

Women Farmers and Food Justice

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Preserving biodiversity through farmer control of seeds

Lead-up study to the 62nd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW62)

While women make up close to half of the world's farmers, their access to agricultural resources and land is often severely limited. As a result, women are relegated to marginal environments (such as wild plant areas, forests, or gardens) and tasked with unpaid food-related care work (like storing, preparing, and serving food), leading many researchers and policy experts to overlook women's contributions to agriculture.

Especially in small, indigenous farming communities, the feminization of agriculture positively impacts sustainable agricultural practices. Women and girls usually tend to a much greater diversity of crops than men, and many of these crops are folk varieties or resilient landraces that adapt well to climate change. Women are also more likely than men to establish informal exchange networks to save and distribute seeds. Yet small-scale farmers, and women farmers in particular, have little protection that ensures their free access to agricultural knowledge and genetic crop diversity.

Considering the increasing shift away from traditional farming methods, this study demonstrates how informal seed saving strategies, including community seed banks, are of central importance to conserving agro-biodiversity. The author argues that we need to develop policies and institutional mechanisms that go beyond restrictive measures against the patenting, proprietary breeding, and genetic modification of seed. It is equally important to develop legal frameworks and regulations that assure broader farmer control.

Carolyn Sachs is Emeritus Professor of Rural Sociology at Penn State University. In her research on food sovereignty, she pays particular attention to environmental sustainability and gender equality in rural farming communities in the global South. In this paper, Sachs demonstrates how small-scale women farmers across the world are fighting for the preservation of agro-biodiversity and seed sovereignty in the face of rapid industrialization and climate change. As the progressive solutions that women farmers come up with indicate: the future of agriculture must be female.

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