CHAPTER 8

Domain E: Equity

Abstract In this chapter, we examine how marginalization and inequity—from international policy arenas to the household level and along the intersecting dimensions of gender, age, class and caste, religion, health and race—pose a major barrier to the development of sustainable food systems. The more transformative edges of the agroecology movement are advancing feminist, decolonial and anti-racist approaches that move the analysis from the centres of power to the margins where the hitherto excluded and oppressed are claiming power. Inequity manifests in overt discrimination as well as unequal access to resources and decision-making power at the household or farm level or to markets, credit, knowledge, governance, relations and other resources at the community or territorial level. In the absence of a focus on equity, efforts to advance agroecology risk exacerbating inequity.

Keywords Gender • Feminism • Discrimination • Decoloniality • Oppression

As described in the introduction to this book, today's dominant food system is rooted in corporate power and built on centuries of racist, patriarchal, colonial relations. The result is an unevenly developed global food system that can be seen in different national and local forms.

Power in this system is concentrated in the hands of a privileged minority, while the social and environmental “externalities” disproportionately burden already oppressed groups (Holt-Gimenez and Harper 2016). Transformations towards more sustainable and just food systems are thus hampered by dynamics of marginalization and inequity. From international policy arenas to households, the intersecting dimensions of gender, age, class and caste, religion, health and race pose a major barrier to an agroecological transformation of the food system. As Olivier De Schutter and Christine Campeau (2018) have stated, “We cannot sustainably improve how we produce and consume food without addressing questions of power and of inequality.” This is, they note, not just about productivity; it also points to a need to “reframe the problem of hunger and malnutrition as a problem of social justice”.

Supporting agroecology without directly and actively addressing these issues is likely to either replicate or reinforce inequity. This is why transformative agroecology, with its political and social aspirations and roots in social organization (see Chap. 7 on the networks domain), is one of the most promising pathways for pursuing equity within agriculture and food systems. Agroecology must be an arena for work towards food justice, for decolonializing food (Grey and Patel 2014) and for pursuing feminist approaches to food sovereignty (Soler et al. 2019). Equity is a critical domain of transformation, where agroecology can fulfil its potential as a part of wider calls and movements for social and environmental justice.

A particular focus for those promoting agroecology and food sovereignty is gender inequity, because it intersects with so many other forms of inequity (Mora and De Muro 2018), varying in contexts from caste, social class, sexual orientation and religion to race and age. Inequity manifests in different ways. It can be seen in unequal access to resources and decision-making power (at the household or farm level) or to markets, credit, knowledge, governance, networks and other resources (at the community or territorial level). At the national and global levels, inequity is inherent in the power of the agribusiness sector (Pimbert and Lemke 2018).

Agroecology can be well suited to strengthening equity through a deeply political process, but inequity cannot be undone through agroecological practices alone. Movements centred on issues such as climate change or food security often fail to engage meaningfully with social justice and equity issues (Wretched of the Earth 2019). Without explicit

work to address inequities, the mainstreaming, or ‘massification’, of agroecology risks that a minority of actors in the dominant regime become the voice of agroecology while the majority at the margins become further disempowered. In that way, those in positions of power, including researchers like us (see Gómez et al. 2013), are generally part of the lock-in of the dominant regime; however, where ‘marginalized’ people gain power, transformation is more likely.

ENABLING CONDITIONS

Angela Davis, distinguished professor emerita at UC Santa Cruz, once noted: “In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist.” Much cited in 2020, this commitment can be applied to all forms of structural inequity. An agroecology that contributes to social justice can exist only in communities, territories and societies actively working to dismantle systems of oppression, privilege and inequity. This means prefiguring and modelling more equitable farms, community spaces, relationships, organizations, attitudes and actions. It also means working through collective action—often as a part of social movements—to identify, confront and dismantle inequitable cultures, policies and institutions.

Improved gender equality and the empowerment of rural women can drive various aspects of agroecology, including improved nutrition and increased crop and genetic diversity among others (De Schutter and Campeau 2018). Women often play crucial, but underappreciated or invisible, roles in agroecology as the guardians of seeds and local breeds, with specialized knowledge and skills for preserving and using them for food, feed, spiritual and medicinal purposes. They also often contribute holistic and nutrition-centred perspectives as well as an eye for not just economic but also health, environmental and social needs. Affirming and protecting women’s work and insights can thus advance agroecological transformation. It should not, however, become a way to reify gendered differences in roles and knowledge, which often adds to women’s workload. Rather, improving equity can be seen as increasing the fluidity of gender roles, allowing improved cooperation, labour division, decision-making, living conditions and governance by directly tackling the many destructive impacts of patriarchal and misogynist dynamics.

Since norms and perceptions that shape gender relations evolve along with changes in the production system (Lambrecht 2016),

agroecology itself can be an instrument for promoting gender equity and women's self-empowerment. This emancipatory potential is tied to agroecology's emphasis on local and diversified knowledge, skills and tasks; input independence; and co-creation. In fact, since many agroecology initiatives are led by women, their participation in decision-making at the household and community level is often both an essential prerequisite for and a result of agroecological innovation (Lopes and Jomalinas 2011).

Box 8.1 Understanding Gender Relations and Equity

Gender relations are the rules, traditions and social relationships in wider culture and organizations which together determine how power is allocated, and used differently, by women and men. Inequalities between the power of women and men are primarily caused by structural and institutional discrimination.

The concept of *gender equity* relates to social justice in these relations according to each person's specific needs and possibilities. *Empowerment of women*, on the other hand, implies building critical awareness and agency to transform the structures that produce gender inequalities. Thus, empowerment can be seen as a process of change on the path to greater equity, both at the individual and collective level (following de Marco Larrauri et al. 2016).

In addition, literature is emerging that examines the relations between *gender diversity* and sustainable food and farming while attention to gender diversity is also gaining ground in farmers' organizations (e.g. La Via Campesina 2016).

Thus, gender equity and agroecology can be mutually beneficial. Because learning and knowledge-sharing are at the heart of agroecology, it can provide spaces for women to work in solidarity and gain livelihoods, income and agency at productive, reproductive and community levels (Khadse 2017). In many documented cases, participating in agroecological networks helped women rise out of sometimes violent situations of isolation and affirm their own identity and knowledge (Galvão Freire 2018). In the words of Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2018, p. 236): "Agroecology needs peasant women and peasant women need agroecology."

Nevertheless, agroecology *per se* does not explicitly address patriarchy and other forms of gender-based inequality that can undermine a socially just process of transformation (de Marco Larrauri et al. 2016). While agroecology's theoretical underpinnings and principles are rooted in the promotion of equity, its practice does not always reflect this. There may be many women involved in agroecology initiatives and social movements, but many may remain hidden as 'wives of farmers' rather than potential leaders (Khadse 2017). As Olga de Marco Larrauri et al. (2016) argue, much agroecology work has not yet incorporated an explicit gender analysis and has thereby permitted the persistence of hidden "internal contradictions" in the farming family (p. 2). Several cases show how, when agroecology efforts are not accompanied by an intentional equity focus, there is a real risk that it adds to women's unpaid care and work burden. Persistent gender inequity may well become an obstacle for the spread of agroecology in turn.

A virtuous interaction between the agroecological movement and the feminist movement is essential to 'de-normalize' gender inequity, along with other inequitable relations and patterns in communities that grow and process food. A feminist perspective on agroecology is useful, as is a critical pedagogy that analyses the condition of women's subordination and pathways to change (Schwendler and Thompson 2017). Explicit efforts must be made to value women's work, empower women politically and address socially constructed gender roles. In terms of women's self-organization, improved access to resources and education regarding agroecological practices and socio-political equity, two things are needed: deliberate, contextualized action and appropriate interventions (FAO 2018; Lopes and Jomalinas 2011). This demands methodological designs and indicators that, first of all, make gender inequity visible (de Marco Larrauri et al. 2016) through reflection and discussion by women on their realities, for instance, to allow it to be addressed. The work of AS-PTA, an NGO in the state of Paraíba, Brazil, provides important lessons in this respect (Box 8.2).

Studies on initiatives that were successful in transforming gender relations in agri-food systems show the key role of iterative, dialogue-based and women-led experimentation with agroecological practices such as diversification, intercropping, nutrition education and marketing innovations (de Marco Larrauri et al. 2016). These strategies often started from a collective reflection by women on their condition, providing a means for them to understand and challenge it using their own agency and collective

Box 8.2 How Women Came Out of Isolation Through Agroecology in Brazil

For over 15 years, AS-PTA, a Brazilian NGO, had been supporting family farmers in developing agroecological innovations. But despite successes, a patriarchal culture remains dominant both within the families and in farmers' organizations in the state of Paraíba. This made women's knowledge, practices and importance for the farm household invisible. It became clear that the inequity between men and women was a barrier to the full implementation of agroecology across the region.

So AS-PTA started to work with rural women in Paraíba. Step by step, the women built a collective identity: 'women farmer-innovators in agroecology'. They accomplished this through meeting, exchanging and reflecting on their realities and work. Making their knowledge visible and explicit motivated many women to expand their experiments with agroecology, subsequently creating new markets, an income and greater respect for themselves, and finally standing up for their rights and their desire to further amplify agroecology.

They came out of isolation—in many cases, connected to domestic violence—and into positions of leadership. The key step here was unearthing and organizing the wealth of knowledge of agroecology held collectively by women, which is often diffuse, fragmented and undervalued, even by the women themselves.

Source: Galvão Freire (2018)

action, “be it in productive, reproductive, public, or private spaces” (Lopes and Jomalinas 2011; see also: Bezner Kerr et al. 2019).

Gender inequity is particularly oppressive when it intersects with other kinds of inequitable social relations. Figure 8.1, developed by Michel Pimbert and Stefanie Lemke (2018), shows how agroecology can contribute to greater equity when attention is paid to the intersecting balances of power and inequality between actors in the food system, such as farmers and transnational corporations.

To be truly transformative, grassroots organizing, policy advocacy and urban planning in agroecology must involve the leadership of black, Latin and indigenous people, women and other often-marginalized bodies and explicitly work on an equity agenda. The agenda can include, for example,

Fig. 8.1 How agroecology and sustainable diets are complementary concepts that can address inequality and contribute to sustainable and just food systems (*Source:* Pimbert and Lemke (2018), concepts based on Rosset and Altieri (2017) for agroecology, Burlingame and Derini (2012) for sustainable diets and Collins (Collins 2000) for intersectionality)

an analysis of inequity that names and addresses racism and discrimination and a deconstruction of structural racism in policies, planning, organizational cultures and education. This can help to topple barriers and provide resources for processes of agroecological transformation led by black and indigenous persons and people of colour (BIPOC). Necessarily, this approach to agroecological transformations would include a process of reparation aimed at undoing historical harm: the inequities and privileges that stem from the theft of indigenous land and livelihoods, plantation agriculture, chattel slavery and the ongoing subjugation of BIPOC cultures and economies around the world.

Farming can offer BIPOC communities the opportunities for economic autonomy while providing safe spaces to gather and celebrate without fear of criminalization or state-based violence (White 2018). As described by the health policy research scholar Ashley Gripper (2020) during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests,

Black agriculture provides a way to engage with the disturbing history of this country, that we live in a place built on stolen Indigenous land and the brutal enslavement and stolen labor of my ancestors. It opens the door to us understanding how this all shapes our collective journey toward liberation.

Several Native American communities are also reviving aspects of their traditional agricultural and land-use practices as part of their struggles for self-determination and food sovereignty. As they use traditional seeds to diversify farming, they also seek out, learn, share and affirm the distinct histories of their indigenous communities and unlearn dominant narratives about the supposed inferiority of indigenous food and agriculture (Mihesuah and Hoover 2019). For example, the Anishinaabeg people on the White Earth Indian Reservation in western Minnesota are reviving the cultivation and harvesting of a traditional food of the Ojibwe people, wild rice. As they reclaim their agroecological practices, they honour the legacies of the Ojibwe people to food and farming: an act of resistance to white supremacy and colonial domination (LaDuke 2017).

Similarly, the 40-year-old process of the Women Sanghams, the women's groups which include over 5000 Dalit women who run small farms in the drylands of Telangana, India, highlights the importance of collective reflection and action to overcome domestic and caste-based violence as well as to enhance Dalit women's agroecological pathways to food sovereignty and greater autonomy (The Community Media Trust et al. 2008). Box 8.3 provides another example of a food sovereignty and agroecology that centres anti-caste, indigenous and feminist activism.

Agroecology and anti-hunger research both examine the underlying causes of inequity and point at the need for shifts in governance (Chappell 2018; Wittman et al. 2017). Governance-related measures such as those listed by Alessandra Mora and Pasquale De Muro (2018) can help reinforce such a virtuous cycle between agroecology and equity. They include a greater emphasis on inclusive, people-centred development; better policy monitoring and implementation; decentralization and greater participation of and investment in people who are marginalized and excluded; strengthening the local capacity, accountability and transparency of governments; and stronger implementation of the rule of law. Key too are policy and programmes that address the legacy of racial, ethnic and class inequality to promote equity in food systems.

One effort to do so is the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact of 2015: a commitment by over 160 cities around the world to develop “sustainable

food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework”. In addition, there have been calls for governments to support agroecology by prioritizing implementation of the UN recommendation on the rights of women living in rural areas, adopted in 2016. This covers women’s rights to participate and benefit from rural development; to health, education, employment, economic, social and public life, and protection from violence; and to land and other components of ecosystems. Indeed, the role of formal and informal democratic institutions in promoting equity in agroecological transformations cannot be underestimated.

Box 8.3 The Kūdali Intergenerational Learning Centre and the India Food Sovereignty Alliance

Fig. 8.2 Seeds of Resistance event at the Kūdali Intergenerational Learning Centre

(continued)

Box 8.3 (continued)

Indian society, like those of many other countries, is highly stratified and structured by class, gender and caste-based inequality. While many organizations work on issues related to agroecology and food sovereignty, the Kūdali Intergenerational Learning Centre and the India Food Sovereignty Alliance embed such work in an anti-caste, anti-patriarchy and anti-capitalist foundation. It is from this starting point that they engage with the politics of food sovereignty and agroecology.

Kūdali (which means joining, meeting) is a physical learning centre in Telangana, India, and a transformative space for intergenerational, intercultural learning and popular education initiatives. Kūdali is a part of the food sovereignty movement led by Dalits, the indigenous Adivasis, and small peasants, pastoralists and other ‘people who eat’ (sometimes referred to as consumers). Kūdali supports the indigenous philosophy also promoted by the *Buen Vivir* thinking in Latin America, in which food sovereignty and social justice are a critical framework of action and practice.

Members of India’s Food Sovereignty Alliance know that reaching out to rural and urban children and youth in schools and universities for a dialogue on food sovereignty is critical for the future of this movement. Interactions with youth take place in schools and universities as well as in the movement’s learning centre.

At Kūdali, critical thinking on collective futures is encouraged through meeting agroecological farmers; visiting their fields and eating the food grown on their farms; understanding the links between people, the ecology, culture and food and questioning the actors and structures that block food sovereignty; learning to work with soil, dung and seeds; and expressing their views in diverse creative ways including art, song and theatre.

Together, by affirming their culture, rights and agency, the India Food Sovereignty Alliance directly confronts inequity as the basis of realizing the promise of food sovereignty.

Source: Yakshi (www.yakshi.org.in) and the India Food Sovereignty Alliance (<https://foodsovereigntyalliance.wordpress.com/>)

DISABLING CONDITIONS

Inequity is, as we have shown, pervasive across all social systems. Women and people from lower castes, minority ethnic groups and races often find that the rules of the game are heavily biased against them in society because they have been historically structured around the physical needs, capabilities and political interests of the powerful, who designed them in the first place (Goetz 1997).

The food system has a long history of dispossession and exploitation of people of colour. Today, they must navigate structurally racist societies with longstanding patterns of inequity, reverberations of historical trauma, anti-blackness and white supremacy that play out in food systems as in society. The study of the relationship between racism and food systems has been most thorough in the United States, with many accounts of how black peoples, indigenous peoples and people of colour have faced, first, exclusion over ownership and, in the case of indigenous peoples, theft of land. Today, ongoing structurally discriminatory policies continue to raise barriers for BIPOC people to access land, financing, education and other resources that are fundamental to building agroecology (see Chap. 4 on access to nature).

On the other hand, many of the emerging ‘alternative food networks’ and initiatives related to agroecology, farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture are driven by privileged interests and steeped in white culture and values—or what is often referred to as whiteness. These initiatives are often exclusionary and perpetuate harm (Slocum 2007). Racism is closely tied to the injustices causing poverty, hunger and malnutrition (Holt-Gimenez and Harper 2016). Ensuring equity of access to healthy food, resources and dignified, living-wage jobs would make meaningful contributions towards more justice and equity in the food system. In addition, Eric Holt-Gimenez and Breeze Harper (2016) note, resources that are being used in methods for healing historical trauma, and working through immobilizing feelings of internalized oppression, fear, hopelessness and guilt, can be brought into the agroecology movement.

Women are particularly hard-hit by these persistent burdens. The dominant agricultural development model is “largely gender blind, patriarchal, and indifferent to human rights, including women’s rights”, note Ana Paula Lopes and Emilia Jomalinas (2011) as it ignores and undermines the important knowledge and perspectives of women and other systematically marginalized people in agriculture and rural communities. Around the

world women are still largely responsible for collecting water, fuel, cooking, caretaking and agricultural tasks, yet continue to have less access and rights to a variety of resources, health services, and care and decision-making.

An ongoing policy focus on commercialized, large-scale, export-oriented agriculture, for instance, has in some cases led men to migrate to urban areas to find work, increasing the pressure on women to care for their families' health and food security (Deepak 2013). For example, strong correlations have been found between the use of agrochemical inputs and gender inequity in the Sahel; here, men are the main recipients of state-subsidized chemical fertilizer (Brescia 2017) while women generally do not have access to them. This has left women to be the first to experiment with soil fertility-enhancing practices grounded in agroecological principles. While this is a positive development, recognition and support for these women's efforts and knowledge has not often followed.

Similarly, 'green revolution'-type approaches have maintained or exacerbated disadvantages for poor and women farmers and other marginalized groups (Negin et al. 2009). In numerous countries, women have been effectively blocked from engaging in agroecological innovation through means such as violence—from the psychological to the physical. Policy blindness to these inequities maintains conditions of inequality and patriarchy (Schwendler and Thompson 2017) in communities, and beyond.

Intersecting inequities in rurality, peasant status, caste, race, class, religion, health, age and gender, along with aggressive large-scale land grabs and rising food prices, have in many places weakened the position of rural women even further. Such persistent inequity can disable the self-organizing processes in communities that drive agroecology transformations. For example, Rachel Bezner Kerr et al. (2019) found that in Malawi the intersection between gender and class dynamics, combined with state policies, undermines agroecology-related processes that hold the promise of addressing inequality. Similarly, Manoj Misra (2017) argues that any strategy to address rural malnutrition in Bangladesh through agroecology must first resolve the existing conflicts between opposing agricultural classes, such as between landholders and workers without land.

Despite such issues, within agricultural research and extension, as well as in ministries for environment and development, units specifically set up to help integrate gender or indigenous peoples' issues in different departments have been notoriously under-resourced in staff and funds—and marginalized (Goetz 1997). Equity-sensitive policy proposals are rarely

reflected in budgetary allocations. This de-linking of progressive policy statements from actual budgetary re-orientations and commitments often occurs in the public expenditure planning process, thus effectively excluding gender and other intersecting equity issues in national or local agricultural development and land-use planning. The under-representation of women, minority ethnic groups and BIPOC people is also an obstacle to the institutionalization of equitable practices in universities, government departments and society (Sian 2019).

The obstacles to equity and inclusion are also embedded in the operational procedures and service delivery of development organizations. In project design and implementation, relatively little attention is usually paid to the unequal division of labour, power and resources between women and men, as well as between groups differing in regard to class, age, race, ability, sexuality and ethnicity. The interventions of bureaucracies such as research institutions or government ministries of agriculture and rural development have often generated and exacerbated intersectional inequities, ultimately harming people and livelihoods (Goetz 1997).

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