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A woman sweeps leaves in an orchard. © ILO/Bobot Go

Cultivating Gender Justice

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This Backgrounder is the first in a multi-authored series on Cultivating Gender Justice. In this series, we seek to uncover the structural foundations of sexism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations, and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions, and structures that hold patriarchy in place. To end hunger and malnutrition, we must end injustices in the food and agriculture system. Thus, dismantling sexism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations, and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society as a whole. Food First invites contributions on this topic from authors engaged in research and community action to dismantle racism in the food system.

While globalization and industrialization of the food system has resulted in fewer farms and farmers, the number of women farmers is increasing – but they’re fighting against a system that fails to serve them and their communities. Women are taking control of their food systems by farming, organizing, and advocating for policies that can create food systems that are better for farmers, workers, their communities, and our planet. Despite an increase in the number of women farmers, there is not a parallel trend in representation; women rarely control or hold power in the agriculture and food industry as a whole, and exploitation is rampant, especially among women of Color.

Women are shaping our food system for the better – they’re leading efforts to create a fair, healthy, and sustainable food system from the ground up. But, as many in the food movement have discovered, the painful and divisive

“I know a lot of really dedicated and inspirational women. These women are involved in agriculture for many reasons, often because they want their children and grandchildren to experience the nurturing environment of a farm, and because of their connection to animals and to nature... We don't yet have the power we need, but women are changing agriculture for the better.”

-Patti Edwardson, Iowa Farmer

effects of gendered oppression hamper our collective progress. Further, the food movement itself is not immune to the structural injustices it seeks to overcome, and must dismantle oppression in all its forms—including gender-based oppression—in order to achieve the sustainable and just food future we desire.

Structural, gender-based oppression, or patriarchy, characterizes the food system. Patriarchy is a system that socially, politically, and economically values men and masculinity over women and femininity. Despite the fact that women participate in the production and processing of food at roughly equal rates to men, most undernourished people in the world are women and girls.¹ Women's earnings are lower than those of men in all sectors, but the agricultural wage gap is among the worst of any industry.² The intersections of gender, race, and class in part determines where workers are located in the food system, what type of work they do, and their access to food. The food system is highly dependent on the labor and skills of women, but this doesn't mean they have decision-making power. Instead, their labor is unpaid or underpaid, and they are subjected to high rates of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence on the job—often taking the form of verbal harassment and unwanted

sexual attention from supervisors, especially among farmworkers.³

“I identify as a farmer. So-called traditional farmers may not see me that way, but I haven't experienced any push-back from my neighbors... I'm taking care of chickens, growing vegetables, the orchard, and am involved in decision-making in other aspects of the farm. I try to attend as many farmer's meetings as I can, and I'm often the only woman there. The head agronomist always opens the meetings with a sexist joke. The men don't laugh like they used to; the guy still makes the joke. Progress—I'll take what I can get as a woman in agriculture.”

-Patti Edwardson, Iowa Farmer

During the 2009 global food and economic crisis, 1 to 2 baby boys per 1000 births died who would have lived in a non-crisis economy—the figure for baby girls was 7 to 8 extra deaths per 1000 births.⁴ The fact that in today's world, baby girls die at four to eight times the rate as baby boys during times of crisis should be a wake-up call. The drivers behind this statistic include a host of gendered inequities that include access to food, health services, incomes, and ownership.⁵ These are also reflective of women's disproportionate exposure to violence and their exclusion from formal structures of political power. But these are not just phenomenon

from developing countries or 'somewhere else.' In the United States, a gendered and racialized wage gap persists. Latina women are paid just 63 cents for every dollar men are paid, Black women are paid 70 cents for every dollar men are paid, and white women are paid 84 cents for every dollar men are paid.⁶ Thus, the distribution of food insecurity is inequitable as well; 30.3% of US female-headed households are food insecure, while only 22.4% of male-headed households are food insecure.⁷

These statistics reflect deep structural injustices that are integral to our food system. US women farm operators as a whole receive 61 cents to the dollar made by men.⁸ Thus, when controlling for farm assets, work time, age, experience, farm type, and location, women generate nearly 40 percent less income than men—among the largest wage gap for any occupation.

But it's not just that women need to “catch up” with men. The inequitable position of women in the food system is actually part of what makes the food system work. How? Patriarchal capitalism. Classism, racism, and sexism merged during the formative period of colonial capitalism, and have been co-evolving ever since.⁹ The expansion of capitalist economies required – and still requires – the exploitation of people and the natural environment. Slavery, the exploitation of workers, and dispossession, coupled with unpaid and underpaid products of women, the poor, and people of Color are foundational—and integral—to the capitalist food system.

Peasant women on the margins of the industrial food system produce over half of the world's food. They feed most of the world's rural poor. However, as food and agriculture industrialize, these women are often exploited by new, capital-intensive forms of production and are either driven from their traditional land, or lose formal ownership of their land to men.¹⁰

As land is privatized and transferred to patrilineal ownership, women are often demoted to the economically and socially devalued roles of wives, field workers, domestic workers, and processors. Even the much heralded family farm is in many cases entirely dependent on the unpaid or underpaid labor of women—including sexual reproduction and the feeding, clothing, health and maintenance of households, in addition to the direct planting, harvesting, and caretaking of crops, livestock, and land. It's not that women aren't farming or producing food, it's that their labor is not recognized or valued in our capitalist food system. The value of women's work subsidizes the lucrative profits of the \$6-trillion-a-year industrial food system.

The entrance of upper middle class women into the global workforce has been made possible because poor women of Color perform household and reproductive labor. Men aren't doing enough household work to pick up the slack—it's simply handed off to women outside the home. In the 1970s, about 75% of food spending was on meals prepared at home; by 2012, only 57% of food spending was on meals prepared at home.¹¹ Much of the food work once done in-home is now done by women, mostly poor women of color, in food preparation positions at processing plants, restaurants, and grocery stores.¹²

Workers across the food chain are often women, and they work for low wages in difficult conditions—and women of Color are disproportionately represented in difficult conditions. Spatially, the women in food work who interact with people and act as the public face of an organization or institution are oftentimes white women, while those working in behind-the-scenes or “back-of-house” positions are disproportionately women of Color. For example, women make up the majority of agricultural product graders and sorters, and women and immigrants are preferred workers at meat processing plants.¹³ Meanwhile, the sales workforce of Wal-Mart, the world's largest food retailer, is 72% women.¹⁴

“In my experience when I've worked in agriculture, if there is work that needs to get done related to quality, detail, sorting vegetables, weeding small plants, and other hard work that requires hand-eye coordination and taking care of the soil and plants, I find that women are generally chosen to do those types of work... As a woman, it feels good to do this work. There is a satisfaction of working with plants, clipping its leaves as it lifts itself up to the sky. I just wish this work was valued, recognized, and paid adequately both in money, but also in healthcare, rest breaks, and other needs that we have as humans.”

-Rosalinda Guillen, Farmworker and Community Organizer

Nonetheless, the number of women farmers and farmland owners in the United States is rapidly growing. In fact, since 1978, the number of U.S. women farm operators has grown by nearly 300 percent, and the number of women farmland owners has grown as well.¹⁵ However, agrarian ideologies still center men as farmers and women as serving in supporting roles. A lack of representation in decision-making roles coupled with an overrepresentation in low-wage food chain jobs marginalizes women's positions in the food system. This also means women are critically important to the dismantling of our current industrial food system – and to the construction of a more just, sustainable food system.

Although women are often in precarious locations of the food system, it has not inhibited their leadership of food and agriculture activism. This is most visible in the movement for a more just, sustainable food system, where women work to grow food, organize their communities, and change policy in order to build a food system that works for all of us.

“The courage that women have when we recognize our own power at every level is amazing... And we're going to stand our ground. There are some things that are just not negotiable – including dignity and survival. As women, the more of us there are leading and supporting each other, the better off we are. We are strategizing together, moving forward together, for a more just future.”

-Rosalinda Guillen, Farmworker and Community Organizer

Endnotes:

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