



M S Swaminathan Research Foundation
Science for Sustainable Development

MINA SWAMINATHAN MEDIA FELLOWSHIP

INSIGHT BRIEF



**GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES FOR SUSTAINABLE
FOOD SYSTEMS IN TAMIL NADU**

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 feminization 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.

The common focus of the two different stories is nutrition. The first story pointed out how malnutrition and hunger is still persistent concern among a tribal community, while the second one focused on how terrace garden, urban farming and value-added foods support urban dwellers to access healthy foods.

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

STORY 1: Struggles of the Irular tribal community to access food, nutrition and water

The Irular tribe, a particularly vulnerable tribal group lives in northern Tamil Nadu. Habitually, their main livelihood is catching rats in paddy fields, trapping snakes, gleaning fish and prawns using their hands during low tides, and also collecting honey. Besides, they work as agricultural labourers or in rice mills belonging to large farm owners. Malnutrition among tribal communities is common because they are poor and their dietary pattern are not consistent. The Tamil Nadu government has the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Project, etc., to help address the malnutrition problem.

CHALLENGES/ISSUES FACED:

1. **Women do not get adequate opportunities for employment and income:** The Irular men migrate to nearby villages and neighbouring districts to find work, while women stay back in the village to work as farm labourers. They work during the main agricultural season and are not employed during the rest of the days. Hence their income opportunities are not regular. Hunger and food scarcity are often acute during the year, affecting their health and nutrition.
2. **Poor dietary practices:** Rice (received through Public Distribution System (PDS)), curd, pickles, and green chillies are important items in their daily diet. The intake of vegetables is restricted to special occasions.
3. **Lack of access to safe drinking water:** Their settlements are temporary huts in common/public land and they do not have proper housing infrastructure. There is no direct access to quality drinking water, and the Irular women have to fetch water at a distance of one kilometre, which is available only for 2.5 hours every morning. They face discrimination from women of other communities (high caste) who collect water first. If the water stops before the Irular women can get their share, they are forced to return home empty-handed.
4. **Lack of entitlement cards:** Most Irular families do not have ration cards and cannot avail of subsidized food grains provided by the government through the PDS. They buy ration rice sold by other community members at Rs 6-8/per kg.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Livelihoods:** To improve the livelihoods of the Irular community, the Government must have decentralized and context-specific targeted welfare plans since the community is deprived of enjoying the benefits of government-provided schemes for various reasons.
2. **Access to entitlements:** To facilitate access to PDS and other government programmes, the government should ensure basic entitlement cards like ration cards for all tribal families. Since all the subsidies and entitlements of the government are linked with this basic identity document. A proper Anganwadi system should exist in the tribal localities to ensure nutritious food for the tribal children.
3. **Building capacities:** Training in small-scale entrepreneurship for women helps diversify their income and improve their knowledge and skills.

STORY 2: Terrace gardening and Urban farming – Potential systems to create urban women farmers

STUDY CONTEXT

The increasing changes in food systems children. This context motivates many gardens and urban farming has been emerging and healthy vegetables continuously. The government of organizing capacity-building programmes and providing horticulture kits for a subsidized rate. Besides, peri-urban areas and common spaces in urban areas are evolving as main spaces for the production and supply points of vegetables to urban households.

and diets have a negative impact on health, especially among urban households to look for viable alternatives. The terrace as an important food system. It helps to access safe, nutritious Tamil Nadu encourages terrace gardening by regularly organizing capacity-building programmes and providing horticulture kits for a subsidized rate. Besides, peri-urban areas and common spaces in urban areas are evolving as main spaces for the production and supply points of vegetables to urban households.

Women play a key role in the management of terrace gardens while ensuring safe and healthy food for their children, as well as others. In the process, they master skills in production, access a suitable variety of seeds, join networks promoting such initiatives to learn, share the seeds and other inputs, etc. Such processes support women and help build their agency, also capabilities. This makes them evolve as urban farmers, innovators, and entrepreneurs.

BEST PRACTICES

1. **Enabling access to vegetables through terrace gardens:** Vegetables such as spinach varieties, tomato, brinjal, beetroot, chilly and okra are organically cultivated, and the experience was shared with other interested women members. This evolved as a model urban farm cultivating millet, fruits and vegetables.
2. **Ensuring nutri-dense and safe vegetables:** Production systems are adopting safe and organic cultivation practices, and soil and other inputs are scientifically tested for the right agronomic practices.
3. **Building new knowledge and skill through peer learning:** Several technical institutions are offering courses on such unique production systems and women come forward in building their knowledge and skills. Apart from academic learning, gaining experience and skills from other farmers in a hands-on manner helped them involve in the process gaining confidence
4. **Innovative value-added products to raise awareness on healthy food:** Engagement in raising awareness on the use of a variety of foods with unique nutritional quality and millets as a supplement for children and patients. Also, different easy-to-cook recipes and processed foods are piloted and taken to consumers. For marginalized communities, such foods are marketed at a lower price.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. There is a need to increase awareness and more training opportunities on terrace gardening, urban agriculture and peri-urban agriculture to access safe and healthy foods. Such programmes should be designed in a gender-responsive manner to encourage more participation of women from different sections of the society
2. Government should conduct hands-on training through agriculture and horticulture departments and organize exposure visits to other gardens to encourage learning from peer groups
3. Establish a networking platform to share seeds, knowledge and other products (this is an informal process now)
4. Provide necessary backwards and forward linkages to access quality inputs, also remunerative markets
5. Provide training on post-harvest processing for small-scale production, and necessary small-scale machinery like solar driers, hydroponic systems, etc.