



A HARVEST OF HOPE

Grassroots women fight back and reclaim food systems

I. Background: Why This Regional Analysis?

For almost 40 years, the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) has been working on confronting neoliberal economic models, corporate expansion, industrial agriculture and climate crises, and other factors that undermine the food sovereignty of women, particularly of rural women and Indigenous women. From 2023-2025, through the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) on the theme of 'Feminist Food Sovereignty: Women reclaiming control and fighting back against the corporatisation of food', APWLD engaged grassroots partners in community-led research across six countries to expose systemic violations of women's human rights caused by commodification of food, land and resource grabbing and environmental degradation.

This regional report brings together learnings from these six stories, highlighting how rural and indigenous women in particular have come together to design, implement and lead feminist alternatives and strategies to resist the forces undermining their human rights and reclaim their food systems.

Women are primary food producers and knowledge bearers within their communities, yet they remain largely excluded from land ownership, decision-making and access to and control over resources and markets. APWLD identifies the nexus of Patriarchy with neoliberal economic Globalisation, Fundamentalisms and Militarism (PGFM) as responsible for gross violations of women's human rights and fundamental freedoms and believes that the journey to food sovereignty should be led and defined by women, especially from marginalised communities.

The FPAR method is rooted in principles that highlight the knowledge and lived experiences of women and is specifically aimed at effecting change in oppressive systems and structures. FPAR entails active involvement and ownership of women in all stages of research from research planning, data collection, analysis, to dissemination and the resulting research is collectively written and owned by the involved communities. By developing a deeper analysis of their current situation and deploying the PGFM framework, the FPAR approach highlights that women's oppression is rooted in historical and systemic factors benefitting the capitalist patriarchy.¹

This regional report provides evidence-based documentation of how food sovereignty violations intersect with and exacerbate violations of women's human rights. It also

¹ Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (n.d.). *Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR)*. <http://apwld.org/feminist-participatory-action-research-fpar/>

highlights feminist food sovereignty by showcasing grassroots alternatives, rights-based food systems and community-led solutions, amplifying the demands of grassroots women. This report is aimed at strengthening the national and global advocacy on feminist food sovereignty among APWLD members, allied networks, United Nations (UN) mandate holders and relevant government and non-government actors.



II. The Fight for Feminist Food Sovereignty

In the last few years, the world has witnessed increasing imperialist onslaught in the form of wars and genocides,² burgeoning fascism, devastating impacts of the climate crisis, mega-corporations plundering and destroying our planet with impunity and continued racial, ethnic and caste violence. Food has been used as a weapon through starvation and is being commodified, financialised and modified³ to enrich the coffers of extractive corporations, while millions remain hungry, impoverished and food insecure. As the climate crisis worsens, food production is negatively impacted, health-risks and migration of rural populations increase, leaving millions vulnerable to hunger and malnourishment.

Even as countries in Asia and the Pacific region embrace neoliberal development, agriculture remains the bedrock of their economy. Forty-two per cent of the employed population in South Asia and 25 per cent of the employed population in East Asia and Pacific (excluding high-income countries) is in agriculture. For women, agriculture is a lifeline as 60 per cent of employed women in South Asia and 22 per cent of employed women in East Asia and the Pacific work in agriculture.⁴ At the same time, the Asia and the Pacific region accounts for half of the world's severe food insecure population, with women being more food insecure than men. The region also fares poorly in indicators like anaemia among women of reproductive age, stunting, wasting and overweight among children under five years.⁵

60 per cent of employed women in South Asia and 22 per cent of employed women in East Asia and the Pacific work in agriculture.



² United Nations. (2024). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri. Starvation and the right to food, with an emphasis on the Palestinian people's food sovereignty.* A/79/171 UN website <https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/171>

³ For more information on genetic modification, please see: <https://gmopromises.org/>

⁴ World Bank Group. (n.d.). *Employment in agriculture (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estimate) - South Asia, East Asia & Pacific (excluding high income).* https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?end=2023&locations=8S-4E&most_recent_year_desc=true&start=1991&view=chart

⁵ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. (n.d.). *In 2023, in Asia-Pacific millions of people have been unable to afford a healthy diet - women fare worse than men.* FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. <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>

Evidently, the human rights of women, especially those from marginalised communities, to land, food and nutrition and health care, are yet to be realised. At this juncture, it becomes pertinent to highlight and scrutinise some of the factors violating the rights of small-scale food producers, most of whom are women, globally and in Asia and the Pacific.⁶

1) Corporate consolidation in the industrial food system: In the last few decades, a handful of corporations have merged and consolidated to acquire ever-increasing control of the industrial food system. As an example, BASF, Bayer, Corteva and Syngenta alone control 56 per cent of the global seeds market and 61 per cent of the pesticides market, effectively rendering them as oligopolies.⁷ This domination over the market enables these companies to raise food prices, dictate research agendas, block unfavourable regulations, undermine alternatives that cannot compete with large powerful companies, and lobby policy makers to favour the interests of big businesses.⁸ This enables them to expand a destructive model of agriculture that contributes to the triple planetary crisis, the destruction of local and diverse food systems and economies, exploitation of workers, displacing small farmers, local communities and Indigenous Peoples from their land and territories.

2) The link between the industrial food system and neoliberal trade and financial markets. The corporate-controlled food system contributes to the sovereign debt crisis in developing countries through four key factors.^{9,10} *First*, the dominance of the US dollar in global trade makes many nations vulnerable to US monetary policy. The need to earn foreign currency has led many developing countries to specialise in export-oriented cash crops, undermining existing diverse and locally eaten crops. *Second*, in the last few decades we have witnessed severe underspending in agriculture and social spending by governments of developing countries driven by structural adjustment programmes, public-private partnerships and foreign investments, leading to the prioritising of export-driven growth and corporate profits over local needs.

⁶ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. (n.d.). Women produce up to 80% of food in developing countries. Family Farming Knowledge Platform.. <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/1634537/>

⁷ GRAIN. (2025, June 10). *Top 10 agribusiness giants: Corporate concentration in food & farming in 2025*. <https://grain.org/en/article/7284-top-10-agribusiness-giants-corporate-concentration-in-food-farming-in-2025>

⁸ GRAIN. (2025, June 10). *Top 10 agribusiness giants: Corporate concentration in food & farming in 2025*. <https://grain.org/en/article/7284-top-10-agribusiness-giants-corporate-concentration-in-food-farming-in-2025>

⁹ United Nations. (2025). *The right to food, finance and national action plans*. A/HRC/58/48. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/58/48>

¹⁰ IPES-FOOD. (2023). *Breaking the cycle of unsustainable food systems, hunger, and debt*. <https://ipes-food.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/DebtFoodCrisis.pdf>

Third, price volatility and boom-bust cycles prevalent in the industrial food system lead to corporations capturing profits when food prices rise and acquiring land and businesses from small farmers in distress when prices fall.¹¹ *Fourth*, the climate crisis has further increased the financial burden on low-income countries, especially those impacted by the climate crisis, as they are saddled by penalisation of climate vulnerabilities by lenders,¹² market mechanisms like carbon offsets that promote large monoculture plantations¹³ over small-scale diverse food production and debt-for-nature swaps that distract from meaningful financial support owed to the Global South by the Global North.

- 3) Neoliberal trade:** Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) weaken food sovereignty by reducing or eliminating tariffs and exposing small-scale farmers to unfair competition from subsidised imports from large agribusinesses. FTAs impose standards on food safety, Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and animal welfare and modify patent laws to privatise seeds, criminalising traditional practices like seed saving and exchange, benefiting large industrial agriculture corporations and harming biodiversity.¹⁴ Furthermore, FTAs prioritise foreign investors over local communities, through mechanisms like the Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) mechanisms, which embolden them to undermine national policies not aligned with their interests and profit making.¹⁵
- 4) Global rush to grab farmlands:**¹⁶ The relationship that people have with the land determines the realisation of their right to food.¹⁷ After the 2008 food-price crisis, there was a drastic increase in land grabs led by investors, agri-food companies and sovereign wealth funds.¹⁸ This has led to widespread land dispossession among small farmers and Indigenous Peoples thereby severely impacting their control over their agriculture and food systems. A recent study found that one per cent of the world's largest farms now operate 70 per cent of

¹¹ IPES-FOOD. (2023). *Breaking the cycle of unsustainable food systems, hunger, and debt*. <https://ipes-food.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/DebtFoodCrisis.pdf>

¹² IPES-FOOD. (2023). *Breaking the cycle of unsustainable food systems, hunger, and debt*. <https://ipes-food.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/DebtFoodCrisis.pdf>

¹³ World Rainforest Movement. (2023, December 19.). *Expansion of tree plantations for carbon markets: More evidence of the offsetting fraud*. World Rainforest Movement. WRM Bulletin 268. <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/expansion-of-tree-plantations-for-carbon-markets-more-evidence-of-the-offsetting-fraud>

¹⁴ Nyeleni newsletter. (2017, March). *FTAs and Agriculture*. https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/nyeleni/nyeleni_a2017m3n29EN.pdf

¹⁵ Sayeed, A. T. (2023, May 30). *Unravel neoliberal trade: A failed solution to food sovereignty*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/unravel-neoliberal-trade-a-failed-solution-to-food-sovereignty/>

¹⁶ farmlandgrab.org. (n.d.). <https://farmlandgrab.org/>

¹⁷ United Nations. (2024). *Right to food*. A/79/171 <https://docs.un.org/en/A/79/171>

¹⁸ IPES-Food. (2024). *Land Squeeze: What is driving unprecedented pressures on global farmland and what can be done to achieve equitable access to land?* <https://ipes-food.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LandSqueeze.pdf>

the world's farmland.¹⁹ This has been enabled by the deregulation of land markets, especially in the Global South, push for digitisation of land records,²⁰ turning farmland into a valuable asset class for investment. Rush for land for afforestation projects for carbon credits²¹ or for cultivating biofuels, or for mining of critical minerals for the ever-expanding need for digital equipment and electric vehicles, along with growing urbanisation and infrastructure developments have also contributed tremendously to this trend.²²

5) New corporate-controlled technologies: Introduced in the guise of feeding the world, increasing environmental sustainability and addressing the climate crisis, these technologies are being deployed to expand the control of corporations over natural resources. For example, digitalisation, being pushed by Big Tech corporations and large agricultural companies alike, can lead to the de-skilling of small farmers, increased dependence on synthetic fertilisers and agrochemicals, crop uniformity and increased genetic erosion on farms. Digital technologies extract valuable farm and food-related data, which are analysed to deliver prescriptions to the farmer, such as how much pesticide to spray and when, when to plant seeds, and so on, effectively dictating the agricultural practices of farmers.²³ Ecological impacts are also imminent due to increased mining for critical minerals, water, and land required for manufacturing digital technologies and the construction of digital infrastructures.^{24,25} Similarly, the promotion of gene-edited foods thrusts patented seeds on farmers displacing local seeds and cultivation methods, glossing over the possible adverse impacts of this technology on the environment and human health.^{26,27}

¹⁹ IPES-Food. (2024). *Land Squeeze: What is driving unprecedented pressures on global farmland and what can be done to achieve equitable access to land?* <https://ipes-food.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LandSqueeze.pdf>

²⁰ GRAIN. (2022, April 15). *The digitalisation of land: More data, less land.* https://grain.org/en/article/6832-the-digitalisation-of-land-more-data-less-land#_edn1

²¹ GRAIN. (2024, September 17). *From Land Grabbers to Carbon Cowboys: A new scramble for community lands takes off.* <https://grain.org/en/article/7190-from-land-grabbers-to-carbon-cowboys-a-new-scramble-for-community-lands-takes-off>

²² IPES-Food. (2024). *Land Squeeze: What is driving unprecedented pressures on global farmland and what can be done to achieve equitable access to land?* <https://ipes-food.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/LandSqueeze.pdf>

²³ GRAIN. (2025, June 10). *Top 10 agribusiness giants: Corporate concentration in food & farming in 2025.* <https://grain.org/en/article/7284-top-10-agribusiness-giants-corporate-concentration-in-food-farming-in-2025>

²⁴ Shand, H., Wetter, K. J., & Chowdhry, K. (2022, September 7). *Food Barons 2022: Crisis Profiteering, Digitalization and Shifting Power.* ETC Group. https://etcgroup.org/content/food-barons-2022#sector_research

²⁵ ETC Group. (2024, July). *Behind sugar and spice and everything nice.* <https://www.etcgroup.org/content/behind-sugar-and-spice-and-everything-nice>

²⁶ Then, C., & Tippe, R. (2018, June 29). *Genome Editing: Increasing monopolisation in agriculture and breeding.* Testbiotech. <https://www.testbiotech.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Background-Patents-Genome-Editing.pdf>

²⁷ Cotter, Dr. J., & Perls, D. (2018, September). *Gene-edited organisms in agriculture.* Friends of The Earth. https://foe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FOE_GenomeEditingAgReport_final.pdf

6) Climate crisis and environmental degradation: The climate crisis critically affects food production due to changes in temperature, increasing extreme weather events and disruption of ecosystems that can cause crop failures, and negative impacts on fisheries as well as livestock production. This is exacerbated by disease outbreaks, harmful algal blooms and unpredictable rainfall.²⁸ At the same time, the industrial food chain wreaks even more havoc on the planet and its people. The largest food and agriculture companies are also some of the biggest polluters and Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emitters on the planet. For example, JBS and other meat companies have been linked to illegal deforestation in Brazil;²⁹ Cargill, the largest grain trader in the world, has been linked to human rights violations of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil;³⁰ while Yara is the largest industrial buyer of natural gas in Europe.³¹ Pepsico and Coca Cola are two of the biggest plastic polluters in the world.³² These companies are now banding together to promote digital agriculture, synthetic biology, geoengineering, genetic modification and robotics as solutions to the climate crisis, when in fact these are strategies to further entrench their control over the industrial food system, letting them continue with their harmful operations.

The industrial food system evolved from colonial agricultural models where land was forcibly taken from Indigenous and local communities to focus on cash crop production for export to colonising countries. Eventually, this led to monocultures and export-oriented farming as colonisers prioritised resource extraction and profit over local food security, restructuring economies around dependency and exploitation. These land grabs dispossessed communities, disrupting traditional relationships with the land, particularly for women who were key land stewards and knowledge holders. The capitalist expansion of agriculture separated essential tasks that sustain life and human communities from waged labour tasks, historically assigning the former to women, making it invisible and devaluing it within dominant economic frameworks while ensuring that it was largely men who were assigned

²⁸ Samon, K. (2023). *Feminist Food Sovereignty: A Paradigm Shift in Confronting the Climate Crisis*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Food-Sov-and-Climate-FINAL.pdf>

²⁹ Hofmeister, N., & Wenzel, F. (2024, October 31). *JBS broke its supply chain rules buying cows from deforesters of Brazil's wetlands*. Unearthed. <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2024/10/31/jbs-deforestation-brazil-pantanal-wetlands/>

³⁰ Dowlen, S. (2023, December 4). *Cargill: Violating Indigenous Peoples' and traditional communities' rights in Brazil*. Forests & Finance. <https://forestsandfinance.org/news/cargill-violating-indigenous-peoples-and-traditional-communities-rights-in-brazil/>

³¹ Corporate Europe Observatory. (2019, September 17). *Yara: Poisoning our soils, burning our planet*. <https://corporateeurope.org/en/2019/09/yara-poisoning-our-soils-burning-our-planet>

³² Alegado, J. (2021, October 25). *The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo named Top Plastic Polluters for the fourth year in a row*. Greenpeace Southeast Asia. <https://www.greenpeace.org/southeastasia/press/44767/the-coca-cola-company-and-pepsico-named-top-plastic-polluters-for-the-fourth-year-in-a-row/>

waged labour.³³ Even as reproductive tasks are essential for the accumulation of capital and women's unpaid and underpaid labour sustains the global food chain, their decision-making power remains constrained by patriarchal land laws, economic systems and fundamentalist norms that deny them autonomy over their bodies, land and food. Feminist food sovereignty recognises how the industrial food system model perpetuates patriarchy and colonial violence and emphasises the role of women in challenging these entrenched unequal power relations, in the struggle against the colonial and corporate capture of food systems that extract huge profits from privatising the commons, violate human rights and justice.

As formidable as the structures around us seem, we draw strength from those at the frontlines who are struggling against these forces, and fighting back, reclaiming their food system, inch by inch. The six FPAR stories are stories of women who are fed-up with the state-corporate nexus and its impunity and despite fear, frustration and on some days, even lingering hopelessness, fight on.

³³ Serrano Zapata, A., & Sofia Luna Siachoque, M. (2025). Unpaid Women's labour driving value chain disintegration in the Colombian palm oil industry. *Journal Für Entwicklungspolitik*, 41(1), 24–49. <https://doi.org/10.20446/jep-2414-3197-41-1-24>



FPAR Partner Organisations

Mukti Nari O Shishu Unnayan Sangstha (Bangladesh)

Mukti Nari O Shishu Unnayan Sangstha is driven by its mission to create a fair society free from superstition, ignorance, diseases, human rights violations and hunger. With a specific focus on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment, the organisation helps marginalised women and girls across five districts, eight Upazila, 72 Unions and six Pourashava in Bangladesh.

FPAR title: Feminist participatory action research on food sovereignty of women tobacco workers in Mirpur, Kushtia, Bangladesh

Young woman researcher: Shibli Aktar

Mentor: Umma Salma

Swadhina (India)

Swadhina is a civil society organisation dedicated to the empowerment of women and child development through sustainable practices. Operating in five states—West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar and Tamil Nadu—Swadhina focuses on empowering marginalised families. Their thematic areas include women's empowerment, land rights, sustainable resource management, health and nutrition.

FPAR title: Exercising their rights on land and food in accessing resources, entitlements and support towards economic independence: the case of women in Dhobani and Uldahi villages in Musabani district, Jharkhand, India

Young woman researcher: Yashswati Singh

Mentor: Sonia Bhattacharyya

Bina Desa (Indonesia)

Bina Desa aims to address structural obstacles in rural development focusing on agrarian reform, gender justice, rural youth and natural farming (agroecology). Over time, Bina Desa incorporated a gender and ecology justice perspective into its policy and programs.

FPAR Title: Problems of women seaweed fishers due to shrimp pond waste disposal on the Arungkeke Coast, Arungkeke District, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia

Young woman researcher: Suci Ramdhani

Mentor: Ainia Prihantini

Tukee Foundation (Nepal)

Tukee Foundation, a non-profit organisation in Nepal, is dedicated to supporting and empowering vulnerable single women-led families. Their goals encompass providing safe shelter, education and economic and social empowerment.

FPAR Title: The strategies of Chepang Women of Raksirang to take control of their local food over corporatised junk food and play key roles in defending their Indigenous food system and promotion of local food in their community

Young woman researcher: Kalpana Praja

Mentor: Pramita Bhushan Dhungana

Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency (Bougainville/Papua New Guinea)

Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency (LNWDA) operates in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, as a non-government organisation promoting justice, peace, gender equality, and community empowerment. LNWDA's thematic areas include gender and human rights, women's political empowerment, advocacy, mental health, peacebuilding, reconciliation, HIV/AIDS, climate justice and conflict transformation.

FPAR Title: Empowerment of leta women farmers

Young woman researcher: Dorah Sagem

Mentor: Bianca Hakena

Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women (Philippines)

Amihan is a leading women's organisation in the Philippines, advocating for genuine agrarian reform, national industrialisation and an end to exploitation and discrimination. The organisation actively lobbies for "Food Security Bills," including the Genuine Agrarian Reform Bill (GARB) and the Rice Industry Development Act (RIDA). Amihan collaborates with various grassroots organisations, human rights defenders and environmental advocates.

FPAR Title: The demands of women farmers and other stakeholders in Santa Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in response to intensifying land-use conversion

Young woman researcher: Camille Rosas

Mentor: Hazel Ramirez

'At the core of much of our difficulties in organising was a fundamental lack of belief that something could be done. The culture of subservience and powerlessness at the hands of the state is a culture driven by years of state repression and counterinsurgency policies aimed at silencing the voice of the marginalised through fear. (...) Many we met were disillusioned by years of living within the same system, same restrictions and seeing no change across various administrations. Learning about their rights and connecting their plight to a vast history of farmers' ongoing struggle for land rights across the nation inspired farmers and farm workers to form organisations within their community and make steps to assert their rights as food producers to land and livelihood.' - Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women, Philippines³⁴

Below we highlight the threats to the realisation of food sovereignty of women from Jharkhand, India, Santa Cruz in the Philippines, Raksirang district, Nepal, Arungkeke in Indonesia, Kushtia in Bangladesh and Busbin, Wonn and Nouru in Papua New Guinea.

1. Land and Resource Grabs

Urban expansion and neoliberal development projects

Land and resource grabs are carried out by the state-corporate nexus, which is complicit in the violation of the rights of local communities dependent on those natural resources, in undermining the recourse available for them and utilises the military to enforce the takeovers. One of the factors driving land grabs globally is urban expansion and infrastructure development. Urban expansion encroaches upon cultivated lands and commons such as village forests, grazing lands and other shared natural resources like streams and ponds on which many women, especially from already marginalised groups, depend for critical subsistence needs like fuelwood, fodder for livestock, wild foods that are essential for household nutrition and livelihoods.³⁵ By displacing local communities from a source of their sustenance, these urban expansion projects threaten the food security and nutritional well-being of women and lead to an increase in their labour burden by distancing them from critical food and water sources.

³⁴ Extract from the FPAR Story from the Philippines. Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women (2025). *The Demands of Women Farmers and Other Stakeholders in Santa Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in Response to Intensifying Land-Use Conversion*.

³⁵ Bollier, D. (2014, June 25). *Gender and the Commons in India*. <https://www.bollier.org/blog/gender-and-commons-india>

Additionally, infrastructure development and industrial pollution associated with urban expansion degrade the quality of nearby farmland soils and strain water resources, further diminishing food production.³⁶ Small-scale food producing communities have an intimate relationship with their land and natural environment and that is part of their cultural fabric in the form of festivals, locally consumed foods, songs and labour-sharing practices. Urban expansion and neoliberal development projects not only adversely impact the local communities economically but also violate their social, cultural and in many cases, spiritual ties with their natural resources.

In Santa Cruz, Laguna in the Philippines, farmers have been witnessing the rapid development of subdivisions and infrastructure projects, reclassification of agricultural lands for commercial and residential use, drastically shrinking agricultural land and disrupting traditional livelihoods. Two large government projects further threaten agricultural spaces: the Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded Laguna Lakeshore Road Network (LLRN) and the Laguna Lake Development Authority (LLDA) Floating Solar Power Farm. The former will cut through prime agricultural lands and farming communities, displacing farmers and fishers who depend on Laguna Lake, while the latter covering 2,000 hectares of the lake, threatens fishing grounds, prompting protests from local fisherfolk.³⁷ The rapid urbanisation in the region has also led to gravel dumping and contamination of irrigation canals, pest infestations and pollution due to inadequate drainage and waste management, impacting what is left of the productive farm lands.

'In Santa Cruz, the lands that have been converted into subdivisions were, until very recently, prime agricultural lands that were being actively tilled and harvested by local farmers. Aside from the complete lack of consultations, public hearings, and the like with the affected farmers, there was also a severe lack of transparency as to whether the land was already deemed unfeasible and unsuitable for agricultural purposes by the DA (Department of Agriculture). - Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women, Philippines³⁸

Similarly, in Raksirang district in Nepal, and Arungkeke district in Indonesia, natural habitats have turned into sites of industrial extraction. In the former, stone crushers have been deployed along the river to produce construction materials from rocks while in the latter, shrimp pond companies release untreated wastewater into the sea, damaging vital aquatic biodiversity and undermining the local community's ability to

³⁶ Cao, C., & Wang, J. (2025, April 10). *The impact of urban expansion on food production: A bibliometric study of development, hotspots, and future prospects*. *Frontiers*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sustainable-food-systems/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2025.1550373/full#h6>

³⁸ Extract from the FPAR Story from the Philippines. Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women (2025). *The Demands of Women Farmers and Other Stakeholders in Santa Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in Response to Intensifying Land-Use Conversion*. [Unpublished].

³⁷ Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women. (2025). *The Demands of Women Farmers and Other Stakeholders in Sta. Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in Response to Intensifying Land-Use Conversion*. [Unpublished].

sustain their traditional food sources in both cases. In Raksirang, the Chepang community is witnessing floods, landslides, droughts and unpredictable weather patterns due to the climate crisis, which have degraded forests, rivers, and water sources, drastically reducing the availability of traditional wild foods, fish, crabs, and plants, which are intertwined with their natural environment. Such projects have led to women who are key producers of foods losing access to ecological resources central to food production, making them food insecure. They have lost opportunities to share their inherited traditional knowledge about local crops, fish, livestock, medicinal plants, wild tubers and traditional cooking methods. As these resources degrade, so does the cultural memory and knowledge associated with them and that reduces the community's resilience and ability to source food locally while creating harmful dependence on cheap, imported and unhealthy food.

Extractive agricultural practices

In Arpal (Arungkeke Palantikang), Arungkeke and Palajau in Indonesia, about 90 per cent of the seaweed cultivation work is carried out by women and it is their primary source of income. Land acquisition by private corporations of erstwhile rice fields, coconut groves and cornfields for the expansion of shrimp cultivation has led to soil and water pollution from the shrimp pond wastewater, reduction in fish populations and frequent seaweed harvest failures. This has led to a loss of income for the women, leading to food insecurity among the local communities whose lives and livelihoods are inextricably linked with the sea.

Meanwhile, due to increasing economic pressures, farmers in Kushtia District in Bangladesh and Raksirang district in Nepal are shifting away from agroecological practices that entailed cultivation and consumption of local rice varieties, pulses and oilseeds, and moving towards input intensive agriculture. Inputs like synthetic fertilisers and chemical pesticides strip away soil nutrients, resulting in poor crop yields, while hybrid seeds increase the market-dependence of farmers. The women tobacco workers in Kushtia district used to rely on diverse and nutrient-rich food sources like different husked rice varieties along with fish from rivers and canals, milk, yogurt, pulses, meat from domestic animals, poultry, fruits and traditional oils like mustard oil. However, the introduction and expansion of tobacco cultivation have drastically altered these practices. Tobacco farming, which is promoted and dominated by private companies and middle-men, has replaced traditional crops leading to a decline in food diversity and nutritional quality.³⁹ In the Indonesian context, the marine pollution caused by the shrimp pond wastewater released into the sea has led to the shifting of fishing areas, causing increased expenses and even debt, as fishermen have to travel further out to sea.

³⁹ Mukti Nari-O-Shishu Unnayan Sangstha. (2025). *Feminist participatory action research on food sovereignty of women tobacco workers in Mirpur, Kushtia, Bangladesh*. [Unpublished].

Extractive agriculture continues patriarchal domination by limiting women's access to and control over land and productive resources. Environmental degradation caused by extractive agriculture leads to pollution of natural resources, water depletion and soil damage, among other drastic ecological impacts, disproportionately affect women who cultivate food, by displacing them from productive resources, leading to a loss of their traditional knowledge, negatively impacting food production, and therefore, hindering the realisation of feminist food sovereignty.



2. Free Trade Agreements

The World Trade Organization (WTO) along with bilateral, regional and international trade agreements promote free trade as a path to development and prosperity.⁴⁰ In practice, neoliberal free trade adversely impacts food sovereignty by prioritising corporate interests over local food systems and small farmers' rights. Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) entail lowering of tariffs on imported agricultural goods, exposing small-scale local producers to competition from large, subsidised agribusiness imports, enforcing intellectual property regimes that privatise seeds and genetic resources, criminalising traditional practices like seed saving and exchange, promoting an influx of imported foods which can erode traditional diets and food cultures, contributing to nutritional insecurity and health problems.⁴¹

In Indonesia, the government has adopted the Indonesian Blue Economy Roadmap that could lead to growing commodification of marine resources and land and ocean grabbing for global capital, excluding coastal communities from accessing sources of food, nutrition and livelihoods.⁴² On top of this, driven by the ballooning demand of shrimp in the global seafood market and the FTA between Indonesia and the European Union (EU), the government aims to increase its shrimp export value and acquire a higher market share in the EU. This would replicate colonial patterns of production and consumption, wherein countries of the Global South become suppliers of commodities to satiate the demands of the Global North.⁴³ This approach has attracted large-scale investment in aquaculture wherein investors prioritise rapid production and maximisation of profits and bypass environmental impact assessments, using chemical-heavy feeds and managing waste in environmentally degrading ways.⁴⁴

Nepal liberalised trade and domestic markets during the 1980s and 1990s leading to the reduction of the scope of its public distribution system and removing a host of agricultural subsidies.⁴⁵ Despite the Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act of 2075 (2018) enacted to protect food sovereignty and promote sustainable agricultural

⁴⁰ Hansell, R. (2025, February 13). "Sin maíz, No Hay País": How free trade hurts indigenous food sovereignty in Mexico. Center for World Indigenous Studies. <https://cwis.org/2025/02/sin-maiz-no-hay-pais-how-free-trade-hurts-indigenous-food-sovereignty-in-mexico/>

⁴¹ Nyeleni newsletter. (2017, March). FTAs and Agriculture. https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/nyeleni/nyeleni_a2017m3n29EN.pdf

⁴² Gandimathi, A., Sridhar, R., Spartegus, J., & Rethinam, J. (n.d.). A Study Report on Implications of Blue Economy in Indonesia. Blue Economy Tribunal. <http://blueeconomytribunal.org/>. http://blueeconomytribunal.org/wp-content/uploads/BE_Exe.Summary_Indonesia.pdf

⁴³ Bina Desa. (2025). Problems of Women Seaweed Fisher Due to Shrimp Pond Waste Disposal on The Arungkeke Coast, Arungkeke District, Jenepono Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia.

⁴⁴ Bina Desa. (2025). Problems of Women Seaweed Fisher Due to Shrimp Pond Waste Disposal on The Arungkeke Coast, Arungkeke District, Jenepono Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia

⁴⁵ Pyakuryal, B., Roy, D., & Thapa, Y. B. (2010, February). Trade liberalization and food security in Nepal. Food Policy. Science Direct. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0306919209001080?oldURL=y>

practices, conflicting national trade policies favour imported food over local produce and have brought cheaper imported goods, including junk food, to even remote villages like Raksirang.⁴⁶ Influenced and driven by the consumerist - capitalist logic, food and agricultural policies along with changing social norms and cultural practices facilitate the consumption of ultra-processed and “modern” foods today, leading to a decline in local agricultural activities and reduced control over food systems. Chepang women face social pressure to adopt market-bought foods—neighbours and other community members often expect to be served with “Dew” or the carbonated soft drink Mountain Dew—if they are working on farmlands in Raksirang district. Traditional Chepang foods such as “Dhido,”⁴⁷ “Sishno,”⁴⁸ and Indigenous oils like “Chury”⁴⁹ are increasingly stigmatised as “poor people’s food,” resulting in their reduced production.⁵⁰ This has led to an increased reliance on ultra-processed foods, leading to higher incidences of illness and health concerns in the community, such as increased cases of diabetes⁵¹ and malnutrition among children⁵². The rural municipality’s annual budget of 1,000,000 Nepali Rupees (7,000 USD) allocated to support the poorest community members was spent in just four months in 2024. In such situations, women bear the additional task of caregiving for unwell family members, exacerbating their workload and contributing to their stress and fatigue.⁵³



⁴⁶ Tukee Foundation. (2025). *The strategies of Chepang Women of Raksirang take control of their local food over corporatized junk food and play a key role in defending their Indigenous food system and promotion of local food in the community*. [Unpublished].

⁴⁷ A traditional meal made from flour from millets, buckwheat or corn; Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Development. (n.d.). *Forgotten Foods: Dhido and Siso Soup with Akabare Chilli (Nepal)*. <https://asianfarmers.org/nepal-forgotten-foods-dhido-and-siso-soup-with-akabare-chilli/>

⁴⁸ Nettle leaves.

⁴⁹ Butter tree.

⁵⁰ Tukee Foundation. (2025). *The strategies of Chepang Women of Raksirang take control of their local food over corporatized junk food and play a key role in defending their Indigenous food system and promotion of local food in the community*. [Unpublished].

⁵¹ Poudel, A. (2024). *Diabetes emerging as major health problem in Nepal*. The Kathmandu Post. <https://kathmandupost.com/health/2024/11/14/diabetes-emerging-as-major-health-problem-in-nepal>

⁵² Sharma, N., et al (2025). *Nepal's Growing Reliance on Packaged Foods*. ThinkGlobalHealth. <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/nepals-growing-reliance-on-packaged-foods>

⁵³ Tukee Foundation. (2025). *The strategies of Chepang Women of Raksirang take control of their local food over corporatized junk food and play a key role in defending their Indigenous food system and promotion of local food in the community*. [Unpublished].

In the case of the Philippines, the erasure of farm lands and the systematic underfunding of agriculture—the budget for agriculture allocated was 3.43 per cent of the 2024 national budget⁵⁴—paved the way for greater importation and liberalisation, which have harmed the livelihoods of local producers who cannot keep up with the domination of imports in local markets. In fact, in September 2023, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that the Philippines had officially overtaken China as the world's top rice importer despite being the seventh largest rice producer of the world.^{55,56} The Rice Liberalization Law (RA 11203), which was introduced in compliance with the World Trade Organization-Agreement on Agriculture (WTO-AoA) obligations, lowers rice import tariffs and removes regulatory powers from the State, encouraging import liberalisation and undermining local rice production and agricultural self-sufficiency.

⁵⁴ Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women (2025). *The Demands of Women Farmers and Other Stakeholders in Sta. Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in Response to Intensifying Land-Use Conversion*. [Unpublished].

⁵⁵ Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women (2025). *The Demands of Women Farmers and Other Stakeholders in Sta. Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in Response to Intensifying Land-Use Conversion*. [Unpublished].

⁵⁶ Foreign Agricultural Service, US Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *Production- Rice*. <https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/production/commodity/0422110>



3. Increased Work Burdens and Unpaid Labour

Women carry a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, in addition to their agricultural work. This dual burden leaves them with limited time to participate in community initiatives, limiting their role in agriculture and severely hindering their participation in skills training, community meetings, and decision-making processes. It also prevents them from gaining new knowledge and obtaining information and skills to move ahead in their life.

'I do all the cooking, cleaning, and childcare and by the time I finish those tasks, it's too late to work in the field.' - Shakuntala Besra, Jharkhand, India.⁵⁷

Environmental degradation of natural resources like commons, streams and forests as well as land dispossession, have led to the loss of livelihoods for women dependent on small-scale farming and fishing. In some stories, women have had to turn to alternative income generating activities such as baking, crafting and backyard gardening, which has increased their work burden, stress and economic vulnerability, as they now have to balance these activities with their existing roles and responsibilities, without any significant positive changes in their economic condition. Some women seek employment opportunities outside of farming, but these are often scarce and poorly paid. These challenges are exacerbated in cases where men have to migrate for work outside the village, leaving women with a heavier burden in meeting both economic and domestic household needs.

4. Legal and Policy Barriers

National laws and policies frequently fall short of ensuring women's rights to food and nutrition, land and other resources. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, discriminatory inheritance and land tenure systems, limited access to credit and services and inadequate policy implementation collectively hinder women's—specifically rural women's—agency and food sovereignty. In most countries in the region, women's right to land, food and nutrition remains unrealised due to poor implementation of existing laws. In some cases, existing laws do not address women's rights and perspectives, perpetuating existing gender inequality in both these cases.

India (Jharkhand): The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 mandates equal pay to men and women for equal work.⁵⁸ However, women in the country continue to earn less than

⁵⁷ Swadhina. (2025). *Exercising their rights on land and food in accessing resources, entitlements and support towards economic independence: the case of women in Dhobani and Uldahi villages in Musabani district, Jharkhand, India.* [Unpublished].

⁵⁸ Swadhina. (2025). *Exercising their rights on land and food in accessing resources, entitlements and support towards economic independence: the case of women in Dhobani and Uldahi villages in Musabani district, Jharkhand, India.* [Unpublished].

men.⁵⁹ This not only undermines women's ability to secure food, nutrition and health of her family but also reduces her bargaining power within the household. Customary laws which are patriarchal in nature often take precedence over the National Land Reforms Policy in rural areas.⁶⁰ Even the Forest Rights Act (2006) that secures forest rights for tribal communities, recognises joint land titles with husband and wife or women's land claims in single headed households⁶¹ meets frequent resistance from the Forest Department and consequently, lacks implementation.⁶²

The Philippines: National land reform laws were used as a tool to pacify peasant unrest instead of genuine redistribution of land.⁶³ The RA 6657 or the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL)—the agrarian reform policy put in place by government officials who themselves hail from elite families—has built-in loopholes that allow landowners to evade genuine land transfer. The proposed National Land Use Act (House Bill No. 8162) enables land use liberalisation without prohibiting the conversion of agricultural land. Such laws and policies facilitate the conversion of farmland into residential, commercial or industrial uses, often benefiting real estate developers and foreign investors. Furthermore, recent developments in the Philippines like the Rice Liberalization Law opened the market to imported food, weakening local agricultural production and undermining food security.

Indonesia: Fisheries laws perpetuate a masculinist identity of fishing by defining fishermen as those who catch the fish (Law No. 31 of 2004, Article 1, paragraphs (10) and (11)), excluding other essential activities in the fisheries value chain.⁶⁴ The Law No. 45 of 2009, Article 1, paragraph (1) defines fishermen as those fishing using fishing vessels up to five gross tonnes, thereby excluding women who clean, sort and sell seafood at markets.⁶⁵ Law No. 7 of 2016, Article (45) limits women's roles in fishing to domestic tasks.⁶⁶ Altogether, these laws don't recognise women whose livelihoods involve providing food for their male family members going to sea, engaging in coastal fishing in small boats, seaweed cultivation and seafood processing, which leads to an

⁵⁹ Walter, D. and, & Ferguson, S. (2022, September 19). *The gender pay gap, hard truths and actions needed*. UN Women Asia and the Pacific. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/op-ed/2022/09/the-gender-pay-gap-hard-truths-and-actions-needed>

⁶⁰ Swadhina. (2025). *Exercising their rights on land and food in accessing resources, entitlements and support towards economic independence: the case of women in Dhobani and Uldahi villages in Musabani district, Jharkhand, India*

⁶¹ The Working Group for Women and Land Ownership. <https://www.wgwlo.org/women-forest-rights.php>

⁶² Sirur, S. (2024, April 4). *More than 15 years on, implementation of Forest Right Act is lagging, new report finds*. Mongabay. <https://india.mongabay.com/2024/04/more-than-15-years-on-implementation-of-forest-right-act-is-lagging-new-report-finds/>

⁶³ Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women (2025). *The Demands of Women Farmers and Other Stakeholders in Santa Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in Response to Intensifying Land-Use Conversion*. [Unpublished].

⁶⁴ Bina Desa. (2025). *Problems of Women Seaweed Fisher Due to Shrimp Pond Waste Disposal on The Arungkeke Coast, Arungkeke District, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia*. [Unpublished].

⁶⁵ Bina Desa. (2025). *Problems of Women Seaweed Fisher Due to Shrimp Pond Waste Disposal on The Arungkeke Coast, Arungkeke District, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia*. [Unpublished].

⁶⁶ Bina Desa. (2025). *Problems of Women Seaweed Fisher Due to Shrimp Pond Waste Disposal on The Arungkeke Coast, Arungkeke District, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia*. [Unpublished].

absence of legal recognition and protection. A lack of recognition as fisherfolk leads to women facing barriers in accessing government support like credit, technology, or education. Consequently, women fishers and their organisations struggle to fully access rights due to a lack of recognition in state policies, undermining their rights and ability to influence environmental and fisheries policies.

Papua New Guinea: National laws on land ownership along with patriarchal norms in communities often do not favor women's land ownership.⁶⁷ Policies specifically addressing women like those focused on women's economic needs through climate-resilient agriculture do not reach women who need them.⁶⁸ National and local policies often do not translate into tangible benefits for women on the ground. For instance, while policies may exist to support sustainable farming, the actual distribution of resources and training is inadequate. An example of this is the National Agriculture Development Plan (NADP) which outlines support for farmers, but many women farmers in rural communities, like Busbin, Wonn, and Nouru, report that they rarely receive the promised training or resources due to logistical challenges and biases in resource allocation.⁶⁹

Nepal: The Right to Food and Food Sovereignty Act of 2075 (2018), which is considered to be a landmark piece of legislation ensuring food security, addressing hunger and upholding the right to food sovereignty, is saddled with poor implementation due to conflicting policies, institutional limitations and a lack of local capacity.⁷⁰ The Raksirang Rural Municipality formulated its own Food and Nutrition Protection Strategic Plan in 2078 (2023/24) based on the principles of food sovereignty, but owing to conflicts with Nepal's trade policies (explained on p. 10) that promote export-oriented agriculture and cheap food imports, the intended positive impact of the national law is undermined leading to monoculture farming, reduction in crop diversity and weakening of local farmers' control over their food systems.

'Makawanpur is a pocket area for ginger cultivation. We once encouraged farmers in Raksirang to grow ginger, but at the time of selling, cheaper ginger from India flooded the market. We couldn't even get four Rupees per kilo. Farmers became discouraged and didn't even bother harvesting their ginger. All of it decayed in the fields. Now, the ward office fixes the rate as per market price before cultivation, and the ward collects the produce at harvest time. This has helped farmers secure better prices.' - Chairperson of Raksirang Rural Municipality⁷¹

⁶⁷ Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency. (2025). *Empowerment Of Ieta Women Farmers*.

⁶⁸ Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency. (2025). *Empowerment Of Ieta Women Farmers*.

⁶⁹ Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency. (2025). *Empowerment Of Ieta Women Farmers*.

⁷⁰ Tukee Foundation. (2025). *The strategies of Chepang Women of Raksirang take control of their local food over corporatized junk food and play a key role in defending their Indigenous food system and promotion of local food in the community*.

⁷¹ Extract from the FPAR Story from Nepal. Tukee Foundation. (2025). *The strategies of Chepang Women of Raksirang take control of their local food over corporatized junk food and play a key role in defending their Indigenous food system and promotion of local food in the community*. [Unpublished].

National laws and policies continue to undermine women's land rights and hinder the realisation of their human rights. Patriarchal norms embedded in land ownership laws often prevent women from accessing and controlling land. Policies are often based on data that do not adequately capture the specific challenges faced by women. This leads to a lack of targeted interventions and lack of gender-specific provisions that can address the unique needs of women farmers. Deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers, legal instruments that favour the interests of the elite, economic constraints, and bureaucratic hurdles further restrict the realisation of food sovereignty for women.



5. Lack of Recognition of Women as Food Producers and Land Owners

Despite their vital role in food production in agriculture and fisheries, women are rarely recognised as farmers, landowners or fishers. Land ownership is almost exclusively held by the male head of the family, leaving women legally powerless over the land they cultivate, hindering their access to credit, technology and government schemes. Prevalent patriarchal norms along with women's limited financial resources and lower incomes compared to men restricts their access to markets and their ability to purchase essential farming supplies. Financial institutions may require collateral, which many women do not possess, further limiting their ability to invest in sustainable farming resources, restricting their capacity to improve agricultural productivity or diversify their income.

Women without sons who lose their husbands often lose land rights entirely and face social stigma, being labeled as “witches” in Jharkhand, India.⁷² This practice forces widows to depend entirely on male relatives for economic support, increasing their vulnerability to hunger, malnutrition and exploitation. Many women are not even made aware of their property rights and do not possess the legal knowledge to pursue those by themselves.

6. Exclusion from Decision-Making and Community Processes

Beyond land ownership, women are also marginalised in critical agricultural decision-making processes. Savitri Murmu in Jharkhand highlights that although women work tirelessly in the fields, men alone decide which crops to plant, where to sell produce and how to allocate profits.⁷³ This exclusion undermines women's ability to gain economic autonomy and fulfill their nutritional needs. Advancing feminist food sovereignty starts with acknowledging the absence of women from decision-making processes and entails women becoming active participants in the processes that shape their food systems.

‘Women are always laborers, whether on their own farm or someone else’s. They work hard in the fields but do not have decision-making power. Decisions about which crops to plant, where to sell the produce, and who receives the profit are made solely by the men in the household.’ - Savitri Murmu, Jharkhand⁷⁴

⁷² Swadhina. (2025). *Exercising their rights on land and food in accessing resources, entitlements and support towards economic independence: the case of women in Dhobani and Uldahi villages in Musabani district, Jharkhand, India*. [Unpublished]. In the state of Jharkhand in India, women from marginalised groups especially those who do not follow social norms, (but in some cases, men as well) are subjected to harassment and violence by being unjustly labelled as witches by their community. The reasons for this have been given as widespread poverty, lack of access to healthcare, lack of social protection, among others; Sharma, A. (2022, Feb 23). *Greed and Power Override Myth As India’s Poorest State Strives to End The Hunting Of Witches by 2023*. Article 14. <https://article-14.com/post/greed-power-override-myth-as-india-s-poorest-state-strives-to-end-the-hunting-of-witches-by-2023-6215a5813c68f>

⁷³ Swadhina. (2025). *Exercising their rights on land and food in accessing resources, entitlements and support towards economic independence: the case of women in Dhobani and Uldahi villages in Musabani district, Jharkhand, India*. [Unpublished].

⁷⁴ Extract from the FPAR Story from India. Swadhina. (2025). *Exercising their rights on land and food in accessing resources, entitlements and support towards economic independence: the case of women in Dhobani and Uldahi villages in Musabani district, Jharkhand, India*. [Unpublished].

Cultural norms further restrict women's participation in economic activities and decision making processes. Women are not even informed of any significant developments at the community-level. They are excluded from community meetings in many cases on the grounds that it is inappropriate for them to leave the house at night, when meetings are usually held, as reflected in the case of Arungkeke in Indonesia.⁷⁵ Consequently, men become more informed about local-level developments. Newly married women, as Sitamani Murmu from Jharkhand shares, have no voice in household matters until they bear children, often waiting years to gain any influence.⁷⁶ Women who dare to assert their rights face backlash and social isolation.

It is important to note that in some cases, the right of communities as a whole to organise is undermined by red-tagging,⁷⁷ limiting their ability to advocate for their rights, as has been seen in the Philippines.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Bina Desa. (2025). *Problems of Women Seaweed Fisher Due to Shrimp Pond Waste Disposal on The Arungkeke Coast, Arungkeke District, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia*. [Unpublished].

⁷⁶ Swadhina. (2025). *Exercising their rights on land and food in accessing resources, entitlements and support towards economic independence: the case of women in Dhobani and Uldahi villages in Musabani district, Jharkhand, India*. [Unpublished].

⁷⁷ Red-tagging in the Philippines is defined as the harassing and threatening of activists done by the state by accusing them of being combatants or supporters of the communist insurgency. This leads to the surveillance of activists, exaggerated charges, enforced disappearance, and extra-judicial killings as well; Human Rights Watch. (2024, September 25). *Philippines: Dangerous 'Red Tagging' of Labour Leaders*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/25/philippines-dangerous-red-tagging-labor-leaders>

⁷⁸ Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women (2025). *The Demands of Women Farmers and Other Stakeholders in Santa. Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in Response to Intensifying Land-Use Conversion*. [Unpublished].

III. Grassroots Women Disrupt the System: Strategies, Demands and Policy Shifts



1. Reclaiming Power Through Collective Action

Women in all the six FPAR stories have started mobilising and coming together to share their lived experiences in groups through regular interactions. Public gatherings, regular conversations and group discussions give them the strength to advocate for their land rights, revive their traditional agricultural practices and navigate patriarchal customs, resisting the commodification of their diets and the imposition of unhealthy, market-driven food systems. In many cases, women expressed that having such spaces has encouraged them to express their opinions publicly, strengthened their confidence, and helped them articulate and contextualise their lived experiences.^{79,80,81}

Their path to obtaining autonomy challenges the capitalist logic that treats land and food as mere commodities for profit. Instead it emphasises food as a human right linked to dignity, health, well-being, Indigenous knowledge, culture, and ecological sustainability. Traditionally, women's collectives in the region were limited to small self-help groups focused on microfinance or savings.⁸² A collective with a clear focus on women's human rights related to land, food and agriculture is a new development in some communities, which has laid a strong foundation for future advocacy and collective action around women's rights to land, food, and agricultural resources.

- In Santa Cruz, Laguna in the Philippines, the formation of community-level groups encouraged the documentation of the community's experience with land-use conversions. This helped in awareness and capacity-building of the community in standing up against the projects. The community developed a *polyeto* or campaign brochure that details the various land-use conversion projects (the subdivisions, Laguna Lakeshore Road Network, Solar Farm), their impact on small-scale women farmers and farm workers, as well as the calls of affected residents in Santa Cruz. The brochure detailed concrete calls to action: like encouraging active citizen participation in consultations, building solidarity among citizens against such projects through petitions and documenting land-use change cases and their impacts. It also served to raise crucial points such as whether or not they underwent the legal process of reclassification and conversion, initiating dialogues with the *barangay* (local government), *sangguniang barangay* (local government council), and other agencies, thereby strengthening the community's resistance against the land-use conversion projects.

⁷⁹ Bina Desa. (2025). *Problems of Women Seaweed Fisher Due to Shrimp Pond Waste Disposal on The Arungkeke Coast, Arungkeke District, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia*. [Unpublished].

⁸⁰ Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women (2025). *The Demands of Women Farmers and Other Stakeholders in Sta. Cruz, Laguna to LGUs in Response to Intensifying Land-Use Conversion*. [Unpublished].

⁸¹ Tukee Foundation. (2025). *The strategies of Chepang Women of Raksirang take control of their local food over corporatized junk food and play a key role in defending their Indigenous food system and promotion of local food in the community*. [Unpublished].

- Fear did not deter women in Arungkeke district, Indonesia, who strategised to discreetly test the pollution level of the discharge of shrimp farm waste into the sea. The women disguised themselves as wild seaweed collectors to approach the waste dump and took used mineral water bottles to carry the samples. Community representatives then provided waste samples to provincial-level stakeholders who explained to them that the collected samples did not meet the laboratory testing requirements and then provided tips on how to collect waste samples. On realising that wastewater testing is expensive, community members initiated a collective business and sold homemade food products made by its members, even increasing the selling price to raise funds for the laboratory testing needs. The two jars of waste samples taken by the community serve as a means of communication with stakeholders at the provincial level, resulting in an agreement between Bina Desa and three provincial-level stakeholders (WALHI South Sulawesi, academics from Hasanuddin University, NGO Cita Tanah Mahardika) to collaborate on advocacy efforts. Bina Desa and KPNS (the local organisation in Arungkeke village) shared the outcomes of this activity with the community, thereby making it a part of the learning materials and campaigns.
- At the heart of food sovereignty lies secure access to land and commons—a right that has been historically denied to women and that is now exacerbated by the impacts of environmental degradation, climate crisis, urbanisation and discriminatory land laws and policies. Women in Busbin, Wonn, and Nouru, in Papua New Guinea, have experienced dispossession through government projects and land sales that prioritise external interests over ancestral claims. However, many of them united to seek support from the Catholic Women's Association, resulting in a productive dialogue with the Catholic Church, which granted them temporary access to church-owned land for agricultural activities.



2. Reviving Feminist Food Systems and Knowledge

Reviving feminist food systems centers on reclaiming traditional food practices, community resilience, and Indigenous knowledge, all vital to challenging the dominance of corporate food hegemony. For centuries, women, particularly Indigenous and rural women, have been the backbone of sustainable food production, acting as seed savers and custodians of agricultural knowledge and practices passed down through generations. Local festivals and cultural celebrations create spaces for sharing traditional foods, recipes, and cultivation techniques, strengthening cultural identities and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Conducting community-oriented gatherings and building communal food-gardens, reclaiming traditional food practices and reviving traditional recipes not only reaffirm women's contributions as food producers and seed custodians but also galvanise collective resistance to the privatisation and commodification of food.

- In Kushtia in Bangladesh, sharing and reflecting on the devastating impact of tobacco cultivation on their health and agriculture led some women to the compelling realisation that they need to move away from tobacco farming and diversify their agricultural activities. About ten families have completely stopped growing tobacco, while others are gradually reducing tobacco land in favour of maize, vegetables, and fruit trees like guava and banana. This is a significant step forward. Additionally, around 50 women have started cultivating alternative crops on a small portion of their land, and practicing poultry and livestock farming to enhance their food security and reduce reliance on tobacco farming. These changes reflect a slow but positive shift toward food sovereignty and Indigenous agricultural practices.
- Building on the strength and the confidence obtained through regular meetings, the women of Raksirang district in Nepal initiated a dialogue with their local school to hold a local food festival to serve nutritious delicacies made with local root vegetables, lentils, leafy greens, which was widely appreciated. The enthusiastic response to the food festival proves that they can advocate for the introduction of diverse, healthy traditional meals into mid-day meal programs for school students. At the household level, they continue to make conscious choices of replacing aerated soft drinks with nutritious, traditional beverages, challenging the imposition of changing societal expectations of food consumption, improving family nutrition and rekindling dignity of their traditional foods. These women are committed to passing down traditional food knowledge to their children, ensuring that the next generation appreciates both the nutritional and cultural value of Indigenous foods.

- In Jharkhand, India women are working towards building community gardens. Community gardens are envisioned as spaces not only for growing nutritious food but for seed-saving and for women to get together and exercise their choices and make decisions independently on their food and nutritional outcomes. These are also spaces where women share Indigenous knowledge, strengthening community resilience by reducing their reliance on corporatised foods.
- Limited access to financial support and seeds and agricultural implements due to discriminatory financial practices further undermine women's ability to practice agroecological methods. To address this, women come together and pool resources, share knowledge and advocate for inclusive policies that recognise their contributions to agriculture and acknowledge and respond to their needs and demands. They also participate in initiatives that enhance their income like soap-making with locally sourced ingredients or learning climate-resilient farming skills. By creating networks of solidarity, women navigate institutional barriers and build economic independence.



3. Claiming Rights and Advocating for Policy Change

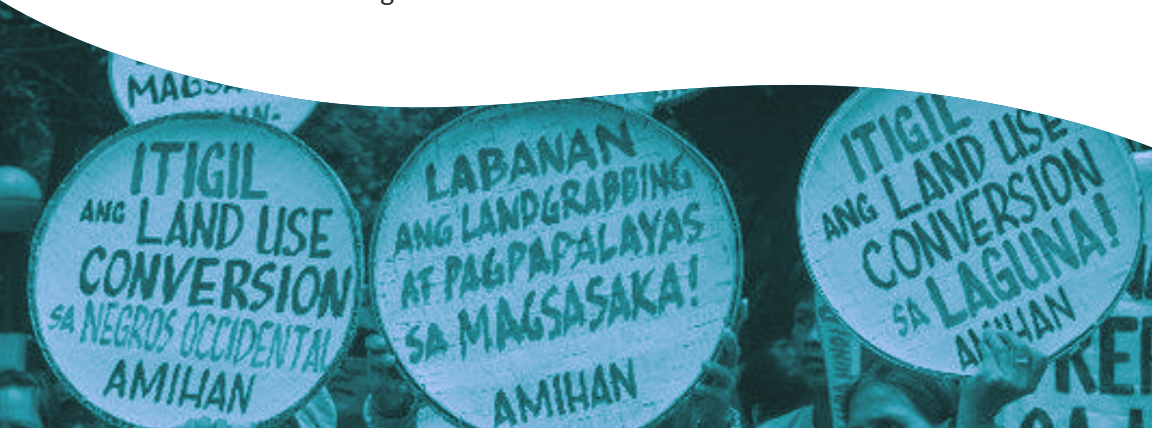
The systemic nature of these interconnected socio-political and economic challenges demands structural change. Women in these communities are now turning into active advocates for their rights, pushing for policies that support the transition to food sovereignty. Some of the strategies being pursued by women to interact with the government and articulate and advocate for social and ecological well-being are as follows:

- In **Santa Cruz, Philippines**, the community group held a consultation with a local political party to address land-use conversion concerns in their area related to the Laguna Lakeshore Road Network (LLRN) project. Their local politician raised issues at the 2025 Department of Public Welfare and Highways budget hearing about the Philippine Pesos (Php) 3.4 billion (60 million USD) LLRN phases 1 and 2, emphasising impacts on small-scale women farmers and farmworkers. This resulted in the Department Secretary confirming ongoing loan talks with the Asian Development Bank and environmental approvals but promising a detailed project road map and continuous dialogue with affected communities.
- In **Jharkhand, India**, the women were unaware that they were entitled to numerous rights to agriculture and food under existing government laws, policies and schemes. When the women's group started becoming a noticeable presence, government representatives reached out directly to the women, thereby enabling women to directly place their problems in front of the officials. This paved the way for the women to understand government schemes and mechanisms, obtain financial support like agricultural loans and seeds for farming. The women's group also acted as an anchor to publicise and build a better understanding of existing laws like the Forest Rights Act.
- The community in **Arungkeke, Indonesia**, drafted a request letter to access AMDAL (Environmental Impact Assessment) documents of the shrimp production corporations, and submitted it to the South Sulawesi Provincial Environmental Agency. They were then directed to submit the request to the Jeneponto District Environmental Agency. Despite attempting both routes, the community was not able to obtain the documents. Even so, this demonstrates the active participation of women who are determined to continue engaging with their local government bodies in pursuit of what is right for them and their environment.
- At the policy level, **Chepong women in the Rakshirang community** engaged with government officials and the media, advocating for the protection and promotion of Chepong food culture. Their approach enabled them to voice their concerns, share their innovations with recipes made with traditional foods, and influence local policy, resulting in initiatives like junk-food-free zones.

- Women in **Busbin, Wonn, and Nouru** have started actively participating in local decision-making bodies like Community Government Ward Level meetings. They were able to voice their concerns and propose solutions directly to policymakers, ensuring their needs are considered. Their participation has boosted their confidence and given them a sense of accomplishment, transforming their perspectives and approaches to challenges. Through these meetings, women have gained a deeper understanding of community issues and governance, enabling them to better advocate for their rights and those of their families. This engagement has also strengthened solidarity and mutual support among them as they work toward shared goals.

In addition to the above strategies, the FPAR findings also mentioned legal and policy measures that can be demanded by feminist movements across contexts to fight for legal recognition of women's contributions at the national level. These would address longstanding invisibility and marginalisation of women in food production, strengthen women's leadership in local and national food governance and decision-making processes, strengthen resistance to corporate control of agriculture, placing women at the center of food systems transformation. A few of these recommendations are as follows:

- **National laws should explicitly recognise women as crucial food producers**, as farmers and fisherwomen, and address the systemic barriers that women face in accessing government schemes for credit, social support and technology and actively take steps to address their exclusion.
- **Make governments, NGOs and global platforms aware of the gendered impacts of food insecurity** by sharing extensive documentation on the key roles of women in food production, the negative impacts on women's food sovereignty due to land-use conversion, absence of land rights for women and intensive cash crop cultivation. Further, advocate for increased funding and support for grassroots women's organising, food sovereignty and climate resilience initiatives. Lead cross-country knowledge exchange and capacity building on strategies being pursued by women in their regions to advocate for their rights.



- **Intersectional frameworks should be incorporated into relevant legislations and policies** that address the unique challenges faced by women from marginalised groups
- **Local governments should regularly interact with women's collectives** via local level camps to: promote rights-based awareness; publish summaries of relevant laws in understandable local languages; facilitate more interaction of women's collectives with their local government representative; and rigorously monitor legal provisions for women's land rights and food security, addressing any loopholes in implementation with immediate effect.
- **Strict sanctions should be imposed on industries that violate protections and harm natural resources.** Governments should penalise private actors that cause environmental damage and destruction of the livelihoods of small-scale food producers. States can make use of extraterritorial obligations to regulate transnational corporations.⁸³

Broadly, the above strategies challenge patriarchal structures that hinder the acknowledgement of women's active role in food production and recenters women's role and leadership in the fight for food sovereignty. At the outset, in some FPAR experiences, there was notable resistance from the men, who even objected to women gathering together to discuss their issues. However, in many cases, by the time the FPAR was coming to an end, there were signs of progress in the attempts to foster a supportive mindset among them. They not only attended the women's meetings but also actively assisted in organising them, such as by arranging seating, food and water for participants. Their attitudes have shifted, becoming more open to the idea of women as co-decision makers in agricultural matters. They also showed increased encouragement toward various land and agricultural schemes designed for women. Although still a small minority, even village elders began to soften their opposition to the concept of women owning land. This also reflects the power of getting women together and asserting their rights to their families and community members.

⁸³ Künemann, R. (2016, March), *Twelve policies how States can make good use of extraterritorial human rights obligations*, ETO Consortium. https://www.etoconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/EN_12PoliciesStatesETOs-2.pdf



A gentle reminder: While calling for the design and implementation of laws, we must also recognise that legal systems can further reinforce patriarchal norms, privileging male authority and subordinating women. The definition of family and head of household in laws and policies often encodes gendered assumptions, perpetuating gendered discrimination.⁸⁴ Adding to the discriminatory definitions enshrined in legal documents, social norms contribute to further inhibiting women's access to justice and resources. These norms entail that women are dependent on their male family members for everyday legal procedures and management of financial resources as well. Similarly, in a capitalist society, law can serve as a tool for the protection of private property in favour of the elite who already possess capital and perpetuates economic inequality. Weak labour laws, deregulation of land markets, militarisation and enforcement of the armed forces to protect business interests, criminalisation of activism and dissent, shows the deployment of rule of law to serve the state-corporation nexus, undermining the human rights of small-scale food producers. Laws can create an illusion of neutrality, and even progressive laws can be limited in their implementation as they challenge prevalent power structures and face opposition from historically powerful entities, as is evident in the case of the Forest Rights Act in India.⁸⁵ The application of legal instruments without acknowledging the social, economic and political realities might not be able to shift the dial on the underlying class and patriarchal dynamics and exploitation inherent in capitalist systems.

⁸⁴ Dhattiwala, R., (2024), *Why family laws are usually patriarchal: An evolutionary perspective*, Scroll. <https://scroll.in/article/1071042/why-family-laws-are-usually-patriarchal-an-evolutionary-perspective>

⁸⁵ Sirur, S. (2024, April 4). *More than 15 years on, implementation of Forest Right Act is lagging, new report finds*. Mongabay. <https://india.mongabay.com/2024/04/more-than-15-years-on-implementation-of-forest-right-act-is-lagging-new-report-finds/>

IV. Moving the Needle Globally

The six FPAR stories are not isolated local concerns but pertinent examples of injustice globally. At the international level, there are legal instruments that have been fought for by social movements across the world that provide legal recognition and political leverage needed to address the systemic inequalities small-scale food producing women face. These instruments provide a common language and universally acknowledged standards that can be used to hold governments and corporations accountable for violation of rights of people anywhere on the planet. They also strengthen solidarity and cooperation across borders, amplify women farmers' voices in international forums, and demand gender-responsive reforms in agricultural policies. Ultimately, these work to advance food sovereignty, ecological justice and social equity in the face of patriarchy, colonialism, and neoliberalism embedded in the industrial food system.



One such powerful instrument is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), which was voted in favour by all the six countries where the FPAR stories are from, in the United Nations General Assembly in 2018.⁸⁶ The UNDROP calls on states to take measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against peasant women and other women working in rural areas.⁸⁷ It states that women have the right to participate meaningfully in development planning at all levels, have access to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, benefit from social security programmes, education and training, have the right to organise to access economic opportunities, financial services, agricultural credit and loans, have access to, use of and management of land and natural resources, decent employment, equal remuneration and social protection benefits, and be free from all forms of violence.⁸⁸

But the UNDROP has been criticised for not recognising several structural issues pertinent to gender equality, specifically, women's equal rights to inherit land and equal tenure rights in agrarian reform processes, rights to equality in marriage and in family relations, and their sexual and reproductive health and rights. It also fails to highlight the disproportionate burden of unpaid reproductive and agricultural labour performed by women and how discrimination is carried out on the grounds of gender.⁸⁹ The UNDROP also faces challenges in its implementation due to its non-binding nature and the lack of public awareness of the declaration at national and international levels.⁹⁰

Another relevant instrument is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation 34. It recognises rural women's rights to land, natural resources, including water, seeds and forests and fisheries as fundamental human rights.⁹¹ It calls on state parties to take measures

⁸⁶ United Nations. (2018, November 20). *Third Committee approves the UN Declaration on the Rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas: Via Campesina*. La Via Campesina. <https://viacampesina.org/en/2018/11/united-nations-third-committee-approves-the-un-declaration-on-the-rights-of-peasants-and-other-people-working-in-rural-areas/#:~:text=Zainal%20Arifin%20Fuat%2C%20from%20La,moment%20in%20the%20peasants%20struggle>

⁸⁷ United Nations General Assembly. (2019, January 21). *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2018. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas*. A/RES/73/165 <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/UN%20Declaration%20on%20the%20rights%20of%20peasants.pdf>

⁸⁸ United Nations General Assembly. (2019, January 21). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas*. A/RES/73/165. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2018. <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/UN%20Declaration%20on%20the%20rights%20of%20peasants.pdf>

⁸⁹ Claeys, P., & Martignoni, J. B. (2021, December 14). *Women are peasants too: Gender equality and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants*. Geneva Academy. <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/Women%20are%20Peasant%20Too.pdf>

⁹⁰ Kemp, D., Owen, J. R., Ang, M. L. E., Loginova, J., & Schuele, W. (2025, January 17). *Climate change, biodiversity, and the Energy Transition: The potential role of the UN's Declaration on Peasants' Rights*. One Earth. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S25903322400589X#sec6>

⁹¹ United Nations. (2016) *General recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women*. CEDAW/C/GC/34 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/835897?v=pdf>

necessary to achieve equality of rural women in relation to land and natural resources and design and implement a comprehensive strategy to address discriminatory stereotypes, attitudes and practices that impede their rights to land and natural resources. Rural women's right to active, free, effective, meaningful and informed participation in decision-making should be ensured by the state, as stated by the Recommendation.⁹² Therefore, the lack of recognition of women's right to land and natural resources, the exclusion of rural women from decision-making processes in policies relevant to their livelihoods, among other instances of violations, especially contradicts the principles of CEDAW General Recommendation 34.

The CEDAW General Recommendation 34 also highlights that bilateral or multilateral trade agreements, economic and fiscal policies can adversely impact women and therefore, States should ensure that these policies are responsive to the needs of rural women. It highlights that the state should address the negative impacts of economic policies, including agricultural and trade liberalisation, privatisation and the commodification of land, water and natural resources, on the lives of rural women and the fulfilment of their rights. The six stories highlight discrimination against women, prohibiting their rights to land and natural resources, exclusion from decision-making processes and other such discriminations, indicating that these are violations of the principles underpinning the General Recommendation. Notwithstanding the non-legally binding nature of the Recommendations, they are meant to guide and influence national policies and legislations on the rights of women. Unfortunately, the non-binding nature of the instrument implies that it faces weak enforcement and implementation.

⁹² United Nations. (2016) *General recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women*. CEDAW/C/GC/34 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/835897?v=pdf>



V. Critical Learning Questions for the Movement

'Asking, we walk' - A Zapatista slogan

These FPAR stories highlight that food sovereignty is a complex political struggle. It is long and interspersed with numerous obstacles. As we pursue this goal, armed with determination, solidarities and strength, facing imperfections in our own strategies, setbacks, and threats from powerful groups, we have to embrace with humility the limits of our own knowledge and be open to questioning our approach, dedicatedly learning from the path taken, advancing through experiments, and questions.^{93,94} In that spirit, we offer the following questions for our collective reflection:

Passing the baton to the youth:

- The resistance to the expansion of industrial agriculture and neoliberal development entails active youth participation in Indigenous agroecological practices and innovation that will enhance traditional agricultural methods. In an economy and prevailing culture that systematically devalues farming and traditional livelihoods and rewards poorly those who practice it, how can we encourage youth to pursue these occupations?
- How do we ensure young women and girls are central to sustaining these movements?

Gender and agroecology:

- Many customary laws and traditions perpetuate patriarchy by restricting women's bodily autonomy and mobility, burdening women unequally, denying them a say in natural resource governance. How do we ensure that we confront and dismantle patriarchal customs and traditional power structures while proposing and advancing the revival of traditional food practices based on customary governance practices?

⁹³ Krishnan, S. (2013, November 12). *Journeys for an alternative world*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/journeys-for-an-alternative-world/article5340174.ece>

⁹⁴ Sitrin, M. A. (2005, February 1). "Walking We Ask Questions": An interview with John Holloway. Left Turn - Notes from the Global Intifada. <https://leftturn.org/%E2%80%9Cwalking-we-ask-questions%E2%80%9D-interview-john-holloway/>

- Do we need to deepen our engagement with men in these communities to ensure that while women feel strengthened to demand better conditions and human rights, there is also a shift in the perspective of men and elders who, in many cases, enforce restrictions on women?
- How do we centre the role of women as custodians of sustainable agriculture without reinforcing their identities as primary caregivers and the gendered division of labour?

Building just, equitable and sustainable agroecologies:

- As cash needs for education and healthcare increase in the neoliberal economy, how do we ensure that communities possess the ability to earn adequate cash income without sacrificing ecological sustainability and cultural autonomy?
- Given that traditional agricultural practices were shaped under different climatic conditions and environmental scenarios, how can we ensure their revival is reimagined to confront the realities of a changing climate and environmental crisis?
- What power dynamics remain even within alternative food systems?
- How far can community-level actions go in challenging global structures, while fostering care and solidarity among transborder communities?
- How do we ensure that the communities sustain the strength and resilience they have built through FPAR, beyond its duration?

ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
APWLD	Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
DA	Department of Agriculture
EU	European Union
FPAR	Feminist Participatory Action Research
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GMO	Genetically Modified Organism
ILO	International Labour Organization
IP	Indigenous Peoples
ISDS	Investor State Dispute Settlement
LLDA	Laguna Lake Development Authority
LLRN	Laguna Lakeshore Road Network
NADP	National Agricultural Development Plan
NGO	Non Government Organisations
PGFM	Patriarchy, Globalisation, Militarism and Fundamentalisms
SHGs	Self Help Groups
UN	United Nations
UNDROP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas
USD	United States Dollar
USDA	US Department of Agriculture
WTO	World Trade Organization

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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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