



M S Swaminathan Research Foundation
Science for Sustainable Development

MINA SWAMINATHAN MEDIA FELLOWSHIP

INSIGHT BRIEF



**GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES FOR SUSTAINABLE
FOOD SYSTEMS IN KERALA**



PRELUDE

Food systems are shaped by the changes in land-use systems, the complexity of climate crisis and extremities, biodiversity loss, diet preferences, economic slowdowns due to unstable markets, pandemics like COVID-19, changes in agrarian relations, etc. These drivers are exacerbated by the underlying causes of poverty, also very high and persistent levels of inequality, specifically on income, productive capacity, assets, technology, education and health (SOFI, 2021)^[1]. In this context, sustainable food systems have been promoted by different actors that are closely aligned with SDG 1 'No poverty' and 2 'Zero Hunger'. Promoting cultivation of locally adapted crops and varieties, intensification and diversification of farming systems,

nutritional gardens, value-added products and local food chains, creating awareness of healthy foods and nutrition, also enabling access to food subsidies, are part of food systems. Although both women and men are critical to sustainable food systems, due to persistent gender inequalities, women face more barriers to accessing productive resources and services. As there is increasing feminisation of the labour force in agriculture, Gender Transformative Approaches (GTAs) are promoted to accomplish food security, better-quality nutrition, and sustainable and equitable agricultural development. The approach primarily deals with the underlying gender and social norms, attitudes and behaviours that deepen existing gender inequalities. It is addressed through actions that break stereotypes in gender roles and responsibilities by building women's access to and control over productive resources and services.

From this background, to foster the exchange of ideas between researchers and development journalists while ensuring reporting of rural affairs, especially in the vernacular press, the Mina Swaminathan Media Fellowship for Gender and Development was launched by MSSRF in 2020. This is the second year of the fellowship and focuses on the 'Gender transformative approaches for sustainable food systems' theme.

ABOUT MS MINA SWAMINATHAN AND THE MEDIA FELLOWSHIP

Ms Mina Swaminathan is known for her contribution to gender and development as well as creative communication for sustainable development. To commemorate her work in these interdisciplinary fields, M S Swaminathan Research Foundation has instituted the Mina Swaminathan Media Fellowship to promote science-media partnerships encouraging journalists to focus on issues of gender and development, particularly in rural India.

STUDY CONTEXT IN KERALA

The case studies were conducted in Wayanad district, Kerala. The district has 31.25 per cent of the state's tribal population and is home to the highest number of tribal groups. Besides crop cultivation, spices, plantations, and forest produce gathering are prominent livelihoods in this district. The major crops cultivated in Wayanad include paddy, tea, coffee, jackfruit, mango, ginger, cardamom, coconut, areca nut, pepper, papaya, etc. Most tribal residents work as agricultural labourers, marginal farmers, basket makers, or carpenters, among others. Women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play a prominent role in facilitating small-scale entrepreneurship in Wayanad. The Wayanad landscape is emerging as a tourist hotspot and along with that the local land use and production systems, value chains and market links, food habits and diets, and social and gender relations are also changing. Two different cases were studied and reported in this Fellowship: the first study focuses on the development of local value chains and promoting skilled work among women labourers, while the second one emphasizes health consequences arising due to malnutrition suffered by tribal women and children while sensitising stakeholders involved.

^[1] <https://www.fao.org/3/cb4474en/online/cb4474en.html>

STORY 1: Promoting healthy foods and local value chain development - case of a local bakery run by SHG members

A group of young entrepreneurs joined together to promote healthy foods, increase the income of the small farmers, and generate additional skilled employment for farmers and women. They established a bakery that produces different healthy products using locally grown ingredients, which are procured directly from small and tribal farmers. The bakery employs women SHG members by enhancing their knowledge capacities and skills. These women were unskilled agricultural labourers before joining the bakery. The study highlighted best practices adopted in the process, challenges faced and some recommendations for stakeholders.

BEST PRACTICES:

1. **Local Procurement:** Almost all ingredients like ginger, black pepper, bird's eye chillies, coffee, bamboo rice, etc., are sourced directly from local farmers at market prices. Such a process helped farmers gain access to direct and assured procurement at the farm gate, overcome intermediaries in the market, get a profitable price based on product quality, and earn better.
2. **Local-Healthy Foods:** Healthy alternatives like wheat flour are substituted for maida without added preservatives, and natural, local flavouring like jackfruit is infused into recipes. Innovative use of locally produced foods like the use of jackfruit for flavours encourages demand in the local area, for safe and healthier food by avoiding chemical preservatives and improving fibre-rich diets ensuring pro-nutrition value chain development.
3. **Capacity Building and Training:** Women from SHGs were trained in preparing the recipes, and taking care of the whole production process.
4. **Technical support:** The team receives scientific inputs and continuous technical assistance from the Agricultural Research Station, Ambalavayal, Wayanad, and the Mysuru Defense Food Research Laboratory, Mysore, Karnataka. Strong institutional support has helped the team fine-tune and diversify the food, based on consumers' preferences and tastes.
5. **Market Reach:** Creation of a local market network and establishing linkages with them helps sustain the retail demand from the locality. About 25 retailers now receive supplies from the unit regularly.
6. **Women Empowerment:** Women SHGs are involved in the value-addition process, which is an opportunity for adding value to important assets of women labourers, namely, time and labour. In this way, the initiative helped women obtain skilled work and regular employment.

KEY CHALLENGES

1. **Access to capital to develop local value chains:** Investment capital is the main obstacle for small businesses to thrive, and getting a loan remains a challenge too. Existing schemes of the banks and line departments are difficult to access, and there is a lack of appropriate support services to promote youth and women's participation in higher value chains.
2. **Cost of healthy foods:** Producing high-quality ingredients results in high production costs. Awareness among consumers is needed to have a healthy diet and price.
3. **Strengthening the supply chains:** Strong backward and forward linkages in the supply chain need to be developed in the process to ensure sustainability. The current supply chain has to be rebuilt to make the product easily reachable and to ensure the availability of raw materials based on market demand.
4. **Natural disasters:** Floods and epidemic diseases such as COVID-19 exacerbate the situation and are the main risks in such initiatives. Suitable risk-mitigation support services are necessary for such local initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS:

1. Access to credit facilities must be enhanced to promote the participation of youth and women in responsible food systems.
2. Enabling an environment for such local value chains and micro enterprises is essential, especially from the government with industry-friendly policies.

STORY 2: Malnutrition among tribal women and children - consequences of changing diet and challenges in consuming food supplements

The monthly report on Severe Acute Malnutrition (prepared by Integrated Child Development Services, Ministry of Women and Child Development) points out the alarming health status among tribal children in Wayanad. The report highlighted that prevalence is about 78 per cent of severely malnourished children in Wayanad District belonging to tribal communities. Among malnourished tribal children, re-admission to hospitals for other health issues is high. Besides, there is also a high rate of anaemia among adolescent women, also pregnant and lactating mothers. This indicates the prevailing adverse health conditions among tribal households.

THE KEY DRIVING FACTORS REPORTED ARE:

1. **Lack of nutritional literacy:** There is no awareness among men and women of tribal households of the negative impact of malnutrition on health. There is hesitation to follow up after the initial check-up.
2. **Changes in diet quality and pattern:** In the past, tribal people consumed a wide variety of wild edibles, but now they have a typical cereal-based diet that is not balanced. Shifting food patterns from ethnic and cultural foods has had a negative impact on their health.
3. **Inhibition in consuming nutrition supplements:** Lack of awareness and knowledge on nutrition supplements provided by the state government, parents restrict children from consuming nectar powder (Amrit powder) and grains packed with vitamins provided by the Anganwadi centres.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS:

1. **Convergence among line departments:** Since the Scheduled Tribes Development Department works closely with the community while extending welfare schemes, the Department of Health and the ICDS can closely converge with them to convey health-related schemes to these communities. The current rate of malnutrition among tribal children necessitates continuous and comprehensive intervention.
2. **Investment in awareness building:** Stakeholders such as social workers, volunteers, and NGOs can collaborate effectively to create awareness.
3. **Promoting local champions:** Training local youth can improve their knowledge of healthy traditional food diets and mediate behavioural change.