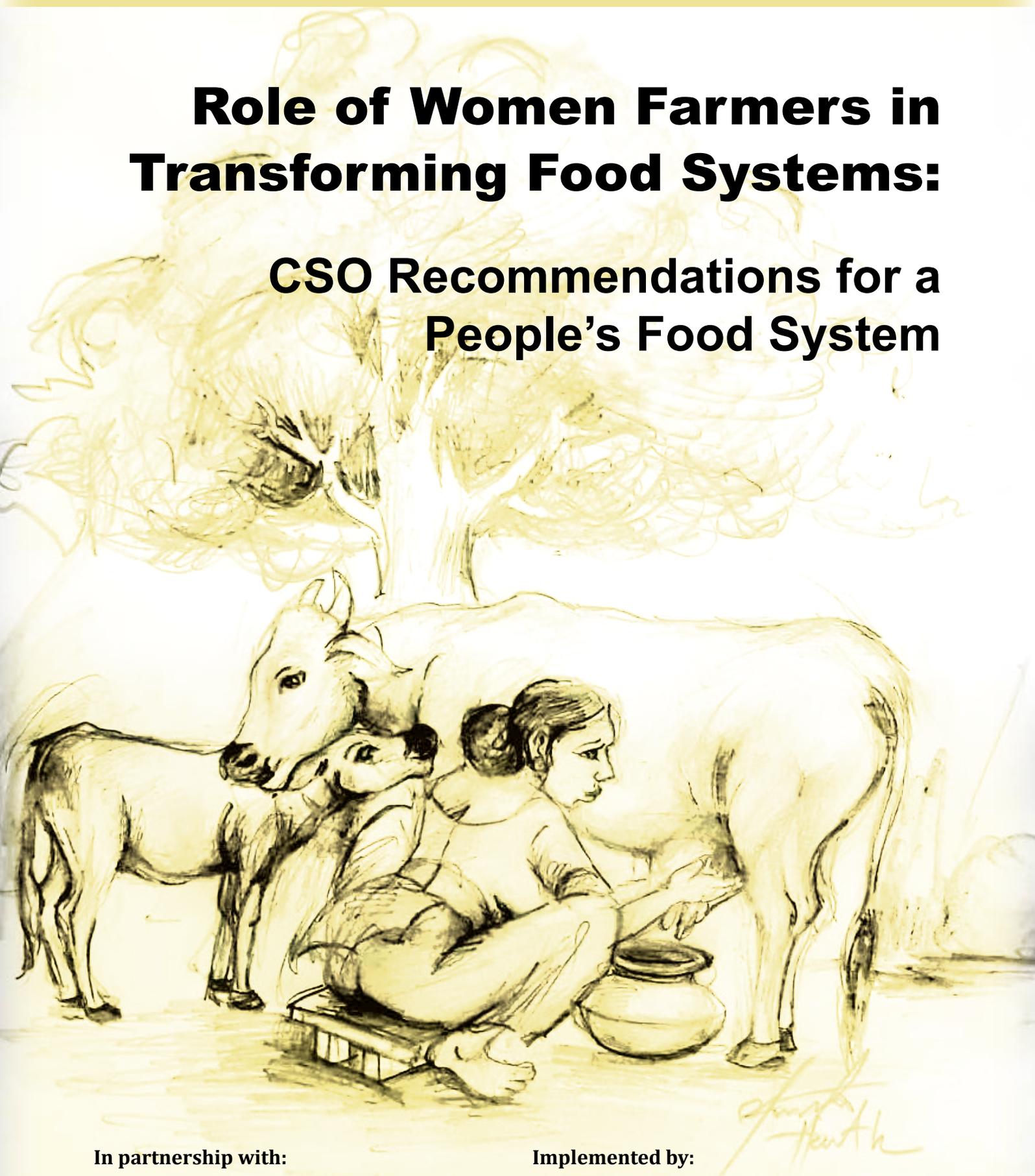


# Role of Women Farmers in Transforming Food Systems:

## CSO Recommendations for a People's Food System



In partnership with:

Implemented by:





# **Role of Women Farmers in Transforming Food Systems:**

**CSO Recommendations for a People's Food System**

**Consultation Report in joint submission by  
Law and Society Trust and Savistri Women's Movement - Sri Lanka,  
in partnership with We Effect**

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# Introduction

The UN Food System Summit convenes in September 2021, at a time when the World has realised the need for a complete transformation of our food system more than ever. Law and Society Trust and Savistri Women's Movement in partnership with We Effect held consultation with women farmers and their organizations in Sri Lanka, has developed these recommendations to guide a complete transformation of our food systems, which recognize women producers as leaders of it.

We recognize and support the concerns of other CSOs and social movements, who fearing that the UN Food System Summit has sidelined the voices of small producers and people affected by the current industrial food system in favor of corporate interests, were upfront in raising the concerns of small producers.<sup>1</sup>

We expect the recommendations in this document will lead towards a revitalised food system that places the needs and rights of small scale producers, consumers and nature at its center – a food system that prioritizes food sovereignty over corporate profits.

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1 [https://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EN\\_Edited\\_draft-letter-UN-food-systems-summit\\_070220-4.pdf](https://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EN_Edited_draft-letter-UN-food-systems-summit_070220-4.pdf)

To facilitate this dialogue at the global level, We Effect re-iterated its position to the FSS. We Effect is committed to:

- Being a resource for providing our input to the different digital mailboxes set up to get feedback into the meeting (both national and global).
- Providing arguments and key messages for our participation in dialogues and forums related to the FSS.
- Creating a space for discussion and sharpened advocacy priorities related to the right to food, building on the joint global advocacy strategy and interim strategy articulated by We Effect and Vi Agroforestry
- Engaging with Member organizations who are working towards the FSS

We Effect's key message to UN FSS is: Put people, not profit at the heart of food systems!

We Effect is also expected to use following supporting messages reinforcing its position in the dialogues:- We Effect will reinforce this message and this position with supportive messages in its dialogues, urging that UN, Governments and Civil Society,

- Put human rights first and stress the need for political and structural change
- Ensure meaningful public / civic participation in development and work against the shrinking civic space
- Acknowledge the role of small-scale farmers in development / ensuring food security
- Respect experience based - traditional knowledge
- Ensure that research truly benefits small-scale producers
- Include a global perspective in the national dialogues

We Effect is putting forward its/ this position on behalf of the cooperatives and partners consisting of farmers' and civil organizations at the UNFSS dialogue.

The We Effect, Sri Lanka country office has worked steadfastly with its partner organizations LST and Savisthri, to collect independent views of people of Sri Lanka on matters relating to food security. Specifically this partnership has brought in the voices of cooperatives and women farmers in Sri Lanka to the global arena, Together, we expect recommendations in this document will lead towards a food system which places the needs, concerns and rights of small scale producers, consumers and nature at the center, and prioritize food sovereignty over corporate profits.

# Background

Women play a pivotal role in Sri Lanka's agriculture sector although their contribution is neither recognized nor reflected in national policy frameworks. The contribution made by women in food production is critical. Women in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are responsible for producing more than 50% of food grown in the world (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011). However women farmers globally, with Sri Lanka marking no exception, are faced with numerous obstacles that hinder or prevent them from using their full potential to strengthen food systems and uphold food security in their families, communities and countries (de Silva, 2020).

In two-thirds of the world, women hold the keys to the food economy as producers and consumers. We need to further explore women's role as farmers because of their ability to make such large contributions despite unequal access to land, credit, and information (Shiva, 1996).

This report provides timely and tangible evidence to substantiate the need for a transformation in our food systems to be based on principles of social justice and equity, be oriented towards the small-scale producer, especially women producers and be developed within the framework of agroecology.

This report seeks to unpack the following:

1. Understand the current state of play: What is the reality faced women farmers in Sri Lanka
2. Collect ground level evidence: What are the key deterrents faced by women farmers
3. Identify policy gaps and make recommendations

The process of collecting evidence for this report includes in-depth consultations conducted in five provinces in the country with approximately 100 women farmers drawn from We Effect partner organizations, village level cooperatives and other civil society organizations and movements.

- Anuradhapura (North Central Province)
- Batticaloa (Eastern Province)
- Vavuniya and Mulathivu (Northern Province)
- Nuwaraeliya (Central Province)
- Hambantota (Southern Province)

Comprehensive summaries with key findings of each consultation can be referred to in Annex 02.



# 01

## **Current state of play: The reality faced by women farmers in Sri Lanka**

### **1.1 Grappling with a broken food system**

Food systems are positioned at the intersection of several overarching goals of the United Nations and member states, as embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals. These goals include elimination of poverty, hunger and malnutrition in all its forms, achievement of good health and well-being, while promoting environmental sustainability (ASN, 2020).

*Despite the high prevalence of industrial food production, almost 1 in 10 people are deprived of sufficient food and over 3 billion people in the world are unable to afford a healthy meal (World Economic Forum, 2021). Over 50% of the world's food production is far from being sustainable and equitable. As of today over half of earth's land surface has been cleared to grow food.*

### **1.1.1 The failure of industrialized food production in the wake of Covid-19**

Our food system is already broken and it has failed to ensure the food security of the people. Malnutrition and undernourishment remain concerns with 32.6% of women aged 15 to 49 years being anemic and with 15.9% of infants having a low weight at birth. We still depend largely on imported food items to fulfill our food requirements, and this places our food security in danger specially in times like this when the international markets are not operated smoothly.

Our agriculture system has failed to ensure a sustainable livelihood for the farmers. Increased corporate control of agriculture is pushing small scale food producers out of their land and livelihoods. The fact that more than 80% of the poor in Sri Lanka are living in rural areas points to serious issues impacting the livelihoods of rural communities, which largely is related to agriculture. Contribution of agriculture to the GDP has declined rapidly over last couple of decades. The failure of the rural economy in providing dignified livelihoods has been identified as one of the major causes of youth uprisings in the country in last 40 years.

Our food system has also become a major environmental polluter. Sri Lanka is one of the highest users of agro chemicals in the world, which contributed not only to polluting our waters and soil but putting the entire population into serious health risks. Chronic Kidney Disease among farmers in the dry zone is a good example of this phenomenon. Large scale mono crop cultivations have resulted in massive destructions of forests, watersheds and bio diversity.

Macroeconomic policies which prioritized industrialization, urban development and export-oriented commodity production have undermined the local agriculture and food security systems. Drastic reductions in Government investment in rural agriculture, lack of protection and support for local farmers, conflicts and natural disasters have put the livelihoods of food produces and our entire food system in an extremely vulnerable position.

Evidence from the field indicates clearly that the COVID -19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and discrimination faced by small-scale farmers, especially women farmers.

*It will take a longer time to recover from the economic setbacks resulting from the COVID-19. Discourses in sustainable development are increasingly substantiating the claim that agriculture is the way forward if the country is to rebuild its economy. Women have the potential to be an integral component of that economic system not as a supplementary labour force, but as women farmers, entrepreneurs and leaders. In Sri Lanka, women farmers need to be recognized as partners of development, in order to achieve this firstly the challenges they face need to be addressed (de Silva, 2020).*

Food production and distribution came to a standstill with the wake of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka and worldwide. Curfews and travel bans imposed to curb the spread of the pandemic severely imperiled the livelihood of farmers, placing the country's overall food system and food security in a vulnerable state.

The spread of COVID-19 has had a severe effect on the country's food system. The failure of global supply chains has highlighted the need to enhance the domestic food production. The restrictions in importing agro-chemicals and fertilizers to support ecological agricultural practices points to the need for an alternative paradigm for production. Subsistence farming, local food production and support for small-scale farmers were thoroughly undermined by neoliberal economic policies over the past 30 years but these policies should now be reevaluated and amended both locally and globally.

Since embracing the Green Revolution in 1960s, there has been an exponential increase in the usage of chemical inputs in the agriculture sector in Sri Lanka. This has resulted in farmers adopting unsustainable agricultural practices and letting go of sustainable practices based on traditional knowledge. The farmers have refrained from crop diversification and by following mono-crop systems, they have advanced the degradation or infertility of the soil, contributed to ecological disruptions and spread of diseases of unknown etiology such as Chronic Kidney Disease (CKDu).

The promotion of mono crops is a product of agricultural modernization. A common sentiment shared among women farmers when discussing the impacts of COVID-19 is that during their parent's generation it would be unheard of phenomena that a farmer's household would face food shortages. The failure of farmers to ensure food security at their own household level is a glaring indicator of the breakdown of the current food system. Farmers who only grew one crop could neither use it for household consumption as a sufficient food source nor sell it in the market due to COVID-19 restrictions. Consultation findings suggested that there is an increase in farmers who have switched to mono crop cultivations in Sri Lanka as there are enabling forces, such as government and agricultural extension services encouraging them to do so.

## 1.2 Towards a just food system - women are the key

*Women actively take over a range of significant roles and responsibilities in food system. These include: growing crops, managing livestock, food preparation, conserving seeds, and transferring of traditional knowledge to the community and the next generation. However women's contributions to food systems are often not formally acknowledged, and they often face barriers that prevent them from engaging with the market / farming community? Government? on equitable terms.*

*Transforming food systems to be more inclusive will require approaches that not only enable women to participate and benefit equally but also empower women to make strategic life choices. Inclusive food systems will benefit not only women but also their families and society more broadly, including through improvements in agricultural productivity and household food security and dietary quality (IFPRI, 2020).*

We envisage a complete transformation of our food system, to a system which priorities the rights of farmers, consumers and nature over profits. The transformed system must ensure food sovereignty for all and rebuild the regenerative capacities of our environmental systems.

This report recognizes that the transformation of food systems has socio-economic, political and environmental components - however it concentrates on affirming that gender justice is an integral contributing factor that can be used to build sustainable food systems. If access to food and its production and consumption are layered with gender inequalities, food systems inevitably fail and prove to be unsustainable.

In countries where women are marginalized with gender discriminatory norms which hinders women from accessing and controlling resources, people are the hungriest - the primary basis for this phenomena is because gender equality and food systems are interconnected (IPS, 2020).

Globally, the productivity of women farmers is notably less in comparison to their male counterparts resulting in a gender yield gap of 20-30%. If key drivers behind the existence of this gender gap are adequately addressed approximately 36 million people can be relieved from hunger (IFAD, 2014).

Out of the economically active population in Sri Lanka, women comprise up to 34.3%. Among this group of employed women, approximately 27.7% work in the agriculture sector (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). Ensuring equal access to productive agricultural

resources for women farmers and rural women will enable them to meaningfully engage and influence discourses on agricultural policies and practices which affects them, their families and communities and the broader food systems. Women are considered as a supplementary work force in the agriculture sector where their actual contribution is left vastly unacknowledged. Failing to pay attention to and acknowledge women's active contribution to food production will only hinder sustainable development at community and national levels as women are deeply engaged with their local ecosystems and biodiversity.

The potential of women farmers to lead climate solutions, defy gender discriminatory barriers and continue to feed the world is vastly undermined by governments and development agencies. Women's contribution to the food system continues to be uncaptured in economic development policies as it is seldom considered as productive work. As is the case in most patriarchal-capitalist economies, economists have difficulty in defining women's work inside and outside of the home; and in this instance, they fall within both categories (Gordon, 2009).

A stark criticism directed at the phenomena of globalization is that it has transferred the identity and ownership of food and seed to profit-oriented corporations. The idea of food has been reduced from being a source of nourishment to a commodity that can be manipulated to maximize profits (Shiva, 2009).

**Small scale producers, primarily women farmers are the key to making food systems sustainable and equitable again. However in order for them to claim these positions, they need to be given the right opportunities, tools and access to resources.**



## 02

### **Ground level evidence: key deterrents faced by women farmers**

Based on the consultation findings, this report identifies five key areas of challenges women farmers are facing in Sri Lanka.

#### **2.1 Access and control over natural resources**

Women farmers are responsible for the production of 60 - 80% of food in developing countries, however they only own 2% of land (Oxfam, 2010).

Gender disparities in agriculture especially relating to access and control over natural resources are vast. In Sri Lanka, landlessness or lack of access to land not only prevent women from participating in agriculture but also stagnates their role as unskilled workers and primary producers within the context of value chains. Access to land and land ownership is a major contributing factor to being recognized as a farmer.

Exclusion faced by women farmers in the arenas of policy making due to a lack of land ownership has consequences in practice too. It has led to the imposing of many barriers including accessing water, financial services, markets and agricultural extension services.

Despite lack of access to land, women continue to engage in agricultural activities but largely in meagre capacities of subsistence farming or as daily paid wage workers in farmlands. The aforementioned activities yield a very low income and are often seasonal and irregular.

Gender disparities in land ownership is attributable to existing outdated discriminatory land laws and regulations. Inequalities in land ownership are evident in customary laws and the Land Development Ordinance (LDO). The third schedule of the LDO gives precedence to the male heir over a female heir. The succession of inheritance favouring men, especially the youngest male child of a family can be considered a severe hindrance to land ownership of rural women. Similarly elements of Kandyan law, Thesawalamai and Muslim laws prescribe the role of decision making and controlling of land assets to males. Although this phenomena is not very prevalent in urban areas, rural farming communities rigidly abide by aforementioned traditional laws - further minimizing a woman farmer's ability to function in full capacity.

Oftentimes banks require land to be presented as collateral when offering loans. Women farmers struggle without having access to formal credit schemes and financial services. The lack of land ownership inevitably has made women farmers in the country more vulnerable and many have fallen prey to unregulated microfinance institutions, obtaining high interest loans from them.

*'Land ownership is often seen as male-centric. Lands are also given in the name of the head of the family. Here men are seen as family heads'*

- This is the recurring feedback which was gathered during consultations with women farmers primarily from post-conflict areas in the Northern and Eastern regions of the country.

The consequences of lack of ownership of land has a domino effect on a woman farmer in Sri Lanka. In the absence of a land title, a woman farmer is not allowed to register at Agrarian Service Centres run by the government. Possession of a land title acts as a prerequisite to be registered in the government system, receive extension services, market information, training, subsidies and even to be eligible for membership in farmer organizations. Irrigation organizations would only accept farmers who own land. This deprives a landless rural woman farmer from gaining access to irrigation schemes provided by the government for agricultural purposes (FAO, 2018). Having no presence in farmer organizations and irrigation organizations would also eliminate the opportunities and spaces for women to voice any of their concerns and in general deny these women from developing a sense of identity and recognition as a farmer.

Although largely unrecognized, women farmers continue to be custodians of indigenous seed varieties and traditional farming practices across the globe. Despite numerous barriers imposed at multiple levels, from their own communities to multinational companies, women farmers have continued to show resilience in fortifying local food systems. Conserving indigenous seed varieties is one such commitment that women farmers have continued to honor for generations. As women farmers have noted in consultations, the corporatization of seeds has taken away from them the role women played as guardians of bio diversity and the rights of women in conserving and sharing their local seed varieties.

## **2.2 Access to Markets**

As stated above, women comprise only 34.3% of the economically active population in Sri Lanka, and from this group of employed women, approximately 27.7% work in the agriculture sector (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). A majority of these women engage in subsistence farming and they face numerous obstacles to enter into commercial levels of agricultural production and to occupying higher levels in value chains and gaining overall access to markets.

As the consultations highlighted, the prevalence of social norms concerning traditional gender roles along with the existence of gender discriminatory policies and practices hinder a woman farmer from engaging in trade and making a presence in the market economy. The issue of mobility has been identified as a major deciding factor for a woman physically reaching markets and evaluating marketing options. A major factor constraining a woman farmer's level of mobility are her care responsibilities including household chores. Lack of proper transportation and infrastructure facilities impose further impediment on women farmers' access to market systems and on their participating in farmer organizations and cooperatives. Lack of engagement with women producer groups of the aforementioned sort further reduces access to information on market demands, market systems and opportunities for commercial engagement.

Women farmers from the Central Province, in Nuwara Eliya explicitly expressed the main challenge they face when accessing markets -'Women are subjected to great inconveniences in the marketing process. It's mostly men who enter markets and sell our produce. When women go to the main markets they face challenges primarily in negotiating the right prices'

Women farmers comparatively have fewer market connections and the financial resources required to upgrade their farming engagement from a subsistence level to commercial levels of production and subsequently move up in value chains. Receiving market information, identifying markets, decision making, bargaining and negotiating in the overall market economy are perceived as work of men. Furthermore, a woman farmer rarely has access to information and services related to specialized market certifications which would enable her upgrade from being a primary producer to higher levels in the value chain.

## **2.3 Access to financial services**

Lack of access to financial services has been identified as a key deterrent preventing women farmers from advancing from subsistence farming into commercial levels of agriculture. The availability of regulated financial services to enable rural women and women farmers in particular to obtain credit facilities, financial capital and saving mechanisms are extremely scarce.

However unregulated microfinance companies have a high presence in rural agricultural communities and they face a barrage of criticism for exploiting and capitalizing on the vulnerabilities of rural women. Over 45% of Sri Lanka's population lives on less than 5 USD a day (World Bank, 2017). Rural women farmers often fall into this group and are held back from seeking services from banks for two primary reasons: lack of collateral and inability to produce guarantors. Oftentimes loan installments are collected on a weekly basis by microfinance companies. In the current local context where women farmers already face multiple barriers including accessing markets, loan repayments scheduled on a weekly basis only deteriorate their financial capacities.

In the event that a woman farmer is unable to repay a loan, microfinance companies typically coerce her into obtaining another loan, further entrapping her in a cycle of debilitating debt. Furthermore there are reports of debt collectors subjecting women to various forms of verbal, physical and sexual violence at times when lapses in loan repayments occur.

This operating structure of microfinance companies further cripple a woman's ability to engage in productive agricultural labour. Ground level research reveals cases where women have completely withdrawn from agriculture and engaged in different forms of daily paid wage work to pay off high interest debt.

Women farmers usually sign agreements to acquire these credit services completely unaware of its content as documentation is usually printed in English. The option of getting these services from a bank is often overlooked as banks require collateral and guarantors to be produced, and it takes a longer time to process and secure the approval of a loan that depends on the applicant's ability to repay. The aforementioned criteria do not provide a favourable prospect for women farmers who are already grappling with multiple economic and social hardships. Lack of awareness of the availability of credit schemes and financial service options, the insufficiency or absence of collateral and instability of income are among the factors that prevent women farmers from gaining access to reliable financial services. This also hinders women from actively engaging in commercial agriculture and connecting to market systems.

## **2.4 Access to technology**

Globally, the productivity of women farmers is notably less in comparison to their male counterparts resulting in a gender yield gap of 20-30%. If key drivers behind the existence of this gender gap are adequately addressed approximately 36 million people can be relieved from hunger (IFAD, 2014). A woman farmer's lack of access to technology is accounted as a key barrier impeding the optimum utilization of her labour in agricultural productivity.

Owing to gender discriminatory social norms, there is an obvious lack of equity in the diffusion of technical knowledge and tools concerning women farmers in Sri Lanka. Anecdotal evidence and field level findings strongly indicate that women farmers rarely get access to farming equipment and overall own significantly lesser tools in comparison to male farmers. This has resulted in the country's female agricultural labour force primarily engaging in unskilled labour, often in time-consuming, labour intensive tasks and thus occupying the bottom levels in food value chains as primary producers.

Agricultural extension services designed specifically to support women farmers too are bound by conventional gender norms. Women farmers are provided with training on subject matter related to family nutrition, household food security, forming women farmer's organizations etc. (Department of Agriculture, 2014). Farmers registered under agrarian service centres possess the opportunity of obtaining technical knowledge and training. However to be registered in agrarian service centres, it is a prerequisite that the farmer is a land owner and a majority of women farmers are unable to fulfill this requirement. This further alienates women farmers from developing their technical capacities.

As per records issued by the Farm Mechanization Training Centre in Anuradhapura and the Institute of Post-Harvest Technology under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture, women farmers constitute for less than 10% of farmers trained from 2015 - 2018 (FAO, 2018). The lack of access to technology hinders a woman farmer from increasing her productivity, gaining streamlined access to markets, and effective participation in value chains thus minimizing her overall losses.

## 2.5 Care Responsibilities

The unemployment rates of women in Sri Lanka are more than double that of men at all age levels, and there is a large concentration of economically active women in unpaid family labor, particularly in agriculture (Asian Development Bank, 2015). When taking to account both productive and reproductive responsibilities, rural women, women farmers in particular work for more hours a day in comparison to their male counterparts.

Gender inequalities prevalent within the agricultural sector are very evident but are difficult to quantify. As women are concentrated in both unpaid care and household work and their role in subsistence farming is often unpaid, their contribution to the rural economy is widely underreported (International Labour Organization, 2018).

'Women help with household chores and agricultural activities. The economic development of women is affected in various ways due to increased domestic work. So changes need to be made at the family and community levels in these matters' – are views expressed by women farmers from the Southern provinces of Hambantota and Matara, calling for recognition of unpaid care work.

Opportunities available for rural women in Sri Lanka, farmers in particular are limited due to constant social responsibilities they are expected to perform. Female representation in agriculture continues to be underestimated - oftentimes women and their respective communities do not identify them as farmers despite the leading role they play in subsistence farming, and their involvement in agricultural roles as planting, weeding and harvesting among others.



## 03

### Policy gaps and recommendations

It is vital that gender is mainstreamed into national agricultural, economic and rural development policies. A public policy discourse must be created on the untapped potential of women farmers and the importance of recognizing them as an integral part of the solution to fixing the country's broken food system. The capacities of policy makers and public officers to address gender issues in agriculture, especially pertaining to women farmers must be enhanced with the aim of enabling the government to respond and provide remedial measures more efficiently to eradicate the barriers faced by women farmers in Sri Lanka.

There is ample global evidence to prove that if a woman farmer is given the same opportunities and access to resources as male farmers, the overall productivity will be much higher. Loss of productivity and the loss of potential income due to under-utilizing and undermining the contributions of women farmers to the agriculture sector and food production must be estimated. The quantifiable results of the aforementioned calculation can be instrumentalized to pressurising national level policy makers to take stringent action and measurable steps to addressing the key barriers faced by women farmers in Sri Lanka, as outlined in this paper.

## **Recommendations;**

A complete transformation of our food system that ensures:

- The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods,
- The right of small-scale producers to define their own food and agriculture systems, and a political system which prioritize the needs of producers, consumers and nature over the corporate interests.
- An agroecology-based approach in food production systems

By Increasing women farmers' access and control over natural resources and decision-making power concerning access to land, financial services, markets, technology and redistribution of care work, women can lead such a transformation in our food system.

Key targeted recommendations are as below,

- Amend gender discriminatory legal, policy and regulatory practices specifically inhibiting women's land rights and access to resources.
- Support women- led cooperatives and other collective production and marketing initiatives spearheaded by women producers.
- Create enabling spaces in markets, political spheres, and supply chains for women farmers to negotiate and make decisions.
- Protect women's rights to use, save and exchange seeds (including traditional varieties), and avoid enacting any legal provisions which violates farmers seed rights.
- Support women led agroecological farming, research and extension services.
- Build capacity of women farmers and create conducive environments for them to undertake seed conservation, transfer of traditional knowledge and collective action through cooperatives, markets and social movements.
- Create programs and muster support from agriculture extension services to increase the capacities of women farmers' entrepreneurial skills.
- Set up infrastructure including transport facilities and market spaces targeting the needs of women farmers.

- Initiate campaigns that portray women farmers as leaders, entrepreneurs and decision-makers among farmer communities, as stakeholders in market systems and as potential buyers.
- Create low-interest loan schemes with longer repayment periods specifically targeting women-farmers.
- Equal participation of women farmers to be prescribed as a mandatory requirement for all technical knowledge and skill training programs.
- Sensitize farmer communities and agriculture instructors on the need to dispel social norms that stereotype gender discriminatory attitudes and wrongfully classify tasks as male-tasks and female-tasks
- Introduction of user-friendly technological schemes for women farmers.
- Establish policy dialogues among government stakeholders and development agencies to promote recognizing and redistributing of care work among farmer women.
- Document, build policy and practice and disseminate knowledge around replicating agro-ecological practices led by women farmers.
- Build capacity of women farmers to continue leading climate solutions

Further recommendations for addressing specific barriers outlined in sections 2.1 - 2.5 can be accessed in Annex 03.



**Annexure 01:  
Key findings of consultations**



## **Batticaloa District**

- ◆ Farmers usually refer to men. This origin is due to the fact that land ownership is usually found/ registered in the name of men. Women only do lighter jobs (weeding and making food) while men do harder jobs. Since men are seen as the head of the family, the title is registered in the man's name when the land is given to them.
- ◆ Men make decisions in agricultural activities. They themselves have more knowledge and experience related to agriculture.
- ◆ Massive (You mean large -scale?) agricultural activities are carried out by men and home gardens are cultivated by women. Massive (You mean large -scale?) agricultural activities and post-harvest activities are also male-centric.
- ◆ Tamil women are more likely to engage in agricultural activities with men in the paddy field but Muslim women are less likely to do so.
- ◆ Many women make small-scale products in their homes through training provided by companies. Especially female-headed families are increasingly involved in mushroom cultivation as an organic crop.
- ◆ Women headed families receive manufacturing and marketing facilities from some governmental and non-governmental organizations. These aids are given to women. Non-toxic foods have a good reception among the people as women produce non-toxic foods.
- ◆ They (Batticalao) depend on the Dambulla center market as there is no central market in the Eastern Province. More and more people are relying on companies to get seeds, hire (or purchase) tractors and other supplies. Traditional farming methods need to be revived. Thereby relying on companies can be counterproductive.
- ◆ Women are the ones who pay the most attention in providing nutritious food. Mothers in particular takes more effort. When feeding children, both males and females are given the same type of food. Food equality is maintained between them.
- ◆ Women who do home gardening use traditional methods in matters such as seed production, seed storage and the application of fertilizers. Natural disasters such as droughts and floods can affect farmers and affect food security. Women benefit psychologically through agriculture. Usually women do home gardening in their spare time and it gives them mental happiness and comfort.

## Nuwara Eliya District

- ◆ Post-harvest decisions are made by men though women play a major role in agricultural activities. Selling is usually done by the men and after the sale the money is spent at the discretion of the men. Only the balance is given to the wife.
- ◆ Women are subjected to great inconveniences in the marketing process. So men are more involved in these activities. When women go to the main markets, they face various problems. The men in the market do not offer the right price.
- ◆ Women are not full-time farmers. They spend most of their time on household chores and childcare and spend the rest of their time farming; Women have to do household chores along with farming.
- ◆ The big problem is that people here do not see women as farmers. Family members should come forward to provide support for the leadership of women. Through this we can see equality in practice and the growth of women.
- ◆ Women are generally paid less. This situation is also found in the work women do in vegetable gardens and in shops in urban areas. Men work shorter working hours and get higher salaries. Although women are involved in agricultural activities, many of the hard work in agriculture is done by men.
- ◆ Female plantation workers and young women are subjected to various forms of exploitation and sexual harassment. Women in various occupations, especially in urban areas, are thus exploited. However, they are not interested in seeking justice for themselves and the main reason for this is the fear of losing their jobs.
- ◆ Lands that have been cultivated on the basis of hereditary right and where there are no documents the right to cultivate is regarded as a male right passing from the father to the son. Most of the plantation workers are seen as landless. Plantation companies do not want to give land to the people and the public administration structures in plantation areas have not been simplified to enable land allocations.
- ◆ Government services related to agriculture are not regularly available to plantation areas. They do not provide awareness to the people working on plantations especially in relation to government services. Awareness about government services is low among the plantation population.
- ◆ The tendency to prioritize men over women is found in women too as women are the ones who put their men first when buying property and establishing their leadership in the family.
- ◆ Commercial agricultural activities use more fertilizers and pesticides. However the women do a little organic farming to meet their household needs. There is not much focus on food security and post-harvest storage. Arrangements for that are not in place here.

## **Mullaitivu & Vavuniya districts**

Land ownership is often seen as male-centric. Lands are also given in the name of the head of the family. Here men are seen as family heads. Various shortcomings are found in the land laws. Non-issuance of land titles and boundary issues are common. Female farmers must be given due respect by encouraging and training them.

The biggest problem for female farmers is the lack of market opportunity. Merchants from outside take the produce at a very low price. Usually the women do not receive fair prices for the products. They use traditional knowledge to maintain the foods they produce. However, as they are ignorant of modern technology, it has not been used in food security. Women can increase their productivity by benefitting from trainings but also by making post-training observations.

- ◆ Women help with household chores and agricultural activities. The economic development of women is affected in various ways due to increased domestic work. So changes need to be made at the family and community levels in these matters. Extreme care for (and pampering of) male children is common in the farming community.

## **Matara and Hambantota districts**

- ◆ Although women take the lead in domestic work, they do not take the lead in large-scale agricultural activities. While men generally do the hard work, women do lighter jobs such as gardening and herding. NGOs help and encourage women in cattle rearing and home gardening activities.

People who farm in villages do not want their children to be involved in agriculture. Instead they are trying to give them a proper education and get a better life in the urban areas. They try to make at least one of their children to be a teacher. Only a few villagers have been farming for generations.

People are creating home gardens while they are at home due to the corona pandemic. But if it continues after the Corona period it will be a great success for the people. Home gardening is generally seen as a source of income for women. However using products produced in the home garden does not give them the value they deserve.

- ◆ Women are not valued for doing housework all day long. They do unpaid work. Family members do not like it when women seek employment or do farming. When women go into business they create the impression that there is no one to do the housework and take care of the husband and children. Men do not want to be responsible for household chores when women go into business.
- ◆ When government services are provided, men are given priority. For example, advice on herd breeding herds is often given to men.



**Annexure 02:  
Targeted recommendations**

## **2.1 Access and control over natural resources**

- ◆ Amend gender discriminatory legal, policy and regulatory practices specifically inhibiting a woman's right to land.
- ◆ Reform the conditions for providing agricultural extension services where land ownership is a prerequisite to be eligible for government support services.
- ◆ Change the mechanism for providing membership to farmer organizations and irrigation organizations for women, moving away from mandatory land ownership.
- ◆ Prioritize women farmers when granting land through the LDO in order to encourage their participation in the active market economy.
- ◆ Government authorities from the ministerial level to the district and divisional level should prioritize resolving the conflicts faced by women farmers relating to land ownership and accessing irrigation schemes.
- ◆ Create a public policy discourse promoting non-land owning women farmers to be considered as farmers and be entitled to the same government services.

## **2.2 Access to markets**

- ◆ Support women cooperatives and other collective market mechanisms led by women.
- ◆ Create programs and enforce support from agriculture extension services to increase capacity of a woman farmer's entrepreneurial skills.
- ◆ Establish mechanisms to disseminate and update information to women farmers on market systems, market demands, production and retail opportunities. This too can be done via extension services, agriculture officers and farmer cooperatives.
- ◆ Set up infrastructure including transport facilities and market spaces targeting women farmers.
- ◆ Develop value addition and a market identity for agricultural produce made by women farmers.
- ◆ Initiate campaign on portraying women farmers as leaders, entrepreneurs and decision makers among farmer communities, as stakeholders in market systems and as potential buyers.
- ◆ Establish market linkages specifically targeting women farmers (trade fairs etc).

## **2.3 Access to financial services**

- ◆ Fulfill the government promises to cancel all unfair micro credit loans provided by companies
- ◆ Instill a strict regulatory and monitoring mechanism for microfinance companies.
- ◆ Provide supplementary information and services related to markets and value addition when credit facilities are provided.
- ◆ Create low-interest loan schemes with longer repayment periods specifically targeting women-farmers through their cooperatives and other collective production and marketing mechanisms.
- ◆ Enable easy access to information on loan and credit facilities available to women farmers.
- ◆ Revise the nature of collateral to be provided as a prerequisite to obtain credit services.

## **2.4 Access to technology**

- ◆ Equal participation of women farmers to be prescribed as a mandatory requirement in all technical knowledge and skill training programs.
- ◆ Sensitize farmer communities and agriculture instructors on the need to dispel social norms that perpetuate gender discrimination and classify tasks as male-tasks and female-tasks.
- ◆ Introduction of user-friendly technological schemes for women farmers.
- ◆ Promoting the identity of women farmers being deemed as 'tech-savvy' via community level campaigns/activism and social media.
- ◆ Increase recruitment of female officers to provide agriculture extension services.
- ◆ Enhance awareness on how technology can be used to enhance productivity and effectively engage in improved value chains.

## **2.5 Establish policy dialogues among government stakeholders and development agencies to promote recognition of and to redistribute care work among farmer women.**

- ◆ Create a public discourse on refraining from disproportionately burdening women farmers with care responsibilities whilst acknowledging their productive and reproductive labour contribution.
- ◆ Sensitize farmer communities on the importance of having an increased level of male engagement in fulfilling household responsibilities.
- ◆ Establish supplementary support systems at community level to relieve women farmers from traditional reproductive and care giving roles at least during selected periods within a crop cycle.

E.g:- provide childcare facilities, meal distribution mechanisms.



**Annexure 03:  
Success stories of women farmers defying the odds**

## **Seeds of freedom: Women Farmers of Monaragala**

Although left largely unrecognized, women farmers continue to be custodians of indigenous seed varieties and traditional farming practices across the globe. Despite numerous barriers imposed at multiple levels, from their own communities to multinational companies, women farmers have continued to show resilience in fortifying local food systems - conserving indigenous seed varieties is one such commitment women have continued to honor for generations.

Undeterred by the propaganda of big corporations to promote hybrid seed varieties which increase the dependency of farmers on the corporations with seeds that are not adaptable to climate change - a group of women farmers from Monaragala in Sri Lanka have been successfully working towards conserving indigenous seed varieties since the 1980s.

Uva-Wellassa Womens' Organization (UWWO) started their efforts in the conservation and distribution of heirloom seed varieties first with a group of 20 women farmers who identified that there was a scarcity in good seed varieties in their area. At its very inception, the women had exchanged seeds during monthly committee meetings which over the years have expanded and grown to the establishment of 05 seed banks in Monaragala with a secure membership base of over 100 women farmers to date.

Research indicates that over 75% of crop diversity in the food that we eat has been lost between the 1990s - 2000s (FAO, 2010). The promotion of hybrid, genetically modified seed varieties by multinational corporations have systematically increased dependency of small and medium scale farmers resulting in an overall increase in the use of agrochemicals, rise in non-communicable diseases and debt.

*"We wanted women to take a more active role in agriculture. At the beginning we started giving indigenous seed varieties of long beans and okra for free during our monthly meetings. Subsequently we encourage women to exchange seeds among each other. Soon after we started a small seed repository - a rack with seed varieties securely stored in clay pots, this was in the early 1990. This eventually grew up to five fully functional seed banks"* stated K.P. Somalatha, a founding member of this seed conservation movement.

The UWWO seed banks have established continuous seed exchange channels from Monaragala to Ampara, Vavuniya, Batticaloa and Anuradhapura.

The UWWO continues to work towards a vision of supporting traditional farming practices that are environmentally sustainable and led by women. As founding members further relate their experiences, it was revealed that it was hard for women to take over leadership and decision

making roles amidst the rigid patriarchal structures in farming communities. Two strategic approaches were deployed towards creating a positive transformation in bringing women farmers to the forefront of agriculture in Monaragala:

1. Instill technical expertise among women farmers: Increased technical capacity on environmentally friendly farming have allowed women to be agents of change in convincing their own families to adopt better farming practices. The more women were seen as bearers of knowledge and expertise, the more they were allowed to get involved in decision-making.
2. Create opportunities for economic engagement and income generation: create market linkages and access to markets for women farmers and provide opportunities to move up the value chain.

What started off as a seed conservation initiative, gradually evolved into a seed conservation movement, and later on incorporated a business model which organized women farmers into producer groups and linked them with markets. A part of this vision also included advancing women farmers up the value chain, beyond occupying the role of being primary producers. Organic certification methods were introduced where members produced certified chemical-free fruits, vegetables and greens via the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS).

Women farmers have been able to take on an entrepreneurial role with this value addition - their current consumer base has surpassed regular farmers' markets in the Uva Province. Keeping abreast with new technology, UWWO now undertakes orders for organic vegetables and fruits via facebook and email on behalf of its women farmer members. Since then, producer groups of women farmers from Monaragala have been able to reach a wider consumer base and respond to the increasing demand for organic fresh produce.

The establishment of this women-led seed conservation mechanism in Monaragala has created spaces of power and recognition for women farmers in their communities in a multitude of ways - reaping positive outcomes economically, culturally and environmentally.

**Key positive impacts:**

- ◆ Fostering intercultural solidarity: The seed banks run by UWWO actively engages in sharing seeds with farmer groups around the country. The exchange of seeds also enables an exchange of traditional knowledge from farmer groups across different regions, enhances crop diversity and strengthens solidarity among farmers of different ethnicities.

- ◆ Supporting climate resilience: Indigenous seed varieties are more climate resilient requiring comparatively less water and being more resistant to pest attacks. The cultivation of heirloom seeds is a proven successful climate adaptation mechanism and makes farmers less vulnerable to climate change and its adverse effects.
- ◆ Strengthening women's leadership: capacity enhancement of technical knowledge and creation of opportunities for economic engagement and increased income have contributed to women farmers being perceived as leaders, experts and entrepreneurs. This recognition and level of acceptance has been able to disrupt patriarchal social norms in the agricultural sector and paved the way for women farmers to lead decision making processes related to the cultivation and harvesting of their crops.
- ◆ Promoting sustainable farming practices: These producer groups of women farmers are not only committed to safeguard heirloom seed varieties, but they also serve to demonstrate that the cultivation of indigenous seeds produce a higher yield with minimum agricultural inputs. These women farmers from Monaragala continue to be active advocates of the economic and environmental benefits of sustainable farming practices.
- ◆ Creating access to new markets: UWWO now connects women farmers with consumers via facebook and email. This not only enables socially conscious consumers to directly link with women farmers but it also facilitates a wider market reach. The women farmer groups also have set up selling points/physical market spaces at the UWWO office premises and selected public places within the Uva province and Colombo. Obtaining organic certification to their produce has increased their potential and ability to reach wider markets.

## **Equipped for transformation: Women Farmers of Batticaloa**

Gender discriminatory social norms hinders women from accessing and using technology in their day to day or livelihood activities, Sri Lanka's agriculture sector marks no exception to this. Globally, the productivity of women farmers is notably less in comparison to their male counterparts resulting in a gender yield gap of 20-30% (IFAD, 2014). The lack of access to agricultural tools has proven to be a major impediment to women farmers making optimum utilization of their labour in agricultural productivity.

In efforts to address the lack of equity in the diffusion of farming tools and technical knowledge among women farmers - Kaviya, a women's organization in Batticaloa initiated providing agricultural tools and technical knowledge to women. A significant outcome of this opening move was that it sparked interest among women who have not been involved in farming before to enter into agriculture.

"The lack of access to farming tools hinders a woman farmer from increased productivity, gaining streamlined access to markets, effective participation in value chains and minimizing overall losses. We wanted to encourage women farmers to keep engaging in their agricultural activities and at the same time create a conducive environment for more women to get into agriculture as a livelihood. It became evident to us that many families in our area were not utilizing their land effectively, they had space to cultivate in their home gardens, but had no interest in doing so. Women in most households were only engaging in cooking and cleaning when they had the potential to do so much more - this is when we realized the need for a targeted intervention" added Ms. Rathy Vitti from Kaviya.

The said intervention acknowledged that the female agricultural labour force in the area primarily engaged in unskilled, time consuming and labour intensive tasks which only allowed them to occupy the most bottom levels of the value chain. It was identified that agricultural extension services designed specifically to support women farmers too are bound by conventional gender norms. Women farmers are provided with training on subject matter related to family nutrition, household food security etc (Department of Agriculture, 2014). This intervention, marked with notable success has been continuing to address structural and cultural barriers faced by women farmers in three divisions of Koralai Pattu, Manmunai West and Eravur Pattu in Batticaloa with an engagement of over 300 women farmers to date.

Three key strategies have been applied in order to achieve the success of this initiative to bring about a sustainable and constructive change for women farmers:

1. Disseminate farming equipment and technical knowledge: Disrupt negative gender stereotypes in agriculture by empowering women farmers to enter to and engage in masculine spaces and tasks.
2. Establish linkages with government officials: Capacity building initiatives and trainings on agriculture tools and technical knowledge are conducted by agriculture officers working for the Department of Agriculture in the area. These linkages and positive interactions would activate an access route to government extension services which are otherwise not reachable for women farmers.
3. Create women farmer cooperatives: Organizing women farmers into cooperative groups enables them to access wider markets and collectively have a higher bargaining and negotiating power. Cooperatives have also proven to ensure the sustainability of farming ventures as they allow access to micro loans, enable shared income and paves the way for more streamlined diffusion of information and knowledge.

Environmentally sustainable agricultural practices have been promoted since the commencement of this initiative - all 300 women producers only engage in organic, chemical free farming. Support given to individual women farmers and women farmer cooperatives are primarily facilitated in collaboration with government agriculture officers in the area - from provision of organic fertilizer to technical knowledge and equipment. As a secondary benefit, this allows government agriculture officers to build a rapport and get familiar with women farmers and vice versa. Similarly, linkages are also established with local banks in the area to enable women farmers access secure financial services if and when needed.

The establishment of this cohesive and coordinated support mechanism among women farmers has not only led to disproving gender stereotypes in Batticaloa but has contributed to a broad range of accomplishments for women farmers at individual and community levels:

## Key positive impacts:

- ◆ Creating interest for more women to get into agriculture: A monumental success achieved from this initiative is that it has been able to encourage women who were not engaging in any income generating activity to enter into farming. Consequently this has allowed women and their overall communities to realize that organic farming is an economically viable livelihood.
- ◆ Effective utilization of land: There was a substantial extent of arable land around houses in the community which was not being utilized productively. Women were subsequently trained and capacitated with technical knowledge and tools to start cultivating in these lands and set up home gardens which eventually led to women leading the production of food for their own household consumption and subsequently engaging in selling the excess production.
- ◆ Fostering women's leadership: The combined effect of more women entering agriculture and the establishment of women farmer cooperatives have demonstrated a notable change in women farmers occupying roles of leadership. Women farmers have come to the forefront in making decisions on prices, production quantities, selecting markets and liaising with public and private sector market channels in the community. Furthermore, women's contribution to the upliftment of household income has also evidently given women more autonomy over how household expenses are made and how their time is to be utilized.



## **Land of struggle, land of power: Women farmers of Paanama**

Rural women in Sri Lanka have proven to be resilient and persevering in the face of adversity, challenges and loss. Approximately 350 families in Paanama were forcefully evicted from their lands in 2010. Farming communities in Ragamwela and Shastrawela lost the lands they had been cultivating for over 40 years overnight. Having both their lives and livelihoods disrupted by this illegal land grab, the community entered a long and relentless quest for justice with women farmers at its forefront.

The path to justice was to regain their land was a turbulent one with numerous politically-led obstacles. From the very inception of this movement of activism, women took over a leading role in organizing and convening community members and allies whilst tackling opposers at different levels. Women of Paanama, who have been farming for generations, after losing access to their lands had to seek income generation opportunities in daily paid wage work. This crippled their household economies and placed their families in a high degree of economic, social and cultural insecurity.

The inter-sectionalities of inequalities working unfavourably against these women farmers were immense at the time. Those affected - they were not just women, they were rural women; the patriarchal forces they had to fight were not the typical older men and women who are found in a community. They had to resist patriarchal forces with much higher power and authority such as the military and the police. Despite all these barriers women continued their demand for justice in determination to get their land back. With the support of like-minded organizations and networks such as the Peoples' Alliance for Right to Land (PARL), women of Paanama actively engaged in lobbying and advocacy efforts at local, national and international levels.

In 2016 the community finally gained access to their land in Ragamwela. This marked a monumental success. Over 40 women farmers actively engage in cultivation. Over 40 women farmers actively engage in cultivation at present. Regaining access to this land which was once illegally grabbed, continues to stand as an exemplary victory in the history of land rights advocacy in Sri Lanka. Three key strategies were applied by PARL to effectively catalyze the process of getting these lands back:

1. Place women at the forefront: Women, primarily consisting of women farmers were prioritized in the planning, implementation and monitoring of lobbying and advocacy efforts - from public demonstrations to protests, litigation etc. Women proved to be more effective and resilient agents in this community's call for justice.

2. Enhance capacity on advocacy and mobilization: Prior to losing their lands, this community in Paanama primarily engaged in agricultural livelihoods and had no experience in any form of activism. Building capacity of community members, primarily women to convene and mobilize community members and other allies, liaise with the media, engage with policy makers, enhance awareness on land laws, policies and human rights were some efforts carried out to support the community.
3. Support the development of regained land: The PARL network mobilized support to develop the area of land the community regained access to. Resources were mobilized to build housing, set up farming grounds and to overall assist the community to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

Reclaiming access to land was a pinnacle in the Paanama land rights struggle. However the provision of assistance given to this farming community continued until they were able to re-establish themselves. With over 40 women farmers actively engaging in agriculture for the past five years, the community has shown significant progress towards restitution.

The Paanama land struggle reinstates the notion that in Sri Lanka, landlessness or lack of access to land not only prevent women from participating in agriculture but also stagnates their role as unskilled workers and or primary producers in value chains. Access to land and land ownership is a major contributing factor to being recognized as a farmer. Despite numerous threats from wild animals, local and national level politicians and climate change, women continue to live and cultivate in this reclaimed land in Ragamwela, Paanama.

Most commonly grown crops include mung beans, maize, ground nut, manioc and vegetables. “Vendors in Ampara and Monaragala are now aware of our crops and production, so they come to our land and purchase our produce. The significant portion of the income we earn from farming is redirected to developing this land we got back after years of a tiresome battle for justice” adds S. Kusumawathi, a woman farmer who was one of the key figures spearheading this movement of activism since 2010.

As a supplementary source of income generation, women farmers also engage in different aspects of community tourism initiatives in Paanama. This engagement is heavily dependent on tourist seasons. Women farmers in Paanama take over roles of supplying food to tourists and small-scale tourist lodges, hosting village lunches etc. There is a growing trend of women creating income generation avenues for themselves and their communities through entrepreneurship in rural areas including tourism, local food production, and home-based businesses or ‘side activities’ (Jackson & Smith, 2004). The involvement in such supplementary livelihood opportunities further proves the adaptability and versatility of this group of women farmers from Ampara.

The success of this long-term coordinated effort in search for justice to uphold the right to land in Paanama has brought forward many benefits to its community. As an initiative which was primarily led by women, it has contributed to uplifting the overall outlook of the potential rural woman farmer and uplifting attitudes about women farmers too.

**Key positive impacts:**

- ◆ Restitution of land and livelihood: Regaining access to land has enabled a community of farmers who had disengaged from productive agricultural activities to re-engage in farming. Activating this group of farmers to get back to their preferred livelihood proved to be a substantial part of this displaced community sustainably rebuilding their lives.
- ◆ Economic empowerment: Most women farmers had to start work as casual labourers in quarries and fields upon losing their lands in 2010. Having the ability and resources to cultivate and sell their produce in their own lands inevitably has increased their income and capacity to access and afford better products and services.
- ◆ Reinstatement of identity: In farming communities, land is closely tied with one's identity and occupation. Being able to return to their own lands has contributed to instilling a sense of belonging to Paanama and tied a connection with their own ancestral roots.



## **Safeguarding mechanism via collective savings: Woman farmers of Tambuttegama**

Women farmers struggle in advancing into commercial levels of agriculture from subsistence farming due to lack of access to financial services. Credit facilities which are easily accessible are accessed through highly exploitative terms and result in making women farmers more vulnerable and destitute. In response to this problem, Rajarata Gami Shakthi Nirmana Kavaya (RGNK), a community based organization in Tambuttegama has introduced a mechanism of establishing savings groups among women farmers.

These savings groups have proved to be a successful deterrent against reach of unregulated, exploitative microfinance companies that prey on the community. As the availability of regulated financial services which enable rural women farmers to obtain credit facilities, financial capital and saving mechanisms is extremely scarce, RGNK has successfully designed and implemented a savings method which functions through the formation of groups.

A savings group consists of 10-15 women farmers. Each member is required to make an addition of LKR 125 per week to the group. When farmers require financial assistance the organization releases funds through this collective revolving fund. Loans are given at a 2% interest rate and farmers are given 6 months to settle as they make earnings from each cultivation season. A farmer will be eligible to request for a loan, if 20% of the required amount has been added to the savings fund.

This initiative primarily targets women farmers engaging in paddy cultivation. It also gives the option of obtaining emergency agricultural loans for cases of settling payments for workers or for the unplanned purchases of agricultural inputs. This method of financial assistance is provided with added layers of support related to enhancing financial literacy of women farmers, involving them in leadership programs and providing them market information.

In order to ensure that the support and services offered to women farmers in overcoming the barrier of having limited to no access to financial services, this system of assistance has mobilized three key strategies:

1. Organizing women farmers into groups: The formation of savings groups not only establishes a collective consciousness and identity among women farmers but also helps in maintaining a higher level of accountability. Targeted support related to enhancing capacity by disseminating information is continuously done through these groups.
2. Enhancing capacity: Members of savings groups are provided with trainings related to financial literacy, organic farming and the identification of market demands.

3. Promoting women's leadership: Each savings group has a woman leader appointed by the group. Selected leaders are provided with targeted leadership trainings to ensure that savings groups remain intact.

Women farmers in the aforementioned savings group are provided with technical financial literacy skills including bookkeeping and the balancing of accounts. They are required to keep records of all savings and loans. RGNK encourages and guides women farmers to reinvest their earnings and directs savings groups to collectively purchase arable land whenever possible.

*"Usually women farmers don't have any savings to call her own. Each women farmer in our savings group has a minimum of 150,000 rupees at any given time. This level of financial independence prevents a woman farmer from being forced into a vulnerable position when she requires money. Leaders of our savings groups are perceived as role models in the community, we have provided them with technical skills not only related to finance, but also enhance their capacity on organic farming and market information",* added Damayanthi Kulasuriya, a founding member of this initiative.

The establishment of this support mechanism has successfully safeguarded women farmers and their families from falling into exploitative debt traps set up by microfinance companies. The provision of low-interest loan schemes with longer repayment periods specifically targeting women farmers has resulted in many positive shifts in the community.

#### **Key positive impacts:**

- ◆ Establishment of a more financially literate farmer community: Rural women farmer communities in Tambuttegama function at a much higher level of financial consciousness subsequent to the trainings they have received from this initiative. Possessing the knowledge to manage income, expenses, savings and investments empower women farmers. It has enabled them to have a more entrepreneurial vision.
- ◆ Safeguarding farmers from unregulated microfinance institutions: Receiving access to secure financial services, and being guided through savings and investments have empowered women farmers of this community to be wary of unregulated microfinance companies. This has prevented women farmers from obtaining loans for high interest rates with the demand that they are settled within shorter repayment times. Due to this initiative, this community of farmers have been able to safeguard themselves from life-threatening consequences of obtaining financial services from microfinance companies.

- ◆ Promotion of women farmers as leaders: As savings groups are operationalized through the leadership of women farmers, there has been wide community acceptance for women to occupy spaces of decision making and control. Their increased technical knowledge and market information has also positioned women farmers at a much higher level than before within their communities.



## **Sustainable market expansions: Women farmers of Walapane**

Women farmers in Sri Lanka have fewer market linkages and financial resources than men, making it difficult of them to scale up their farming practices to commercial levels of production and to move up in value chains. A development initiative was designed and implemented in Walapane of the Nuwara Eliya district in response to this barrier faced by women farmers.

The initiative aimed to create a conducive environment for women farmers to shift from inorganic agriculture to organic agricultural practices. It was recognized that that women farmers in Walapane grappled with many barriers, including receiving market information, accessing markets, bargaining and negotiating in the overall market economy. The intervention sought to provide a set of cohesive solutions to resolve these challenges at multiple levels.

At the start, basic technical knowledge, tools and other essential agricultural inputs to engage in organic home gardening were provided to selected women farmers in 2014. Subsequently the level of support given was advanced in parallel with the increase in production. Creating access to markets, introducing value addition methods, expanding supply chains were facilitated at a secondary tier of interventions.

At present there are over 300 women farmers from Walapane who are actively engaging in this support network. In order for this intervention to reap its envisioned results, it put five key strategies into action:

1. Facilitating a systematic and gradual transition from inorganic to organic agriculture: The initiative tactfully converted inorganic farmers to organic farmers by first introducing organic farming practices at a small scale. A conducive environment to adopt environmentally farming methods was created by providing technical knowledge, farming equipment, organic fertilizer and other agricultural inputs to women farmers. Gradually the support provided was scaled up as production from home gardens increased.
2. Formation of women farmer groups: This continues to instill a collective consciousness among women farmers and enables them to be at a vantage point through collective bargaining and price setting.
3. Introducing value addition mechanisms: Organic certification through Participatory Guarantee System (PGS), introduction of packaging and food processing technologies, mechanisms to utilize excess produce to minimize post-harvest wastage have added value to the produce of the women farmers.

4. Creating access to markets: Enabling access to market information such as market demand and prices, facilitating women farmers to access wider consumer bases via the establishment of 'Green Community Forum' - a market platform specifically designed to support rural women producers have aided the productivity and revenue of women farmers.
5. Introduction of high level of agriculture technology to support traditional environmentally sustainable farming practices.

A cross-cutting inhibiting factor that was observed in the community prior to these interventions was the fluctuation of vegetable prices, which places women farmers in a vulnerable position. In these circumstances they may be unable to make any profit or even break-even. Subsequently a market information dissemination was introduced where farmers can conveniently access the specifics of current market prices. This contributed to the standardization of pricing for organic produce – and women farmers now are able to access updated market information from their mobile phones and sell their organic produce for a price that is 20% higher in comparison to inorganic produce.

This intervention sought to address challenges faced by women farmers in Walapane at both the micro and macro levels. It even attended to providing safe and efficient transportation facilities for women farmers to reach market places. This initiative continues to function in a successful manner and has enhanced the life and livelihoods of women farmers since its inception.

**Key positive impacts:**

- ◆ Promotion of environmentally sustainable agricultural practices: Currently over 300 women farmers and their families engage in organic agriculture. A positive shift in attitudes and an increase in awareness continues to take place to encourage more farmers to adoptto sustainable agriculture practices and more government agriculture officers to support such initiatives.
- ◆ Creation of new markets: New market spaces have been established to support women farmers. In addition to weekly farmer's markets in Walapane, through the Green Community Forum, women farmers have been able to sell their produce to a wider base of clients. The establishment of streamlined and efficient supply chains with supermarkets and other large scale vendors, there is a revolving regular demand and supply mechanism in place. The expansion of new markets has now reached a high level leading to the export of organic produce as well.

- ◆ High level of technical diffusion: Women farmers are provided with technology and infrastructural facilities to incorporate value addition to their produce. They receive training and knowledge transfers, the provision of tools and machinery and this has encouraged the women farmer community to adopt a novel and innovative outlook to agriculture.
- ◆ Strengthening of women's leadership: Women farmers are appointed to leadership positions in the PGS systems, in the quality checking processes, and as agents of knowledge and information dissemination. Instilling targeted technical capacities and high levels of responsibility and control on women farmers has inevitably enabled their recognition and acceptance as leaders and decision makers in their communities.







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*Consultation Report in joint submission by  
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