattan, resin and *geliga* and practiced rich Indigenous knowledge systems such as traditional medicine called *bediki*. Like other communal societies, they live in kinship groups led by their tribal leaders, with their own laws and structure according to the needs of their communal society. Although men make up the majority of the tribe, women and men work together equally, means of production are jointly owned, the produce are shared and women are also able to actively participate in decision-making processes in the community.

Palm oil plantations in Indonesia

In Indonesia, the legacy of Dutch colonisation remained, enabled by neoliberal policies and national laws that allow foreign corporations and local ruling elites to occupy and control massive tracts of land. Private companies such as PT Ivomas Tunggal have been granted with state concessions and built large-scale monocrop palm oil plantations for export, often displacing Indigenous Peoples that have long been existing and thriving in these lands.

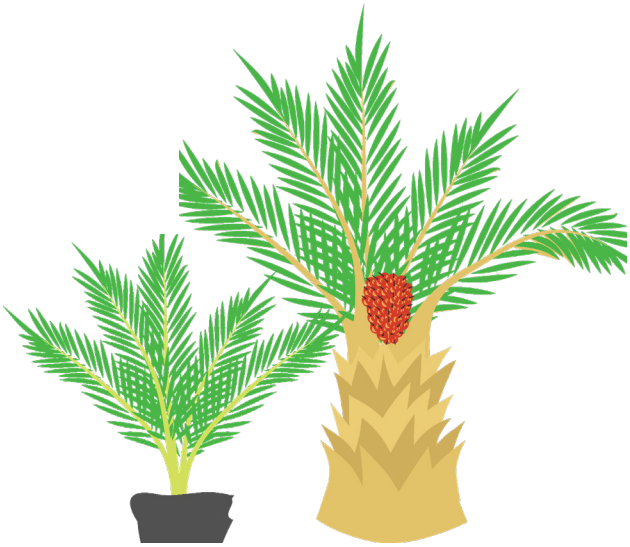
For generations, the Sakai people suffered from oppression—first by the Siak Feudal Sultanate, then the Dutch and Japanese colonisers who attempted to conquer them and then by the Suharto regime—all of whom coveted their lands and natural resources. In the 1970s, the Suharto government began to grant concessions to companies such as PT Ivomas Tunggal, which included the ancestral lands of the Sakai people. Land ownership was transferred without any compensation and consent from the communities. Gradually, the area where they lived began to be surrounded by the development of large plantations. The resistance movement of the Sakai people and other communities affected by the palm oil plantations persist until today and women are among those in the forefront fighting for their rights to land and food.

The situation in the PT Ivomas Tunggal area reflects the challenges faced by various classes and sectors, all of whom are significantly impacted by the chronic economic, social and political crises. The worsening issues on land access have forced the majority of peasants and other community members to sell their labour to different landowners, including large, medium, small and wealthy farmers. People in Kandis continue to suffer from hunger and poverty due to the limited wages, lack of job security and safe working conditions and threats to health that they experience working as agricultural workers in plantations.

Kandis

Not much is written or even researched about Kandis, the sub-district in Siak Regency in Riau Province in Indonesia. Various historical records show, however, that Kandis had been an entity of a kingdom of a fairly vast, powerful and respected ancient empire. The Sakai people—said to be descended from the Minangkabau peoples—were the first settlers to inhabit the area. Nowadays, Kandis has become a site for large-scale monocropped palm oil plantations that has displaced the traditional and indigenous ways of its agricultural production. While the farmers and workers in Kandis face tremendous oppression for hundreds for years, the resistance of the Sakai people today remains as fierce as their ancestors from before.[38]

38 Serikat Perempuan Indonesia (SERUNI). (2023). *The role of women in the palm oil agricultural production and their struggle for food sovereignty.* [Unpublished].



Women's role in palm oil plantations

Women workers in palm oil plantations can be found in various stages of production. Their work is physically demanding, such as weeding and pruning and picking fruits during harvesting. Additionally, some women also do administrative work such as record-keeping, financial management and general administration.

Historically, women were able to work equally with men, enjoying the same access and benefits from production. In plantations, however, colonisers implemented job segregation that reinforced patriarchal norms. While the tasks that women plantation workers take on are part of the crucial production process such as planting, cultivation, maintenance and harvesting, these are often low-paying and are considered less skilled positions. Men, on the other hand, often hold supervisory roles that are higher-paying. Gender disparities are also apparent in the lack of occupational safety for women workers who do not have access to appropriate protective gear which are necessary especially during pesticides and fertiliser application. Workplace facilities and conditions in the plantations are not conducive to women. There are no adequate healthcare support services, menstrual leave and toilets or proper hygiene and sanitation facilities, forcing women workers to hold their urination or bowel movements until they can go home. These conditions result in various infections causing formation of kidney stones and other reproductive health issues for the women plantation workers.

In many instances, women workers also bring their children to work, usually because they do not have someone to mind them at home. However, there are also times when they would have the children do menial tasks on the plantation. This raises concerns over child labour, as well as the inadvertent exposure to harmful chemicals.

Health impact of pesticides to women plantation workers

Pesticides Action Network Asia Pacific (PANAP) lists the number of ways that pesticides impact women farmers and agricultural workers:

- Pesticides are potentially toxic to fetuses of pregnant women and to breastfeeding mothers;
- Various studies show that pesticides in the environment can cause congenital abnormalities in newborns and or increase risks for stillbirths and autism; and
- Chronic exposure to pesticides and harmful chemicals can disrupt endocrine systems and has been linked to increased breast cancer risks.

Despite these life-threatening risks, women workers in plantations are often left uneducated and lacking access to opportunities to build their awareness on and reduce the risk of the harmful use of pesticides and chemicals in plantation work. Even if the women are not spraying or directly applying the pesticides, their exposure is inevitable as they are the ones handling and mixing the chemicals or washing the containers and the clothes that were used during the application.[39]

39 Pesticides Action Network Asia Pacific (PANAP). (2016, December 31). *PANAP Submission on the UN SR on Right to Food*. https://panap.net/2016/12/panap-submission-to-the-un-sr-on-the-right-to-food/

Aside from the physical and economic challenges, women plantation workers also face sexual harassment, discrimination and absence of protection from violence against women in the workplace. For instance, women who request for menstrual leave are subjected to invasive examinations by midwives in the healthcare centre. Anybody who refuses to undergo these examinations are threatened with job termination or non-renewal of contracts. Incidents of such harassments often go unreported due to fear of reprisals, perpetuating a culture of silence and impunity.

Among the most critical challenges that women workers face is persisting landlessness. Only a handful of farmers have access to sufficient agricultural land, while others have very limited land or none at all. This forces the majority of peasants and other members of the community to work as labourers to big landowners or private entities in the area. The unbridled expansion of monocropped plantations in communities such as Kandis means encroaching on indigenous lands and ancestral domains of peoples such as the Sakai.

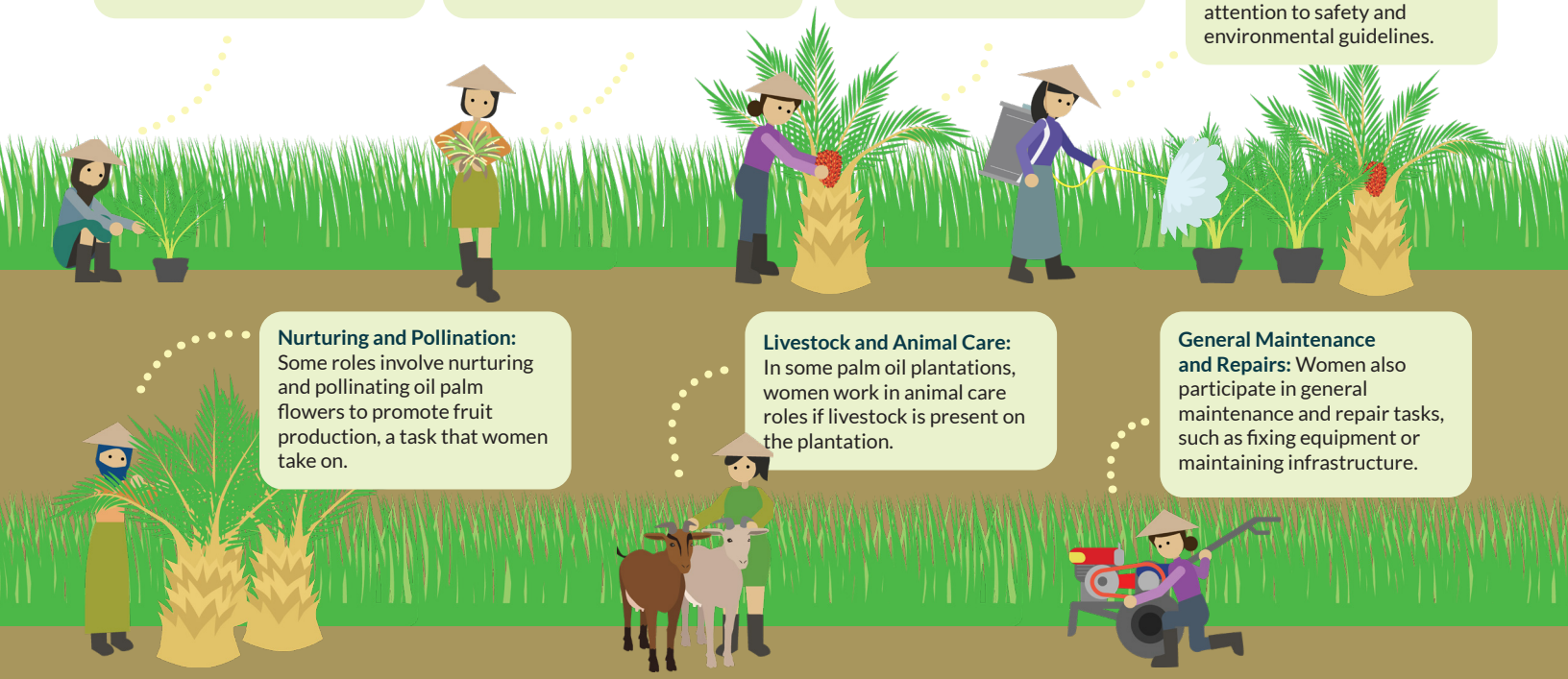
Women are found/concentrated in the maintenance division of the palm oil production networks aside from administration and finance departments. The roles do women fulfill in these division are:

Nursery Workers: In the nursery division, women are responsible for the early stages of oil palm cultivation, including planting and nurturing young palm plants.

Weeding and Pruning: Women are involved in ensuring the healthy growth of oil palm trees. This includes removing competing vegetation and maintaining the plantation's cleanliness.

Harvesting: Harvesting ripe oil palm fruit bunches is a physically demanding task that women participate in, either as fruit pickers or as part of the harvesting team.

Pesticide and Fertiliser Application: Women apply pesticides and fertilisers to ensure the health and productivity of the oil palm trees. This work requires attention to safety and environmental guidelines.



Nurturing and Pollination: Some roles involve nurturing and pollinating oil palm flowers to promote fruit production, a task that women take on.

Livestock and Animal Care: In some palm oil plantations, women work in animal care roles if livestock is present on the plantation.

General Maintenance and Repairs: Women also participate in general maintenance and repair tasks, such as fixing equipment or maintaining infrastructure.

In administrative and finance departments, women can take on various roles, including administrative assistants, accountants, clerks and finance managers among others. These roles typically involve tasks related to record-keeping, financial management and general administration to support the operations of the palm oil plantation.

Banana plantations in the Philippines

Indonesia's neighbour, the Philippines, faces a similar situation, with a sizable area of its agricultural lands being converted into large-scale monocrop plantations of bananas, pineapples, palm oil and maize among others. Different varieties of bananas are being cultivated all across the country, but the majority of bananas for export are produced in Mindanao island in southern Philippines.[40]

In 2018, Mindanao in the southern Philippines generated 84 per cent of the bananas exported from the country.[41] Davao Region is among the top three performing regions in the Philippines, with Davao De Oro province consistently contributing to the region's net exports—so much so that the province itself is considering engaging bilaterally in Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) to tap export markets for their local products.[42] But while Davao de Oro was ranked by the Commission on Audit as the wealthiest province in Mindanao in 2021 with a record of PHP 23.21 billion (USD 395 million) in assets, the poverty incidence among its population was estimated at to be 23.9 per cent or roughly 24 out of 100 individuals.

The Philippines' membership to the WTO and its adherence to other trade and investment agreements has led to the country's unilateral liberalisation and deregulation contributing to increased producer efficiency and exports. However, the protection of essential food commodities by the government remains in place resulting in high domestic food prices. Rising food prices, limited job opportunities and low minimum wages have contributed to the pressures faced by women, who are often driven to seek better opportunities in urban areas or even overseas as migrant workers.

Women's role in banana plantations

Over 70 per cent of workers in the banana packing plants are women, owing to the requirement of 'nimble' fingers needed in handling and processing banana fruits and the perception that women are therefore best suited for these roles.[43] Agricultural women workers play diverse and essential roles in the agricultural production network, contributing significantly to various aspects of crop cultivation, harvesting, processing and marketing.

40 Tridge. (2021). *2021 Industry Report: Philippine Banana.* https://cdn.tridge.com/market_report_report/37/7f/dd/377fdd1678694ea8e9f-b15793736a7087b18b60f/2021_Industry_Report_-_Philippine_Banana.pdf

41 Tridge. (2021). *2021 Industry Report: Philippine Banana.* https://cdn.tridge.com/market_report_report/37/7f/dd/377fdd1678694ea8e9f-b15793736a7087b18b60f/2021_Industry_Report_-_Philippine_Banana.pdf

42 Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC). (2023). Rapid Research On Food Sovereignty: Perspectives Of Women Banana Plantation Workers In Compostela, Davao De Oro. [Unpublished].

43 Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC). (2023). Rapid Research On Food Sovereignty: Perspectives Of Women Banana Plantation Workers In Compostela, Davao De Oro. [Unpublished].

Women's role in banana plantations in the Philippines[44]

WSRC conducted a total of five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews among 75 women workers in banana plantations in Davao de Oro where the women workers described their various tasks and responsibilities:

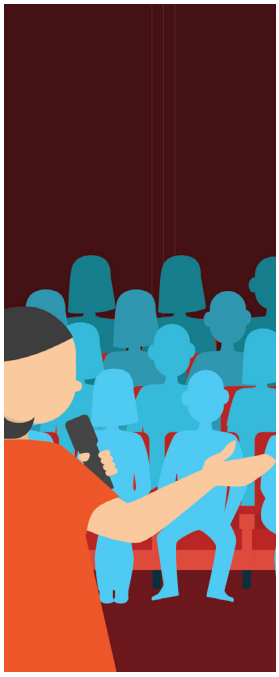
Field Operations: Women agricultural workers

are actively involved in field operations, including planting, weeding, watering and harvesting crops. They perform these tasks with skill and diligence, often working alongside male counterparts to ensure the successful cultivation of crops.

Post-Harvest Processing:

After banana bunches are harvested, women are also involved in post-harvest processing activities such as cleaning, sorting, grading and packing. They play a crucial role in ensuring that crops meet quality standards and are prepared for distribution and sale.

Marketing and Sales: Informal women agricultural workers are involved in marketing and sales activities, selling produce at local markets or roadside stalls. Women often lack the power to negotiate prices, but they interact with customers and are able to eke out income from their produce to be used for their daily consumption.



Community Leadership and Advocacy: Many women agricultural workers also play leadership roles within their communities, serving as representatives in women's groups, faith-based organisations or community organisations. They advocate for the human rights and interests of agricultural workers, promote sustainable agricultural practices and mobilise resources for community development initiatives. The majority of women in the banana packing plants also provide emerging opportunities for women's political and economic empowerment in agricultural production.

Household Food Security: Beyond their roles in agricultural production, women also play a critical role in ensuring household food security. They often manage household food production, including home gardens and small-scale livestock rearing to supplement family diets and improve nutrition outcomes. The women raise hogs, vegetables like mung beans and corn. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the women workers set up and nurtured a communal garden to address food poverty experienced by many workers' families.

While women play a crucial role in agricultural production, their contributions are often undervalued. They face numerous barriers that limit their full participation and empowerment within the agricultural sector. Women agricultural workers receive very low wages, which are not sufficient to cover their basic needs, including food. After long hours of work and being constantly exposed to agrochemicals, women banana plantation workers only earn an average of PHP 365 or around USD 7 a day. Their condition is relatively better than women workers in the informal sector within the industry whose work is seasonal, on-demand and of lower remuneration. Still, the paltry USD 7 a day earned by women banana plantation workers is not enough to support a family of five who needs at least PHP 1,178 (USD 20) daily to live adequately.[45]

44 Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC). (2023). *Rapid Research On Food Sovereignty: Perspectives Of Women Banana Plantation Workers In Compostela, Davao De Oro*. [Unpublished].

45 Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC). (2023). *Rapid Research On Food Sovereignty: Perspectives Of Women Banana Plantation Workers In Compostela, Davao De Oro*. [Unpublished].

Perhaps the biggest irony in being an agricultural worker is the experience of being 'food-poor'. Women workers listed maize, vegetables, noodles and dried fish as their go-to meal daily which does not give them balanced nutrition. Many of the women cannot afford to eat three meals a day, as they prioritise their children's food consumption instead of their own.

'Mas maayo pa 'to sa una lagi, kay ang among yuta, matamnan og mais, gulay, klase-klaseng mga lagutmon, mao nga dili ra gyud pud mi magutom. Sa una kani akoang luna mais ug humay man among tanom diri. Pero lagi kay niabot ang mga korporasyon, kini lagi'ng rentahan kuno ang yuta, patarbahoon ang mga anak, mao nga gi-lease ni among yuta. Karon, wa na gani trabaho, wa pa gyu'y makaon.' - Maria Dela Cruz,[46] banana plantation worker

('It was much better before because our land used to be planted with maize, vegetables, all sorts of crops, so we never really went hungry. Before, my land, this land, was planted with maize and rice. But when the corporations arrived, they wanted to rent our land, give us money, jobs in the packing plants for our children, so we leased our land. Now, there are no jobs, and we still don't have enough to eat.')

Another challenge that women agricultural workers face is the constant and prolonged exposure to chemicals used in banana plantations. Their tasks in the production such as harvesting, sorting and packing expose the workers to harmful amounts of chemical pesticides which greatly increase the risk of adverse health effects, including respiratory problems, skin irritation, reproductive disorders and increased risk of cancer. Pesticide drifts and runoffs can also contaminate the surrounding environment and neighbouring communities, exposing the residents, including women, children and other vulnerable populations, to contaminated water sources, air and food.

46 Due to security concerns, the woman worker asked not to use her real name.

Fighting against pesticides

To address Moko disease or bacterial wilt, corporations such as Sumifru use formalin and rice hulls to eradicate the virus. Hazardous substances like Lannate and Actara insecticides are administered into banana blossoms. In fruit processing, women labourers utilise significant quantities of chlorine, alum and Banket 25SC to meet Sumifru's quality requirements. Exposure to chemicals become more widespread across communities with the practice of aerial pesticide spraying which banana plantations continue to utilise due to its convenience and efficiency in dispensing the chemicals. Given that the communities are located within these plantations, residents are subjected to both ground and aerial spraying.

In 2016, workers in seven packing plants under BIGWAS (Banana Industry Growers and Workers against Sumifru) filed a petition addressed to Sumifru President Paul Cuyegkeng, citing among others, 'The continued use of the post-harvest pesticide Omega in the packing plants which has poisoned workers and the non-provision of adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to handle such toxic chemical'. The workers campaigned against the Omega chemical—which was categorised as blacklisted by Greenpeace for its harmful effects.[47] However, Sumifru nevertheless continued to use it in their products bound for China, Russia, South Korea, Middle East and New Zealand products.

47 Kilusang Mayo Uno - Southern Mindanao. (2017). *ComVal Banana Workers Protest Chemical Poisoning*. https://kmudavao.wordpress.com/2017/11/20/comval-banana-workers-protest-chemical-poisoning/

Monocropping in Mindanao dominates agricultural landscapes and imposes uniformity so that all one can see are acres of banana fields. By prioritising the cultivation of a single crop over diverse farming practices, monocropping disregards the ecological and cultural diversity of the land and increases the risks for crop infestation and diseases. Monocropped plantations have displaced traditional farming methods and local varieties in favor of crops demanded by global markets, reflecting a form of cultural and economic imperialism. Additionally, monocropping systems rely heavily on external inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides, often controlled by large corporations, further consolidating power and control over agricultural production. In the context of the Philippines' banana industry, this practice has marginalised small-scale banana farmers and perpetuated economic dependency on multinational corporations, echoing patterns of imperialism.

Cotton and sugarcane production in Pakistan

An agricultural country, more than half of Pakistan's population can be found in the rural areas with 47 per cent of the labour force engaging in agriculture production. Despite this, the majority of the peasants remain poor and landless as land ownership is concentrated among the few ruling elites. For instance in Sindh, a province in Southeastern Pakistan and the research area of Roots for Equity for this study, 60 per cent of farmers had one to five acres of land. At the national level, more than half or 55 per cent of the land is owned by 89 per cent of small farmers, and the remaining 45 per cent is controlled by just 11 per cent of rich landlords and feudal families. Of the small farmers, 64 per cent own less than five acres of land. Only two per cent of Pakistani rural women have sole ownership of land.[48] Without land, farmers are forced to seek employment as agricultural workers or sharecroppers.[49]

The domination of the feudal landlords in land ownership is compounded by the dictates of neoliberal policies that introduced the agrochemical production system and created crippling dependence on high yielding and hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers, pesticides and mechanisation. In Pakistan, Green Revolution programmes were introduced in the 1960s, which was the first induction of modern-day capitalist-driven agriculture policies and practices. With the creation of WTO, trade liberalisation in agriculture has intensified sharply.

Pakistan is a founding member of WTO and has altered its seed legislation in accordance with the Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) agreement. The government has passed the Seed (Amendment) Act in 2015, and the Plant Breeders Rights Act in 2016 allowing the use and commercialisation of Genetically Modified (GM) seeds in the country. The GM cotton seeds were first introduced without legal cover in the early 2000s. These wiped out the conventional seeds and, over time, have resulted in very poor harvest yields. The GM cotton seeds are not able to withstand the high temperatures that have now become more frequent as the impact of the climate crisis worsens.

Pakistan also has a high debt burden and has a long history of relying on the IMF bailout plans. In the past couple of years, the country has come very close to bankruptcy and default. The weak economic situation of the country means that it has to follow the dictates of capitalist lending institutions, especially IMF and the World Bank, like many of the developing countries in Asia and the Pacific region. Part of this dependency comes from pursuing economic policies that promote external dependencies in industrial and agricultural production systems which invariably result in a negative trade balance. The IMF conditionalities also further accelerate neoliberal policies that demand deregulation, privatisation and trade liberalisation.

Cotton is an ancient crop with its traces going back as far as 5,000 BCE in areas in Balochistan, Pakistan. It is often referred to as Silver Gold. Its raw material is used in the textile industry which has the highest foreign exchange earnings.

'Cotton crop has 0.8 per cent share in GDP and contributes 5.2 per cent in agriculture value addition. Cotton has 51 per cent share in total foreign exchange earnings of the country.'[50]

Cotton is cultivated on an area of six million acres, or 15 per cent of the cultivated area in the country. Almost all, or 'over 90 per cent of cotton' is produced by 1.3 to 1.5 million small farmers cultivating in less than five hectares of land and an estimated 1.3 to 1.5 million farmers grow cotton.'[51]

Similarly, the textile industry provides employment to millions of workers in the country. According to the Pakistan Statistical Bureau, it employs 40 per cent of the industrial labour force and 'textiles products have maintained an average share of about 61.24 per cent in national exports.'[52]

48 Roots for Equity. (November 2019). *The Unholy Marriage between Corporate Control and Land Grabbing: Impacts on the Lives of Rural Women*. [Unpublished].

49 Often a landless male farmer who works on a landlord's land. He is provided a certain amount of land which could be from four to 16 acres depending on the landlord. Sharecroppers earn a fixed share (one-half, one-third or one-fourth) of the total land's produce but in turn he also has to bear his share of the total cost of production based on the final land share. The sharecropper is responsible for the labour on the entire piece of land for which he has been contracted by the landlord.

50 Ayub Agricultural Research Institute. (n.d.). *Cotton*. https://aari.punjab.gov.pk/crop_varieties_cotton

52 USDA Foreign Agriculture Service & Global Agriculture Information Network (GAIN). (2021). *Cotton and Products Annual*. USDA FAS. https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/api/Report/DownloadReportByFileName?fileName=Cotton%20and%20Products%20Annual_Islamabad_Pakistan_04-01-2021

53 Government of Pakistan, Finance Division. (2022). *Pakistan Economic Survey 2021-22*. https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_22/Economic%20Survey%202021-22.pdf

Under WTO, the TRIPS agreement is responsible for an array of new legislation controlling the seed sector such as the Seed (Amendment) Act of 2015 and the Plant Breeders Rights Act of 2016. This has allowed the introduction of GM cotton seeds in the early 2000s which has been a key reason for the decline in cotton production. Currently, 95 per cent of the cotton production is based on first-generation GM cotton seeds which are mostly sourced from outside of Pakistan. Weak Intellectual Property (IP) laws that can safeguard IP rights of multinational corporations do not provide a conducive environment for the corporations to bring in the second and third generation GM cotton seeds in the country, which are supposedly more hardy than the first-generation GM cotton seeds.

The widespread promotion and use of GM cotton seeds has led to the genetic erosion of local seed varieties which are arguably more resilient. GM seeds, having only developed to thrive under ideal farming conditions, succumb to changes in climate that Pakistan is already facing. The cotton growing areas are more prone to floods which have become more frequent and intense due to the climate crisis. This has been one of the reasons for the shift from cotton to sugarcane, as it is able to withstand high rainfall and to some extent even flooding. This is mostly verified by studies outside Pakistan but has been often corroborated by farmers during discussions.

Women's role in cotton production

Women are responsible for cleaning the land after it has been prepared for production. The land is raked into troughs and peaks. After this process, women have to pick out grass, other weeds or any form of trash on the prepared land. On one acre of land, four to five people work together and are paid PKR 1,000 (USD 3.57) per day for their labour which is divided among them. The money is received by the men of the family. It is up to the men whether they want to share some of this amount with the women.

For the next two months, women would voluntarily pick the grass or weed off the cotton fields and hoe the cotton seed area for aeration once or twice a month. For both tasks, they are paid in kind, usually the grass and weed that they picked up, which they then use as fodder for their livestock. Generally, small farmers would not allow women to work on their land for this purpose and women have to access the land of the bigger landlords in the area. Sometimes, the landlord also asks them to cut grass for his own use. In that case, they would cut enough for two to three bundles for him separately. Mostly, only sharecroppers' families were allowed to collect grass while other families had to ask for work. For women, getting grass from cotton fields was important as they are able to use it as fodder.

Cotton-picking season happens from July to October and is done in three waves. However, women are only able to get good pay during the first wave and second wave which is much harder as there is less cotton to harvest. Harvesting or cotton-picking also becomes more challenging when the fields are flooded. Women get foot sores from working in stagnant water. Additionally, women workers also suffer from hot weather and are prone to illnesses from pesticide fumes.

Women are paid wages based on the quantity of cotton they are able to pick and are generally not able to bargain or set a rate for themselves. Most women are only able to pick not more than 30 kg per day. The amount picked daily varies depending on the age and the time available to women and the daily temperatures. Older women generally could not pick more than 20-30 kgs per day while younger women could even pick up to 30-40 kgs per day. Women who have infants or are pregnant picked less but they still try and participate in cotton picking. On average, women's wages vary from PKR 8,000-25,000 (USD 30-90) per season. However, in general, the earnings had fallen as the crop yield had decreased and there were many more women trying to pick cotton.

Women in sugarcane plantation

There are two seasons for sugarcane production. The first season happens in spring (February to March) and the second time in autumn (September to October). If sown in autumn, it is a common practice to sow sugarcane first and then also plant wheat in the same land area. However, once sown, sugarcane will produce yields for two to three seasons from the same seed. In this case, wheat is sown only in the first season and then in the next two years it cannot be sown along with sugarcane. Hence, sugarcane is often not a favoured crop by the small and landless farmers as it decreases space for wheat, which is a food crop.

Sugarcane is less labour intensive as it only requires labour at the beginning of the season, when seeding takes place. After that, there is no labour required for the rest of the year until the harvesting season.

Women sow the sugarcane in the field using long sticks of the seed cane. Men are responsible for cutting the cane into small pieces and women are responsible for sowing them. Generally, sowing rates are based on acreage. For one acre of land, they are paid PKR 1,200 (USD 4.29). For the most part, at least four women would plant seeds on an acre which they can finish in a day. However, this means that each woman's wage would be PKR 300 or just over one dollar for a day's labour. The more women work on one acre the less wage each woman will receive.

Other women reported that sugarcane seed sowing could also be carried out as group labour including men and women of a community (though not necessarily) for sugarcane sowing. Their group is hired to carry out specific tasks. Male labourers would cut cane from another field, women would shred off the leaves, cutting it into smaller pieces, transport the cut cane to the field where it has to be sown and then sow the cane as seed. For the whole process, the group is given PKR 4,000 (USD 14.32) for one acre. Generally, there are about eight people in the group, with some occasional children participating in the work. In either case, whether women work only for seed sowing or within a group, the money is given by men to men, who keep it from the women. For their labour, women workers are only compensated with the sugarcane fodder which they use to feed their livestock.

Government data on cotton and sugarcane shows the decreasing cotton production and increasing sugarcane production in Khairpur and in the rest of the country. IMF conditionalities such as deregulation has resulted in the increased cost of agricultural production that small-scale farmers can ill afford, much less sustain. This is further compounded with the intensifying climate crisis, increasing dependence on expensive agricultural technology such as GM seeds and the lack of political will of policymakers to strengthen domestic production including developing appropriate and homegrown agricultural technology.

Meanwhile, sugarcane production is on the rise, with Pakistan ranking as the fifth biggest sugarcane producer with respect to area under cultivation but places only 15th in sugar production and 60th in yield. The sugar industry in Pakistan employs more than 100,000 agricultural workers with more than nine million people involved in the production of sugarcane.[53]

The government continues to provide support price subsidies on sugarcane production. Sugarcane is not only used for the production of sugar, but also a number of different products and byproducts which include molasses, bagasse, ethanol, biogas (energy), press mud and paper. A profitable product is ethanol and Pakistani industrialists are now selling it to many international buyers including Indonesia, Taiwan, China and United Arab Emirates.[54]

The sugar industry is controlled by a handful but powerful feudal and business families that are only concerned with reaping high profits while keeping sugarcane production costs low, often at the expense of its workers.[55] Sugar mills definitely enjoy a sweet deal—between receiving consistent subsidies from the state while also being able to cover its production costs from the sugarcane byproducts that are converted for energy use.

On the other hand, women workers can only taste the bitter end of sugarcane production. Their wages are almost non-existent and they have to make do with the sugarcane fodder to feed and sustain their livestock.

53 Pirzada, A., Shahid, N. & Ghauri, R.T. (2023). *The Ongoing Crisis in the Sugar Industry: The Implications of Legislation and a Need for Deregulation. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics*. https://file.pide.org.pk/pdfpdr/2023/553-572.pdf

54 Siddique,T. (2023, November 14). *Sindh govt fixes minimum price of sugar cane at Rs425 per 40kg.* DAWN. https://www.dawn.com/news/1789111#:~:text=The%20chief%20minister%20approved%20the,by%20the%20cabinet%20through%20circulation

55 Sayeed, A.T. (2021). Neoliberalism in food and agriculture – ramifications and struggles. *Bayan, This Bridge Called My Back, Volume VII.*

Women asserting their central role in forging feminist food sovereignty

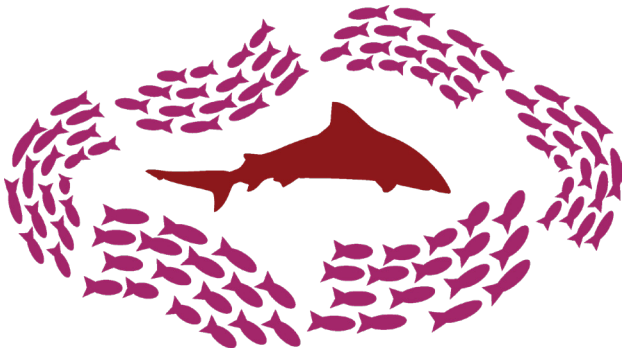
The stories of rural women in various agricultural industries clearly establishes their essential role in food systems. Their stories also show how these roles are being eroded by the giant corporations who are grabbing and commodifying resources, implementing oppressive policies and destroying the rich culture and practices in local food production. From a complex, intricate web with women producers at its heart, food systems have become a linear chain of cheap labour and exploitation with women shunted and even rendered invisible.

Feminist food sovereignty calls for the radical transformation of the existing corporate-controlled food system and upholds an agricultural system that prioritises people and planet over profit. It places value on the collective nature of agriculture, such as in Kyrgyzstan where families support each other by providing ample pasture for grazing. Cultural practices such as *ashar* in Kyrgyzstan or *bayanihan* in the Philippines mean sharing resources, including labour with families and communities to support one another and to make farming more efficient and sustainable. Rural women and communities likewise recognise the intricate link of people and the environment, as well as the interconnectedness of ecosystems, thus, sustainable use of natural and biological resources is an important pillar of feminist food sovereignty.

Women in agricultural production systems often find that they have a measure of control and access when they engage in smaller scale and localised production systems. Community-based alternatives such as agroecology and organic farming production not only ensure the sustainable management of resources and healthier food for the family, they are also a strategy for resistance of rural women and communities. By using local breeds and seeds and improving traditional practices, production costs will be minimised and risks from diseases, pests infestation or climate change will also be manageable. In Kyrgyzstan, local cow breeds are used for a more sustainable dairy production as they have minimal input needed (such as feed etc.) and better adaptation and resilience to the environment. Meanwhile, women workers in plantations in Indonesia and the Philippines are shifting to organic farming production to help them tide over economic needs while providing safer, chemical-free food for the household.

'Building organic farming side by side with the oil palm plantation represents a bold and strategic step in the ongoing struggle to challenge the dominance of landlords in the realm of commodity crops, particularly palm oil. This initiative underscores the importance of sustainable and equitable agricultural practices, while also addressing economic disparities in the industry. Women agricultural workers who went from being cheap labourers in palm oil plantations to organic farmers show how women are able to assert and reclaim their control over land and food for the family and community.'
– SERUNI, Indonesia[56]

Working in groups and collectives comes naturally with women food producers. In resisting corporate control, women find hope as they organise themselves as a cohesive group with a common vision to be able to amplify their demands. For workers in plantations, collective mobilisation becomes a tool for empowerment, enabling workers to articulate their needs and demands within broader discourses on food security and agricultural development. Palm oil plantation workers in Indonesia, for instance, are able to exert significant influence on plantation management and local authorities through their collective actions.



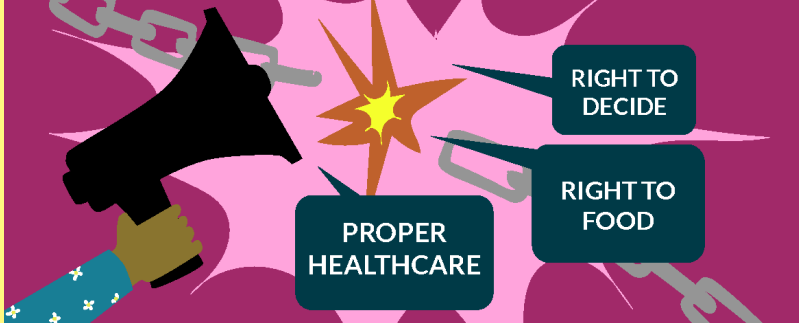
56 Serikat Perempuan Indonesia (SERUNI). (2023). *The role of women in the palm oil agricultural production and their struggle for food sovereignty*. [Unpublished].

Advocating for policy change or implementation are also made more effective when done collectively. In Thailand, the Ban Don Bay Small-scale Fishermen Network lobbied the local authority to enact mechanisms to protect the local fishers whose access to aquaculture areas are restricted by illegally-constructed shellfish farms. In Sri Lanka, NAFSO is advocating for policy change to ensure fisher women's rights based on FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). Working in collaboration with another small scale fisheries group, NAFSO has also proposed to enhance the recognition of fisher women through the National Fisheries Policy.

By building their own networks, rural women are able to gather support that is essential in improving their capacities, as well as developing alternative solutions to corporate-controlled and state-supported agricultural programmes.

Long before becoming just one of the cogs in the machine of industrial agriculture and globalised food production systems, women have played the central role of seed keepers and seed savers, fishers, livestock keepers and breeders possessing millenia of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom that have helped uphold their communities and societies. Rural women are asserting their central roles and are fighting back!

Women Demand Feminist Food Sovereignty: A Call to Action



The current situation of women agricultural workers in Asia and the Pacific region is marked by persistent gender inequalities, limited access to resources, exploitative labour practices and food poverty. However, there are also emerging opportunities and spaces for building women's capacity and agency through collective action, access to education and training and supportive policies and programmes.

The following are some of the recommendations and calls to action that emerged from the research:

At the local and national level, for governments to:

- Respect rural and Indigenous women's human rights, including right to food, right to life, right to health, right to social protection and right to education. Ensure their access to participation and decision-making processes about the use of their land, water and other productive resources;
- Uphold women's right to land, water, forests and other productive resources by putting an immediate halt to acts of corporate land grabbing and military occupation of civilian land, water bodies and coasts, forests and other natural resources that women use for food production;
- Implement comprehensive agrarian reform to distribute large landholdings to landless peasants and ensure that adequate financial and technical support are provided;
- Enact and implement local and national policies that recognise and support women as key actors of food production and their immense contribution to attaining national food sovereignty. Promote gender transformative actions;
- Provide women farmers with training and capacity-building opportunities in sustainable agricultural production systems and value chains. These include but are not limited to post-harvest activities, product development, processing, marketing, entrepreneurship and business management, to enhance women's skills and competitiveness in their respective industries;
- Develop, promote and institutionalise agricultural technologies and approaches such as agroecology that recognise and enhance indigenous knowledge systems and emphasise a holistic approach that takes into consideration the intricate link of agrobiodiversity; and
- Encourage more research and data collection to understand the specific challenges faced by women in agricultural production. Ensure women's meaningful participation in developing targeted interventions and/or adaptation mechanisms to effectively address these challenges.

At the regional level, for rural women to:

Expose and oppose imperialist corporations and institutions and their corporate-driven techno-fixes and false solutions such as genetically modified organisms, smart agriculture and agricultural digitalisation among others, These false solutions exacerbate the difficult working conditions of rural and Indigenous women and violates their food sovereignty;

- Strengthen feminist analyses on the role of women in various forms of agricultural production and enhance education and awareness-raising campaigns to challenge deep-seated cultural norms and gender stereotypes that limit women's participation and decision-making power; and
- Foster networks and linkages to unite women with other activists, organisations or communities advocating for food sovereignty to strengthen resistance against systemic issues such as patriarchy, globalisation, militarism and fundamentalisms.

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist and women's rights organisations and individual activists. For over 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice.

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